

# The Modernity Monster

By Michael W. Kelley

***No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? and God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams, by David Wells (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1993, 1994).***

Contra Mundum, No. 15, Final Print Issue

Copyright © 1997 Michael W. Kelley

---

*O tempora! O mores!* goes the old Ciceronian adage. “What terrible times we live in!”—will probably do as an approximate English rendition. Cicero is alleged to have uttered these words as he stood before the Roman senate to launch his attack on Cataline whom he accused of conspiring to overthrow the Republic and seize power. That Cataline came within a whisper of success would certainly suggest not only his ability to stir up discontent, but more especially, to Cicero at least, it revealed that the times in which he lived showed a growing tendency among many to question, if not altogether to sever allegiance to, the moral and social order that was Rome. And what greater good was there than Rome!? Rome, gift of the gods, was unsurpassed as the embodiment of a righteous civilization, the bestower of truth, justice, peace and prosperity, certainly to those peoples who had embraced her. To topple her institutions or subvert her ancestral conventions was not to replace her with something better. Quite the contrary, it could only mean a return to anarchy and savagery. Cicero, therefore, saw in Cataline a reminder of how vigilant one must be if one wished to preserve the good order that had been achieved at no small cost by the heroic efforts of erstwhile generations. Thus he was loathe to think that the times in which he lived could show such disregard for what had taken centuries to accomplish. Did his day truly witness so marked a decline? How dreadful to contemplate! How essential to sound the warning!

History repeatedly records that nearly every civilization has at one time or another, in the course of its advance, undergone some sort of moral or social upheaval. When, as a result, a crisis looms large, people will quite often conclude that mankind’s survival stands on the brink of complete disaster. Our own civilization is surely no exception. The Fourteenth Century, for example, experienced the Black Death, a plague which spread decimation to something like a third to half the population of Europe. Many at that time proclaimed it the end of the world. The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century produced

such dramatic changes in men's loyalties as to breed in the next century some of the most vicious wars history has ever known. And once again, something like panic set in. Moving closer to our own time, the years of Napoleonic conquest of the early Nineteenth Century brought about a fundamental instability in the politics of European states, which shook the dynastic centers of power and threatened to overturn all previous forms of legal and political authority. By mid-century, Marxian socialism and Darwinianism had together redefined the nature of men's relationships with one another as well as their concept of the natural realm in such a way and to such an extent as nearly to topple all previously accepted ideas of society and truth. Today, we still live off the fruits of this twin revolution. We could, of course, add to these the effects of industrialization with the displacements it brought about. Neither should we forget to mention the rise of the statist totalitarian ideologies of the Twentieth Century which were responsible for the destruction of millions of lives and so much of the legacy of centuries of culture. Much, then, can be pointed to in providing examples of massive and far-reaching convulsions in the realms of thought and behavior. In nearly all such instances, feelings have been seized with a grave sense of impending doom, that the times they-are-a-changing, and not for the better.

And yet, if in past times men were inclined to take notice of circumstances and events which threatened the peace and welfare of life in human societies, nothing, it seems, could crush completely their optimism about the future, or their belief that human problems, however momentous, were capable of solution or amendment. To be sure, much in this way of thinking derived from humanism with its supreme faith in man, his native goodness, inherent intelligence, or inventive adaptability. Unquestionably, among the dominant outlooks of our time has been the Enlightenment vision of man who, with the instrument of science and knowledge, is altogether capable of ordering his world by the power of his reason and of setting all to rights in the disharmony among men and nations. Such a faith has been productive of the notion that with the increase of knowledge by the methods of scientific investigation man would discover the means that would lead to a continual improvement and perfection of the human condition on earth. Knowledge meant power to control the forces of nature, whether this referred to external nature or the nature of man himself. Nothing, ostensibly, could prevent mankind from overcoming all difficulties and problems to create the best of all possible worlds. Nothing, that is, except ignorance, which was the source of all vice, crime and perverse ambition among the people. However, with elites in charge, society will be saved and the future guaranteed.

