



BY TODD LAKE

What is it about evangelicals in particular, and humans in general, that makes us long for an earlier Golden Age? The old joke has it that nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Humanity has always suspected that there was a time not too long ago when life was better. You can imagine an ancient Israelite saying, "You like Temple worship!? Let me tell you, there's nothing that compares with worship in the Tabernacle." Over two millennia ago, the author of Ecclesiastes had to admonish, "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?'"

In its present evangelical manifestation, widespread nostalgia exists for a putative time when there were fewer doubts and fewer temptations, a time when the church was more faithful in following Jesus. I am—just for the record—all for fewer doubts, fewer temptations, and more faithful discipleship. But every time you hear someone say that we need to get "back to" this or that superior era, you should reach for the nearest history book.

It would be one thing if the purveyors of evangelical nostalgia were only the usual suspects: James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and the others that come to mind for slipshod theo-

logical thinking. It is no surprise that their websites, radio broadcasts, and books portray the world before the 1960s as a veritable Garden of Eden. But the yearning for an idealized world gone by is seen even in the work of a very thoughtful and respected scholar like David F. Wells, the Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, one of the most important evangelical seminaries in the country.

A recent comment in an online evangelical journal is representative of the high esteem in which Wells is rightly held: "[He] is one of the most eminent theologians in the English-speaking world today. His combination of theological brilliance and acute cultural analysis is rare, even at the highest levels of his profession. The circle of friends into whom the Lord has providentially placed Professor Wells constitutes a Who's Who of great evangelical leaders, preachers, thinkers, theologians, and historians over the last half-century. ... This has both prepared him to play the role of Jeremiah to the 21st-century Protestant church in the West, and placed him in a uniquely strategic place for the observation and analysis of evangelicalism."

I do not intend to review Wells' latest book, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs, Christ in a Postmodern World* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005). Others have already done this, and the book has much to commend it. However, precisely because it is a serious work by a serious scholar, its uncritical and wholehearted embrace of evangelical nostalgia illustrates how pervasive and destructive this tendency has become. *Above All Earthly Pow'rs* is the final volume in the series that began in 1993 with *No Place for Truth: or, What Ever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* The following year brought us *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. The third volume, published in 1998, was *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*. Notice the yearning for the past in each title: "what ever happened to?"; "fading dreams"; "losing"; "must recover." There is clearly something about the past that evangelicals miss.

What is important to note is that Wells is no voice crying in the wilderness. A dangerous nostalgia is washing over the whole evangelical world, a hope that we can turn the clock back to a time when the church had its act more or less together. One can hear it every time a Christian leader tells the faithful that we need to "get back to" whatever it is that was better way back when. One hears the nostalgia on the very influential Mars Hill Audio *Journal*, founded by Ken Myers in 1993 and dedicated to "assisting Christians who desire to move from thoughtless consumption of contemporary culture to a vantage point of thoughtful engagement." I am a longtime subscriber and avid listener. Just last year, there were pieces on "disengagement of college students from concern for intellectual life," "conversation and why it's a dying art," and "how modern culture weakens religion." I am not Pollyannaish about modern collegiate life, the vibrancy of most conversations, or the prospects of faith in our culture. But I know as a matter of historical fact that there is no era that has not felt the same. Hence the biblical warning not to glorify the past. The fact that the board of directors of Mars Hill Audio is entirely male might lead one to suspect that some part of evangelical nostalgia is driven by a hunger to return to an idealized 1950s world.

Indeed, when white American evangelicals exalt the past, the Fall is placed during the 1960s (Wells consistently refers to the decade in a negative manner). Within that decade, one event above all others is identified as the root of the problem: "the fact that through the changed immigration law of 1965, America has become a truly multiethnic society and perhaps the most religiously diverse one in the world." While he decries the immigration of people of color, he writes warmly of the earlier white immigrants, because they desired to become "a people without its own particular ethnic memory, one with no inherited ideas or beliefs, and one in which immigrants

were expected to shed the particularities of their past in order to become *Americans*." Yet in actuality these waves of immigrants preserved their language and culture by founding schools, daily newspapers, and churches where they lived in happy isolation from the wider culture. Slowly, ever so slowly, the Germans and Swedes and Italians became mainstreamed, but it took many decades. They had no more desire to be deracinated than do the Latinos coming to America today. By the same token, Latinos will become part of mainstream culture in God's good time, and xenophobia won't move things along faster.

