

SEARCH FOR CHRISTIAN AUTHENTICITY

BY DR. JAMES F. ENGEL, DAI FOUNDER



DAI

WWW.DAINTL.ORG

PO BOX 49278

COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80949

My story began in 1964 when, as a churchgoer, I began to seek a faith that moved far beyond the bland, superficial Protestantism of my life to that point--a faith that could transform both my own life and the world in which I lived. I discovered the reality of Jesus Christ for the first time at age 31 in the midst of a successful university teaching and writing career in the field of marketing and consumer research.

This, of course, was the heyday of modernism and the almost universal conviction that no problem is too great to be solved with human reasoning and initiative. I was quickly introduced into an activist Christianity founded squarely on modernism and became caught up in the cliché of that period—solution, spiritual revolution. It made perfect sense to me to devote my life to winning the world through no holds barred strategic evangelism given my background and skills in strategic planning, evaluation and marketing.

It was not long, however, before the zeal of these early days began to temper as my faith matured. Soon I began to discover a disturbing reality identified by Mark Noll as the *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*¹—a modernism-induced biblical reductionism focusing primarily on personal piety and evangelism with scant attention to much-needed personal discipleship and social transformation.

My life as a Christian has been a long, difficult and often lonely pilgrimage to escape this contaminating influence of modernism on my Christian outlook. The major lessons learned on that journey are my story highlighted in these pages. Did this journey transform me into a “postmodern (PM)?” In many ways it has, but I prefer to describe myself today simply as a Christian—perhaps a premodern--a fellow struggler attempting to help myself and others to return to our historic Pilgrim heritage dedicated to bringing “...all aspects of life—political, social, cultural, economic, artistic, or ecclesiastical—into subjection to God.”²

MY LIFE BEFORE CHRIST BECAME A LIVING REALITY

Like so many people in the United States I was raised in the church and participated in Sunday school and youth groups in the 1940s and 50s. Nearly everyone in those days, Christian or not, accepted the need to live moral lives following what we understood to be the Golden Rule. After all, these were the values accepted by American society even though the Christian roots had largely been cut by that time. Christianity, however, was little more than a poorly understood ethical code for me and not a living reality.

My father was a preacher's kid who largely rejected his faith to the point that he deserted my mother and me after service during World War II. As a result, I was raised by my mother, a Christian, living with deep inner uncertainties and fears dating back to her childhood. Although she did her best, she compensated for her own frustrations by prodding me to be the very best in everything I did. What this did was to put an already entrepreneurial kid on the track of unrelenting achievement, a highly-valued motivation in modernism that still plagues me at times even in retirement.

So from very early in life I have been driven by a desire for success. After all, this was the road to the top. Not surprisingly, I was high school valedictorian, drum major, featured soloist in the band, active in drama and radio, features editor of the school newspaper, Eagle Scout and on it goes. That was just the beginning. Honors and awards came my way through my undergraduate experience at Drake University and my graduate study at the University of Illinois.

When I received my doctorate in Marketing in 1960, my goal was to teach at the best business school in the United States. I set my sights on the University of Michigan Graduate School of Business and started at that great university on what was to be a fast track to success. Later I moved into an even more rewarding

professorship at Ohio State University where I taught for nine years.

During those years I became recognized as a leading marketing authority. My books on promotional strategy and consumer behavior soon became standards worldwide to the point where I was acknowledged as the founder of the field of consumer research launched in the 1960s by me and a few other colleagues. In short, I was king of the hill — a poster person for modernism — the successful achievement driven entrepreneur. I had a beautiful, gracious wife Sharon and twin daughters. We continued a sincere but passive involvement in church following patterns established in our childhood. My life appeared to be ideal, but by the time of my early 30s this life began to lose its luster. Both Sharon and I felt a real dissatisfaction that peaked during six months in New York City in 1964 where I had the privilege of involvement as a faculty visitor in one of the world's top advertising agencies.

One Sunday we attended the Marble Collegiate Church and sensed something entirely fresh and new. We meet people who had a contagious vitality. It was there that we set foot on a pilgrimage of several months that was to lead to a life-changing discovery in 1965 of what Christianity is all about. This was a radical new beginning for both of us. Now we wanted to make

our lives count for Christ.

THE NEW KID ON THE EVANGELICAL BLOCK

After this life-changing experience I continued as a professor at Ohio State until 1972. While my motivation to achieve remained largely intact, the direction took a dramatic shift as Christ became increasingly real and vital. Of great significance was the opportunity to become involved both nationally and at Ohio State in campus evangelism. In that capacity I traveled the United States frequently in a growing ministry to motivate Christian faculty to become involved meaningfully in campus outreach. I learned what “trench evangelism” through days that often began at breakfast meetings and ended past midnight. In other words, I became a true card carrying evangelical by this single-minded lifestyle.

Although I continued active as a recognized marketing author into the 1990s, my career took a very different turn when I went to the Wheaton College Graduate School in 1972 as a Visiting Scholar on a one-year leave to study theology. Much to my surprise, God led me to assume a leadership role Wheaton’s pioneering Graduate Communications Program that lasted for 18 years. Later I was called to my last position at Eastern University in Philadelphia in 1990 where David Fraser, Jane Overstreet and I founded the Center for Organizational Excellence dedicated to

preparation of much-needed leadership development curricula in the Two-Thirds World. This soon was followed by the formation of Development Associates International that now is a recognized leadership development agency worldwide.