Humanism was not the only optimistic faith, however. Christianity, too, held out hope for tomorrow. The world stood not on the brink of collapse, but God's providence ordered the times and the seasons, and faith could work for a brighter day, because a power greater than man was on the throne and His promise of obedience would insure that man did not labor in vain. History might continue to record times of difficulty and trouble, but God was redeeming the world in grace and His people could confidently await His victory which He would grant by way of Godly perseverance and patience. Here, too, was an optimism that looked beyond the dire moment to the day of salvation, giving to many a

hope which transcends the sorrows of the present and a firm belief that the future belongs to those who live in terms of the Word of promise and practice its righteous prescriptions. It is really this Christian leaven which has undergirded our civilization, particularly when confidence in the power of man showed signs of stress and despair. Man might lose hope in reason, but God's ways, though they often lay beyond the power of men to understand, were not open to doubt or contravention. When all else failed, the Word of God gave to hearts a renewed confidence to press ahead and continue to work for the good of future generations, ultimately knowing that unless God builds the walls they labor in vain who build it.

Hope, confidence, optimism, then, were the prevailing sentiments in both humanistic and Christian thinking throughout much of the modern period. What is more, and that which gave strength to this reassuring outlook, both were founded upon an idea of law as an ordering principle of life. For the humanists it was natural law which expresses an inviolable universal norm along with a retributive power if spurned or denied by men or societies who seek the way of tyranny. For Christians it was principally the law of God, a God Who was sovereignly in control of His creation ordinances, Whom Christians believed ruled in the affairs of men and nations. He, too, was a retributive power who brought His judgments down in history on all sinners who flaunted His moral order. At the same time, He was a protector of the righteous who fear and obey Him. Without delving into the fact that humanists of the Enlightenment, for the most part, borrowed heavily from this Christian heritage to prop up their natural law theory, we may simply assert at this point that, in both cases, it was normal for men to believe that, despite the moral and social upheavals that occur from time to time, the world was not going to collapse into utter chaos; that, despite periodic convulsions in the life of nations, a Divine law and law-giver existed to prevent human life from becoming totally abnormal and completely meaningless. Things might get off course, but an ordering power greater than man would soon set them back on an even keel. Man did not think that the ultimate order of the world was against him, but for him, under certain conditions. Consequently, he was future oriented and possessed of a firm conviction that his labor could be productive and his prosperity increased for the benefit of future generations. Rather than wallow in self-pity, he took the circumstances of life, the bad as well as the good, in moderate stride, always seeking to improve himself wherever possible, but accepting what he could not change with equanimity.

How remarkable the change, then, that has come about in the past few decades! With many, especially the academic elites, optimism has been replaced by deep-seated pessimism. But more remarkable still, what accounts for this is not some particular, immediate crisis like the threat of war or famine or disease, rather it is a more general despair. The culprit is not so much a distinct and palpable threat, but instead it is thought to lie in the general nature of modern civilization itself. We are told by writers and thinkers of various sorts that *Modernity* as such is a crushing burden, a great monster that is about to destroy, not this or that aspect of civilization or culture, but the whole of life in all its aspects and tendencies. What is more, it threatens not the externals of life so much as it attacks the *spiritual* essence of humanity, a killer of the soul and of all higher ideals

that fill man with purpose and meaning. Modernity is a psychological disease which, instead of lifting men above the level of mere animal satisfactions, debases all his interests and objectives with mere material and sensual gratifications. It is said that modern men have one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to satisfy his bodily needs and that all higher, *spiritual* pursuits in which reside the goals of truth and virtue have either been ignored or deemed worthless. On the other hand, the only goal thought to be worthwhile is the ever greater accumulation of material things. In this respect, modern man is only interested in technological progress and the benefit it provides. But, intellectually and morally, he has become entirely bankrupt. Instead of feeling that he is at home in the world, man is lost and rootless, the victim of a deadening psychological sickness that elites describe as one of alienation, confusion and anxiety.