Despite evangelical fears to the contrary, the fact is that the majority of African and Latino immigrants, a great number of Asians and—perhaps most surprisingly—almost half of the Arabs have been Christians. The primary impact of these new immigrants has been to bring a new diversity and vibrancy to American Christianity.

The fact remains, however, that these people are neither white nor middle-class, nor do they speak English with an American accent. But they are the harbingers of the future of Christianity. Nostalgia for white, Western, middle-class dominance of Christianity fuels the concern that so many darker skinned people are coming to the United States. But even if Wells were right about the religious pluralism of the new immigrants, it seems counterintuitive that an evangelical would mourn that God is bringing non-believers right to our doorstep. Evangelicals are supposed to evangelize. How odd to spend millions to send missionaries overseas and yet to bemoan the providential arrival of hundreds of thousands of non-Christians into a land where Christians have more money and influence than any other nation on earth. If we cannot reach them for Christ when they are on our home turf, we might as well just give up. Fortunately, the churches springing up across the land for speakers of Korean and Portuguese and Haitian Creole and Spanish show just how open these immigrants are to the good news of the gospel.

The longing for an ordered past leads Wells to excoriate "those churches which have banished pulpits." Not only do these radicals not use "pulpits," they do not even have "pews" nor "pianos and organs." Nor do they have "traditional sermons, hymns, offerings." The evangelical nostalgia rises to such a fever pitch that even those who make God's Word available to others are reprimanded because nowadays there are "Bibles in every conceivable size and covering." Everything from the Book of Kells to worship services in the catacombs is swept up in this denunciation of anything that deviates from American Protestantism circa 1950. Attempts to exalt one era over another always run the danger of honoring form (e.g. piano and organ music, properly sized and bound Bibles, sturdy pulpits) over content.

Something else happened in the mid-1960s that makes white middle-class evangelicals long for earlier decades. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement changed the face of America forever. In 1965, the very year cited by Wells as the beginning of the end, Dr. King led marchers—each of whom was trained to “meditate daily on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ”—from Selma to Montgomery. The gospel was not incidental, but instrumental, to this church-based movement for social change. But white evangelicals in the main fought against God’s work in the world through Christ’s church. Christians of color seldom find themselves longing for pre-1960s America.

The lack of attention to social justice among the white evangelical nostalgists is underscored by Well’s contrast of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney. “Justice,” writes Wells, “which in the works of Jonathan Edwards was one of the divine perfections, became in those of Finney simply a functional value in human life.” Edwards was arguably the best mind in 18th-century America, a brilliant theologian and the public face of the First Great Awakening, but Finney, in addition to leading the Second Great Awakening, became the president of Oberlin College, the first college in the history of the world to admit women and African Americans on an equal basis with white males. This was a matter of Christian justice for Finney, as was his leadership in the abolition movement. The hunger for order and stasis forces evangelical nostalgists like Wells to give a cold shoulder to the radical social change that occurs whenever the church fully embraces the gospel that Jesus himself said would be “good news for the poor.”

While the 1960s is seen by evangelical nostalgists as the Fall, the decline began in the 1930s with the New Deal. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, with 25 percent unemployment and malnourishment stalking our children and the elderly, the government stepped up to the plate. Wells writes, “after the Depression, the state felt obliged to take a more active role in social relief, now an enormous part of its budget, and this has happened often at the cost of the church’s involvement.” However, the church can and does have the freedom to serve those in need anytime it wants, but the government cannot stand idly by and watch its most vulnerable citizens sink into ruin. We currently have tens of millions of uninsured in our country, our infant mortality rate is the worst in the industrialized world, and our under-funded urban schools have dropout rates approaching 50 percent. If the church wants to serve the poor, they are ready and willing to be served. Jesus told us to help those in need (Matt. 25), and in a democracy, we can do that not only through the church but also through the state. Wells claims that in spite of government efforts, “poverty levels remain unchanged,”

ignoring the undeniable impact of bipartisan programs such as Social Security, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and food stamps.

