

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Formal Critique: God in the Wasteland

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Introduction

The world of evangelical Christianity is one that has overcome many changes and shifts in its relatively short history. These changes have varied greatly in their scope, focus, and intensity but few have been as potent as that of the modern and postmodern American society. The American evangelical movement's struggle to survive in the American vacuum of value is the focal point of *God in the Wasteland* by David F. Wells. Wells, an Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Theology at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts, has created over four books over the modernity's challenge to the church¹ and *God in the Wasteland* is part of that series. The evangelical faith faces a new enemy from within rather than without and leaders of this faith need to evaluate the very real truth of the challenges expressed by Wells' work to best position the church to face those challenges.

Summary

Wells begins his work with a poignant look at the modern world and the peculiar pluralistic nature of a society that can place Jesus Christ in the same place it puts political figures². In the earliest chapters of the book, the author paints a picture of the road that has led to the modern hollowing of faith and theology for the sake of advancing society. He covers topics ranging from the political factors of change all the way through to the very church leaders being entrenched in the miasma of modern schools of thought.

Throughout the midsection of Wells' work, he turns away from the factors that influence the modernization of theology and into the modern disassociation of society from God. The reader is presented with the subtle way God has slowly been removed from a position of

¹ Wells, David F, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

² Ibid. p.5.

influence in the society and the church of the Western world in favor of more universal theology³. Wells elaborates on the circumstances leading to modern isolation of God from the events and social constructs of the modern world and in to the privacy of the evangelical life⁴. The reader is able to discern from the text that the secularization has become almost intangible because of the many decades of modern thoughts being piled atop it like sedimentary layers.

On the outset of Wells' book, the reader is presented with a small amount of hope for the future of evangelical faith as the newer generations in the coming generations. Wells provides data regarding the coming generation's belief in the importance of theology⁵ and how this will shape the future of the church and its adherents. Furthermore, he concludes his work with a multi-layered analysis of what the future holds for evangelical congregants. The author seems confident that the church has the strength and the hope for breaking out of its sluggish and sometimes derelict state if it returns its focus to God and God alone⁶.

Critical Analysis

David Wells is a theologian and should be granted all the merits associated therein. The style of the book from the outset is one that speaks in the voice of an observant academic and biblical scholar, tightly knit together in a single unit. The research methodology of such a man is made evident in the manner in which he structures his points and counterpoints. Wells clearly researched his information in various phases as he compiled the manuscript and this structure is apparent to the reader as each phase unfolds, leading to a pronounced close of this second volume.

³ Ibid. p. 93

⁴ Ibid. p. 157

⁵ Ibid. p. 192

⁶ Ibid. p. 225

The second element in the production of Wells' book that is clearly noticed by the reader is the potency of biblical support he provides it. From the early portion of the book, Wells deals with the idolatry of the modern world when superimposed upon the Old and New Testament views on it in a concise yet accurate analysis. Later, the author uses many pointed references to biblically incorrect modern perceptions of critical theologies such as judgment⁷. This style is prevalent throughout the work and provides unequivocal evidence that Wells has a firm grasp on Scripture and its life applications.

Beyond scripture, however, the reader begins to see some areas where Wells attempts to build a biblical case against social data he analyses with a rather sketchy result⁸. In the early portions of the work, the reader only gets a minor sense of this issue but as Wells continues to dig into the society he is challenging, this becomes a major distraction. The synthesizing of data followed by the ragged thrusts against Biblical walls led a critic of the *Christian Century* – a publication that even the author lauds⁹ - to refer to the book as having a 'patchwork texture... that reveals a fundamental flaw in the book.'¹⁰

Another glaring factor that becomes evident to the reader is the environment in which the book was written. As one can discern by Wells' academic post in northeastern Massachusetts and the fact that the work was written in the early 1990's gives a taste of local bias that is almost intangible at first glance. Hamilton is one of the earlier settlements in the Puritan United States¹¹ which means it was a primary battleground for puritanical settlers and the fathers of evangelical church in the New World. Thusly the society likely has some historical underpinnings that would cause evangelicalism to be viewed differently than, for instance, someone in the Southern USA.

⁷ Ibid. p.165

⁸ Ibid. p. 50

⁹ Ibid. p. 24

¹⁰ Cary, Phillip. 1994. *Christian Century*, November 23.

¹¹ Felt, Joseph Barlow. *History of Ipswich, Essex, and Hamilton*. 1834.

Furthermore, the era of the 1990's was one of material excess and the surge of pop-culture into even the previously untouchable religious sphere. These two elements paint a melancholy worldview for the author and the context in which the book was created.

Despite these minor infractions, Wells produces a well formulated work on a topic he knows quite intimately and brings a squared view of the theological challenges the church faces in the world if it does not stem the tide of modernity diluting the church. The elements he addresses are still relevant in the world today even though they might look different on the surface or have a slightly modified molecular structure. The minister can use the book as a solemn reminder of how far the message of God can be modified into something very different than its nature and the reader can find an eye opening appeal to the conservative nature evangelicals of the world lean on.

Conclusion

There is much one must consider when standing at the feet of giants and Wells addresses it accurately in *God in the Wasteland*. Indeed, the challenges of modern and postmodernist values pose a serious threat to the stability of the evangelical church and Wells' document provides a broad schematic for the battlefield. One thing that Wells did not address, however, is that the God he claims is being overpowered by the modern world is the same God who created the very air Wells and the readers breathe and the earth upon which they walk. If God wills these challenges to happen, He can also train leaders to rise to that challenge.

Bibliography

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