However, a moment's reflection on this phenomenon of *Modernity* along with the deep pessimism it inspires should enable us to see that, while it appears to be fairly recent because so widespread and vocal, in fact it has had a considerable grip on the pulse of Western culture since the Eighteenth Century. Despite the rise to prominence of the Enlightenment with its faith in science and reason, there has been an equally powerful counter culture at work in what has been called Romanticism. Far from being a fringe movement among *literati* and assorted writers and thinkers, Romanticism has been a cultural force of overwhelming proportions. In fact, Romanticism has helped to shape the cultural agenda of our modern world as much as, if not more than, that of Enlightenment scientism. As Richard Tarnas points out in his eloquent tome, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, "[b]ecause both temperaments were deeply and simultaneously expressive of Western attitudes and yet were largely incompatible, a complex bifurcation of the Western outlook resulted."<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, as he notes, "the secular scientific mind" established the basic "outer" cosmology of the modern *Weltanschauung*, defining the realm of external nature in accordance with a strict mechanistic determinism. For it, the world of nature, including human nature, "was an object for observation and experiment, theoretical explanation and technological manipulation."<sup>2</sup> Whereas, on the other hand, Romanticism, which inspired the West's "inner" culture, looked on nature as "a live vessel of spirit, a translucent source of mystery and revelation."<sup>3</sup> If the Enlightenment saw all knowledge and truth as a matter of mathematical calculation and empirical testability, Romanticism "sought truth that was inwardly transfiguring and sublime."<sup>4</sup> If the Enlightenment sought to define man and his world in strictly material terms, Romanticism—in its art and literature, its religious and metaphysical vision—sought to define man and his world in moral and spiritual terms. Not reason and perception were of prime importance, but emotion and imagination achieved an exalted and noble status. Not to *know*, but to *experience* should be the goal of life.

Of profound importance is the recognition that Romanticism and Enlightenment, far from being mere parallel but unconnected developments in the modern Western consciousness,

---

1 Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 375.

2 Tarnas, pp. 376, 375.

3 Ibid.

4 Tarnas, p. 367.

have actually emerged as flip-sides of the same phenomenon. Romanticism, however, represents a movement in direct antithesis to the Enlightenment faith in the superiority of rational man. Again Tarnas writes, “In the Enlightenment scientific vision, modern civilization and its values stood unequivocally above all predecessors, while Romanticism maintained a profound ambivalence toward modernity in its many expressions.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, “Romantics”, he continues to observe, “radically questioned the West’s belief in its own ‘progress’, in its civilization’s innate superiority, in rational man’s inevitable fulfillment.” (Ibid.) Romanticism, then, far from representing a mere side show in the drama of the West since the Enlightenment, constitutes a significant denial of and protest against all that the Enlightenment stood for; indeed, all that Western culture and civilization stood for. Seeping into every area of thought and experience, where man was concerned, Romanticism acted as a solvent to rational man’s scientific ideals and effected to undermine all humanistic man’s faith in his culture as the embodiment of reason. It has done so largely by proclaiming that the quantitative and scientific world of the Enlightenment has reduced the quality and coherence of the human world to an impersonal and mechanistic datum, devoid of spontaneity and freedom. “Under the West’s direction and impetus, modern man has burst forward and outward, with tremendous centrifugal force, complexity, variety, and speed. And yet it appeared he had driven himself into a terrestrial nightmare and a spiritual wasteland, a fierce constriction, a seemingly irresolvable predicament.”<sup>6</sup> While man has gained in terms of his bodily and material welfare, it has been at the cost of losing his soul. And for Romanticism, the price has been too steep to pay. Romantics, then, labored to transform the optimism of the Enlightenment into the pessimism of the disenchanting and the uprooted.