Wells characterizes the social service portion of the federal budget as “enormous.” Unfortunately, no concern is evinced about government subsidies of agribusiness, the military-industrial complex, the oil and timber industries, and a hundred other programs that benefit the wealthy. But towering above direct aid to the well-off is the U.S. military budget, which is larger than *all* the military budgets of all the countries of the world combined. How sad for a Christian theologian to decry money spent by “Big Government” to aid the poor, but to say not a word about money spent to arm ourselves beyond any rational need for self-defense. There is no concern that our tax dollars are funding a war machine without precedent in human history.

Those who do want to ensure that the poor are served by their government are derided: “...every attempt to change the level of taxation, by which all the desired programs are to be funded, is treated as cold-hearted and unfeeling. By a different route, then, the Enlightenment’s assumption that human beings would do for life what God had once done is working itself out at a political level, too.” Note the *non sequitur*. If one believes that tax cuts for the rich are wrong, one is a closet atheist. But believing too much about God is just as bad as believing too little. Evangelical nostalgia merchants want us to believe that in the good old days, God built houses for the poor, but nowadays Section 8 housing stalks the land, offering “secular” housing to the poor. But in the Old Testament there was God-given legislation that redistributed wealth at a rate that would make a Swedish tax collector blush. Of course, in the New Testament, with Christians on the run, believers had no chance to influence governmental policy. But whenever Christians do have their hands on the levers of power, we are called to use our influence to serve those in need. This is not atheism, this is discipleship.

The other aspect of evangelical nostalgia that beggars the imagination is the contention that it has seldom if ever been harder to believe or live out the Christian faith than in 21st-century America. One can find this perspective in every fundraising letter from the Christian right, where our “Christian values” are said to be under unprecedented attack. Everything from the lack of state-sponsored prayer in schools to the lack of the Ten Commandments on courtroom walls is held up as an example of how beleaguered Christianity has become. Wells writes, “Christianity...that asserts its own beliefs as being normative is not wanted.” He argues that hostility to the gospel really heated up with the advent of the Enlightenment and “modernity.” What of the martyrs of the church, from those in Rome in the first century to those in Japan in the

17th and Uganda in the 20th who knew what it was to feel cold steel on the neck?

Wells writes of the current “psychological environment in which certain beliefs and habits seem normal and others do not.” What of the first-century Christians who proclaimed at the risk of losing friends and family and fortune that “this Jesus whom you have crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ”? Surely, it was hard to see your spouse stoned to death, to be hounded from town to town, and to be told by former friends that you were crazy. Early believers were accused of (a) cannibalism—for eating Christ’s body and blood; (b) incest—for loving brothers and sisters without distinction; and (c) atheism—for not worshipping the genius of the emperor. They were accounted treasonous for the latter offense and often executed. That’s a “psychological environment in which certain beliefs and habits seem normal and others do not.”

Evangelical nostalgia is enamored of the idea of medieval Christendom. Wells is saddened that “in place of the single, overarching understanding of meaning, which was once religiously derived, are now multiple worldviews...In premodern societies, the sacred was a matter-of-fact part of public life...” He writes of “a traditional society in which unchanging supernatural order has an unchallenged matter-of-factness about it, social customs are enduring, human relations are settled... beliefs are stable.” The history of God’s work in the world includes revolutionaries like Hus and Tyndale and Luther and Calvin and Cranmer and Wesley and Whitefield and Booth and Seymour on up to Fannie Lou Hamer and Dr. King. Wells mentions a few of them in passing, but only wishful thinking can turn them into part of a great “unchanging” tapestry of times gone by. These firebrands upset the social order, tore families and societies apart, and challenged the prevailing worldviews of their era.