This attitude of acute and pervasive pessimism has become the unstated assumption in every area of investigation so far as man and society are concerned. The rise of the disciplines of History, Sociology, and Psychology, to mention but a few, have been profoundly influenced by Romantic presuppositions. The same may be said for literature and the arts in general. Modern intellectual analysis has broadly adopted the Romantic agenda of seeking the meaning of life in terms of an on-going conflict between the “inner” (good) realm versus the “outer” (bad) realm. Man, it is claimed, is trapped in a dualistic world in which his subjective experience stands unavoidably in contradiction to an objective world which opposes him and reduces him to a mere automaton. This is certainly true in the way secular man especially evaluates the problems of man in modern society. Equally disturbing, however, is that it has also become the given assumption in the way contemporary Christian theologians are now going about the business of theological analysis of modern life, particularly the life of the church. None is, perhaps, more representative of this tendency than David F. Wells of Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

Wells recently published two books which have become major statements of the way

---

5 Tarnas, p. 372.

6 Tarnas, p. 388.

modern evangelical elites view the present state of affairs, both in society and in the church.<sup>7</sup> In them, the protest culture of Romanticism is very much on display. Because the views he expresses have been well received we shall, for the remainder of this essay, turn our attention to what he has written.

Wells purports to be concerned about the state of the modern Church, particularly the evangelical Church. What, he wonders, has accounted for the rise of the contemporary phenomenon known as the Mega-Church? And, more importantly, why have trends in these Churches, as well Churches in general, shown a distinct decline in interest in theological or doctrinal Truth and, at the same time, substituted for it a total preoccupation with experientialism and entertainment? In other terms, why has the modern Church replaced understanding the content of the faith with psychology and feel-good religion? Important questions, these. Anyone with any interest at all in the present state of the Church should indeed be concerned about its present slide into subjectivism with the feeling-centered orientation that seems to dominate it. It is, however, Wells's sociological Romanticism that claims to offer the explanation for this state of affairs affecting the modern Church that should be of no less concern, for it is far from a Biblically based point of view; and how, we may ask, can a *Christian* theologian evaluate the life of the Church on other than sound Biblical reasoning? No doubt, Wells believes he is doing just that, but, in fact, his thinking is thoroughly shaped by the protest culture of Romanticism which predisposes the way he allows problems and explanations to be framed and discussed. At the very least, we should be aware that this sort of analysis, in the end, is only ever likely to reassure academic elitists like Wells that their gnostic insights are of superior worth to those vacuous souls who, in their daily affairs, must occupy themselves with much that he and similar minds find repugnant and demeaning.

Basic to Romantic ideology is a sky-is-falling-on-us-now philosophy. Those who imbibe this elixir of negativity have not hesitated to pronounce, with an assured condescension, their disgust with modern industrial and technological culture and civilization. For them, the present is to be compared with some golden, idyllic past which represents a kind of lost paradise when human life was lived more serenely and without the complications and stresses of our own time. Romantics yearn, then, for days of yore when, as they imagine, life was sweeter and so much better than the misery they feel at the present. Not surprisingly, then, the opening chapter in Wells's first book, *No Place for Truth*, is entitled: "A Delicious Paradise Lost." The world has changed and in doing so we have been ejected from paradise. This theme of a past paradise-like state which we supposedly have left to advance culture and civilization that has turned out to be nothing but a wasteland is central to the Romantic frame of mind. If Wells typifies the way evangelical cultural critics think, then Romanticism, not Scripture, determines their outlook on life.

This idea of the good past versus the bad present was probably first articulated by J.-J. Rousseau in an early essay which has come to be called *The First Discourse on*

---

<sup>7</sup> These two books are *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* and *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, both published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids (1993, 1994).

*Inequality*. In it, he asserted with mournful affectation that “One cannot reflect on morals without delighting in the recollection of the simplicity of the earliest times. It is a lovely shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, toward which one incessantly turns one's eyes and from which one regretfully feels oneself moving away.”<sup>8</sup> Notice that “the simplicity of the earliest times” corresponds to a condition “adorned by the hands of nature alone.” In other words, the passion to explore the world, to achieve culture by the application of the energies of man and to transform nature from a raw and untamed state to one that is useful and beneficial is thought to be nothing but the source of misery and ruin. Only the state of nature, untouched by human hands, is pure and without cause for grief. Indeed, Rousseau does not hesitate to avow that “our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts towards perfection.”<sup>9</sup>

The unstated assumption in Rousseau, as in all Romantics, is the notion that man is not Fallen into sin, nor has his world been subjected to a curse which compels man to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. It is, rather, the belief that man was innocent and virtuous until he became despoiled by culture and civilization; or, that the world was a natural paradise and in no way a threat to human life until man sought to achieve something he thought was better. Men were initially good, but became bad only when they acquired the aspiration to accumulate possessions, the root ambition of civilization. In doing so, they became insatiable in their wants and soon sought to plunder one another in order to satisfy them. In time, civilization of a sort came forth, but it was always based on the desire to get more and more, ever constantly seeking to reach some imagined state of perfection. All this has only served to corrupt man's soul. If we could but recapture the original spirit of man before he was consumed with the lust to satisfy his senses with every conceivable pleasure, which is the sole promise of a culture based upon industry and commerce, then we will surely find the solution to the modern predicament. And so it is with Romanticism's concept of man and society. Recapture the past, escape from the present; or, barring that possibility, do what one can to avoid “touching pitch”, that is, becoming contaminated by contact with *Modernity*.

But whereas Romantics might hope to turn back the clock or overturn the present state of things to find relief from their misery, their entire outlook is based upon the assumption that the present state of affairs is such a crushing burden that no hope is to be found in any direction. After all, Modernity is not something that only troubles Romantic elites, those who possess a superior gnosis regarding our cultural times, but, as they pontificate, it overwhelms and oppresses us all, whether we know it or not. If Romantics do not hesitate to declare that they themselves have felt the weight of these dismal times, they also claim to know what it means for everyone else. That is because, Romantics scarcely bother to discuss real people and real situations: theirs is more the pronouncement from on high about the conditions of large aggregates of time and people. So mighty, so pervasive and determining are these conditions that escape is totally impossible. Those who are controlled by their sinister influence do not recognize their oppression or even

---

8 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp. 53, 54.

9 p. 39.

that they are being manipulated by forces and factors beyond their control. Man, the Romantic prophets assert, no longer is master of his own world. Instead, he is nothing more than a conditioned instrument in the hands of impersonal forces moving relentlessly through all time and space. So over-powering is this situation for modern man that about all one can do is bemoan our loss of innocence and weep for those who cannot possibly know, because either too stupid to see or too unwilling to admit, that they are being eaten alive by the Modernity monster.

Wells, in adopting this Romantic world of thought, has accepted all the *cliché's* of its intellectual and moral outlook. (I have used this word *cliché* intentionally, for Wells claims that our Western culture has produced what he calls "global cliché culture". Apparently, little does he realize the extent of Romanticism's own cliché explanations.) For example, he does not hesitate to make vast pronouncements on what he supposes to represent the great "historical divide", namely, the transformation of Western culture into what he calls Our Time. The century in which this is to be placed is the Nineteenth; the causes which brought it forth were not so much ideological as socio-economic in nature. It constituted a change that was not so much planned as it was the outcome of factors which sprang up from within Western culture as a result of its own internal tendencies. That is, these changes came about by impersonal pressures that were indigenous to Western culture. Apparently, in looking back, there was little anyone could have done to stop or deflect the West from taking the course determined for it by History. The problem is that no one really wanted to. In fact, given the assumptions of the Enlightenment regarding the continuing course of progress in Western culture towards democratic institutions and market-oriented economic behavior, the direction the West was taking was altogether to be desired. No one foresaw the illusions of the future, a future which has now become the present and which, instead of becoming the utopia dreamed of, has turned out to be a nightmare of the most frightful proportions. We are only now waking up to the truth of our baleful situation, like a drunk on the morning after a binge, to discover that we have been betrayed (Romantics love to feel like victims). What seemed good at the time has proved to be a delusion. For, what we might have benefited from Modernity we have lost in the way of Humanity, and precisely for that reason.