The bogeyman of Enlightenment Humanism is a constant when the evangelical nostalgists write and speak. Yet they forget that the Enlightenment began not in the work of Immanuel Kant, but in the late Middle Ages among Christian intellectuals who sought a path out of the morass of superstitious accretions that had obscured “the faith once handed down.” Their cry was *ad fontes*, “to the sources!” They wanted to go back to the Scriptures in the original languages to determine what God’s Word really said. They sought the power of the Word of God to challenge the consensus of practices and opinions that reigned in Christendom. Yet Wells writes disparagingly that “Enlightenment thinkers were, however, united in their opposition to what they saw as ‘superstition’ and they as adamantly favored the powers of reason...” Why the quotation marks around “superstition”? The world of the late Middle Ages was one in which Jesus’ umbilical cord and baby teeth

were believed to hold miraculous powers, where indulgences were sold by the millions under the slogan, “*Wenn daß Geld in die Kasse klingt, die Seele aus der Hölle springt*” (“When the money in the cashbox rings, the soul out of hellfire springs”). Pilgrimages and masses for the dead immiserated people without number. It was superstition, as Catholic thinkers today now acknowledge. And it was the use of reason that moved Christians from trying to cure disease by going on pilgrimages to seeking cures through the use of their God-given reason.

Wells will have none of this. He writes, “Preoccupation with what...the human being could do, with the remaking of human life, replaced the older vision of a world over which God presided and in which human ability to reconstruct life was quite limited.” You have to be the beneficiary of a lot of “human ability to reconstruct life” to look back with fondness on an era when most women died in childbirth, most men died in their early 40s, and most people could not thrive physically or intellectually because of the endless backbreaking labor needed to eke out an existence. He is on the mark when he says that what “in an earlier age, people believed only God could do, the Enlightenment now placed within human reach.” There was a time when prayer alone was used against disease or to protect one from a hurricane. Most of us believe that it was God, not human hubris, who has given us meteorologists and epidemiologists.

The flight from the present in evangelical nostalgia evinces a lack of awareness of what life in a traditional society is like. Wells writes, “The experience of this new culture is intense and intrusive in ways that older cultures never were.” I submit that anyone who thinks that life in a traditional village culture is not intrusive has never lived in a village. Take, for example, female genital mutilation, also called clitoridectomy. That is about as “intense and intrusive” as a culture can be. It is practiced on tens of millions of women in Africa thanks to the stable, family-centered traditional culture in which they live. In the 19th century in this country, slave marriages were not recognized. Millions of slaves living in the most tradition-honoring part of the country suffered under the unrelenting fear of having family members sold away from them. Mothers had children ripped from their arms, and husbands and wives were torn from each other, never to see their loved ones again. Modern culture, though its faults be many, is clearly not more intrusive. And through most of the 20th century, the most traditional part of our country, the South, used legal segregation and extralegal terror to ensure that African Americans remained disenfranchised, underemployed, and undereducated. This level of intrusion makes the pervasiveness of cell phones and the internet seem downright pleasant.

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The Dangers of Evangelical Nostalgia

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Wells gives voice to the prevalent evangelical nostalgia for a vanished world when he writes, “When the world was simpler, and ruffled by only a little change, it resembled a fixed abode and in that setting human nature made sense to people.” One might counter that it resembled a charnel house, where every family had to bury several children before their first birthday, where women routinely died in childbirth and could be beaten by their husbands without legal ramifications, and where freedom of action was constrained by grinding poverty. Which benefit of modernity would the evangelical nostalgists like to live without? Which troublesome freedom—speech, assembly, religion, the press—would they like to jettison in order to recapture the world of stasis? Most Christians see

progress where the evangelical nostalgists see things being unnecessarily “ruffled.”

Christians are called to be co-laborers with God in the ministries of educating, healing, and building God’s kingdom on earth (Matt. 9:35). Is it a less godly America today because, instead of trusting God to heal, we have a polio vaccine which obviates the need to pray for a cure for polio? Behind this nostalgia is a denial that being made in God’s image makes humans not only stewards of the Creation but also co-laborers with God, invited by our Maker, Redeemer, and Sanctifier both to pray and to work until “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven.” ■

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