These sorts of explanations, and more, run through page after page, in some of the most ornate and, at times, overblown prose in both of Wells's books. He cannot, it seems, find one redeeming feature of the modern world. Time and again he employs the melancholy language of the Romantic soothsayer, who thinks it is not enough to voice his own complaints, he must complain on behalf of everyone else as well. His use of phrases like, "we are increasingly forced", "we are compelled", are meant to drive home the point that Modernity has us all by the scruff of the neck and there is nothing we can do about it. Furthermore, he speaks of the "structures of society" forming what he calls "interlocking systems" which "surround and envelop us", "intruding into our consciousness". Or, modernity has "dissolved links" between people leaving us as individuals isolated "centers of loneliness". As a result, we are drawn into that easily manipulable category called "Mass society" where, despite the crowd, we are all reduced to a flaccid and empty sameness, capable of being psychologically molded by the image and appearances of a



drowning material consumer society. In short, we have all “become spiritual vagrants in the modern wasteland, wanderers with no home to return to”.

At one time we had a home—it was called the “transcendent order”. This is Wells's method for introducing God and Christianity into the picture. Despite Wells's preference for the past, he is little inclined to use the language that distinguished its “religious” discourse. Words like “righteousness”, “obedience”, “sin”, “unGodliness”, and so forth do not play a significant part in his prognostication of problems. Rather, he much prefers the modernist jargon like “transcendental center” of values (for righteousness), “worldliness” and “not having roots” (for disobedience or ungodliness), and “self-indulgent accumulation of profits”, or “unregulated pursuit of self-interest” (for sin). What is more, all these things have been brought on by “centrifugal forces” resulting from modernization, “the fundamental force behind the creation of Our Time”. This, apparently, stands for “original sin” into which we are all born and, having inherited its curse, become dead in “consumerism”, “technology”, and “industry” which, Wells assures us, has done nothing but despoil the earth.

Wells is a firm believer in all the nostrums of elite-culture leftism so typical of the modern academy. The “deep thinkers” among contemporary intellectuals have always poured scorn upon on the so-called “material” interests of man. In other words, they disdain economics, particularly the market-oriented variety. For them, capitalism is the great bane of Our Time. They regard capitalist economic behavior as equal to a state of drug-induced stupefaction in which men are narcotically addicted with the singular craving to satisfy every conceivable sensual impulse and nothing else. Capitalism, furthermore, fuels the process of technological innovation which, in turn, drives the processes of urbanization with its emphasis on industry and commerce, and its crowded and feverish pace of life. The result: we have all been sucked into a vortex of bureaucratic social arrangements which, in the end, have left us feeling lost and alone. We have exchanged “personal” relationships for “impersonal” ones thereby creating a vast *spiritual* wasteland of the soul. In the name of productivity and efficiency we have become victims of a world of standardized sameness with neither a moral center nor intellectual depth (i.e., no concept of Truth). Life has been shorn of all objective meaning and purpose, and given over to conformity and mere subjective satisfaction. In short, capitalist culture has been productive of a pervasive psychological hedonism the outcome of which has left us myopic and hollow.

By leaving behind the *real* world for *visions* of the world, one is relieved of the need to give thought to the mundane order of things. For example, one does not have to study capitalist economic behavior and thereby know its actual workings and whether or not it conforms with an objective reality in human affairs. All one need do is condemn it from the vantage point of a superior morality. Nor does one need to compare it to socialism to see if, despite its imperfections, it allows society to function in a more coherent manner or enables man to rise above the indigent poverty that is his natural condition. One can simply pronounce upon it as if it were some sort of disease in the body social that no intelligent observer could possibly regard otherwise. The humanist left has always viewed

capitalism as the root cause of social and psychological disorder. But that *Christian* thinkers, such as Wells, would adopt the same attitude without any attempt to understand it only confirms how deeply Christian academic elites have become influenced by humanistic thought. His condemnation of capitalism is not in the name of some alternative system. Rather, it is made only in the name of Romantic primitivism. And his assertion that bureaucracy is its natural offspring is further proof that he does not understand the character of modern socialist statism. For the heavy bureaucratization that he deplores is not the product of capitalism, but is due to the growth of the modern state with its ambition to control man's life in every detail. It is not "technological pyramids" that threaten life and create "impersonal centers" of modern culture; it is the spread of governmental power and purpose to every area of human endeavor that is the culprit. But Wells's theology has never permitted him to understand society on a Biblical basis, so instead he employs the ideology of Romantic sociology for such purposes.

Wells's real purpose, as we said, in all this tendentious moralizing about Our Time is to bring to bear a critique of the modern evangelical church. Here Wells has something to say that is far more useful and worth considering than is much of what he has said leading up to it. Basically, he wants to say that the church no longer has theology or truth as the substance of its message, but instead has substituted in its place a man-centered psychology and experientialism. Rather than conveying the objective truth of God and His holiness to the masses of humanity, the church has pandered to the modern ideals of happiness, self-esteem, and personal well-being. Instead of emphasizing an ethics of good versus evil, it has sought only to appeal to the quest for psychic wholeness. And instead of addressing the intellect, it seeks only to soothe the emotions. The gospel that the church proclaims is one in which Christ and his truth is made to appeal to consumer interest, a message that grants the sovereign needs of the people priority over the sovereign claims of God. In the place of a message about sin and righteousness the modern evangelical church has offered to a broken and suffering world a therapeutic technique. And its business has become, not truth, but profit and success.

Wells will get no argument from us on this score. His description is entirely accurate. But why all this rambling on about *modernity*? Wells's thinks that the church has become just another example of Our Time, which indeed, for the most part, it has. But it is not because the evangelical church has lost or abandoned theological truth, as Wells claims, but because it accepted some time ago a *false* theology. What is more, it was a theology heavily laced with humanistic assumptions from the thought world of Romanticism! The emphasis upon *experience* was not something that just cropped up with the appearance of contemporary affluent society. Theological Arminianism combined with Romantic era revivalism took deep root in modern Christianity. Pietism always has been a religion of *inwardness*. It stresses the emotions and the subjective state of the believer. At the same time, it will accept only a minimal doctrine. What more is there to know than Jesus and the soul? In such a doctrinal perspective the believer looks heavenward and the creation order is de-emphasized. He does not want to know the content of his faith as it applies to the here and now, he only wants to experience the raptures of the next world. As he passes through life he seeks those things that will reassure his psychological well-being,

because his entire outlook is one of self-interest rather than being focused upon God's agenda.

Wells thinks that the loss of theology among evangelical Christians is the problem. But every religion always possesses a “theology”. The question is, what theology? Because he seems not to comprehend this, Wells has no real theology of his own to offer. To be sure, he speaks of the need to return to a Christ-centered gospel. Thus, for example, he states, “Christ's gospel calls sinners to surrender their self-centeredness, to stop granting sovereignty to their own needs and recognize his claim of sovereignty over their lives.”<sup>10</sup> But, he never gets around to telling us much about what Christ's sovereign claims entail. Does Christ have any sovereign claims that include anything besides *spiritual* affairs? That is, does he have any kind of program for culture and civilization which include man's legitimate *material* interests. Or, is Jesus' concern only with churches where, instead of psychology and entertainment, the preaching, far from pandering to the religious consumer, must force men to choose between God and modernity? If so, can this really be seen as a solution to the problem of Our Time? To set up such a disjuncture will only heighten the dualism which already operates in the evangelical mindset. Instead of showing that God has a purpose and a program for man's worldly existence, it will only add to the existing schizophrenia which now prevails in the evangelical thought-world between what the believer's relationship is to God and what is his relationship to the world in which he lives.

The real problem is not modernity, but the failure of the Christian world to understand and articulate a Biblical-cultural agenda. For a very long time now, Christians have wanted to have a Christ who is merely a *savior*, but who possesses no lordship over all areas of man's life. Henry Van Til put it quite succinctly when he remarked, “There is a tendency abroad [and has been for quite some time] to reduce the requirements for church membership to accepting Christ apart from Christian culture.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, as he proclaims more fully a little farther on, “It is certainly folly for God's people to think that they can live in two separate worlds, one for their religious life and devotional exercises, and the other usurping all other time, energy, money—an area in which the priests of Secularization are calling the numbers. One cannot keep on evangelizing the world without interfering with the world's culture.”<sup>12</sup> Any “place for truth”, any rejuvenated theological outlook, must involve this fact.

---

10 *God in the Wasteland*, p. 82.

11 Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), p. 23.

12 pp. 43, 44.