Unfortunately my achievement motivation seemed to survive intact and I became an equal success in the Christian arena worldwide through my writings, teaching and consulting on ministry effectiveness. Once again I was a poster person for modernism. I loved this spotlight but my own inner struggles continued and even magnified.

Fortunately matters came to a head in the early 1980s when the bottom dropped out of my life and I found myself outwardly successful but inwardly bankrupt. Through an invaluable period of counseling, reflection and help from others, I found myself on an all-new pilgrimage, a virtual process of rebirth reshaping my outlook on life and ministry that continues today.

MY EMANCIPATION FROM MODERNISM

It needs to be said at the outset that the enlightenment leading to modernism has been beneficial in many ways, especially in releasing the Christian mind from its bondage lasting hundreds of years during the middle ages. Indeed, it created and provided the climate in which I could use my gifting in an entrepreneurial

way to the glory of God. I often have challenged the status quo through my teaching and writings and have triggered many to rethink their directions in life and ministry.

My life crisis in the 1980s, however, sharply magnified a process that had begun years earlier as I began to use the lens of scripture, theology and the history of Christian witness to evaluate the priorities and practices of life and ministry. It was not long before I discovered that much of what I believed and embraced had become contaminated with modernism in three primary ways: (1) relegation of faith primarily to the private world of personal values; (2) a misplaced confidence in human initiative and reasoning; and (3) putting programs before people.

RELEGATION OF THE FAITH TO THE PRIVATE WORLD OF PERSONAL VALUES

Of greatest concern to me has been a widespread pattern of biblical reductionism leading to the establishment of evangelism and “winning the world” as the primary task for Christ’s church. According to this Christian worldview, social transformation, if indeed it can happen at all in a lost world, will follow as a consequence of conversion. Unfortunately the history of revival since the 1850’s, the early days of modernism, has provided little evidence that this has taken place³. Christianity, in short, all but

capitulated to the doctrine of modernism relegating faith to the world of personal values.

To me this is a far cry from what Christ expected as he challenged his followers to make disciples who understand and practice everything they had learned from him. He called for obedience to a radical lifestyle dedicated to transforming a corrupt world through salt and light, a lifestyle far different from the privatized faith which seems to prevail today.

I have long been distressed and demoralized by our readiness to declare countries and whole continents to be “reached” largely on the basis of numbers who gave some affirmative response to the gospel and joined church rolls. This is hard to accept when these same countries, rich and poor, are still characterized by racial unrest, poverty, unrestrained materialism, a series of tragic and even immoral wars and deterioration of morals to an extent not even seen in Sodom and Gomorrah.

What has happened to Christ’s narrow way? It seems all-too-apparent that Christianity, although vital and authentic in many quarters, ventures into the public world of politics and business with fear and trembling. As I write these reflections I am stunned by the virtual silence in evangelical quarters on the widespread corruption characterizing America’s business community. Why

do we seem to speak out loudly only on such litmus test issues as homosexuality and abortion and remain silent about endemic public corruption? Having said this, however, I am greatly encouraged by a strong move, especially in the Two-Thirds World, toward holistic ministry in which there is no distinction made between evangelism, personal holiness and social transformation.

A MISPLACED CONFIDENCE IN HUMAN INITIATIVE AND REASONING

Evangelicalism during the 20th Century has fallen captive to the optimistic vision of modernism that no task is too big and complex to defy solution. Therefore, a serious effort was made to accelerate world evangelization, a critical and indispensable component within Christ's great Commission. The challenge was to mobilize scientific reasoning and technological resources to accomplish the task. This has resulted in activating an amazing evangelistic mobilization to the point that there is a Christian presence in most parts of the world today.

How did this take place? The first step was to reduce evangelism to a measurable task in the form of a presentation of propositional truth, the plan of salvation, in such a way that it can be communicated clearly and bring about a response of

conversion. We did not hesitate to harness what the secular world offers in terms of managerial strategies and technology. It was not long before strategies and technologies abounded with numerical growth established as the definitive criterion of success or failure.

Yes, there has been numerical growth worldwide and the spotlight has focused for many decades on the “heroes” whose ministry is most successful numerically. Many “experts” even have proclaimed that we have nearly finished the task of fulfilling the Great Commission. We have succeeded! Or have we?

The bottom dropped out of this evangelical triumphalism about a decade ago for many reasons one of which was widespread evidence of immorality in the ranks of some of the best-known Christian leaders. The greatest shock, however, was Rwanda, declared by many to be our greatest “missiological success” on the basis that the country was 80% Christian and churches were bursting at the seams. Then this country once again was torn asunder by a barbaric tribalism, a reality largely untouched by Christian faith. While there were many martyrs, much of the carnage was led by church people.

Since then we have become all too aware of the extent to which Christianity has become little more than a veneer on society in

many quarters. As a professional in ministry evaluation, I saw this coming. I either led, participated in or had access to many studies evaluating what actually took place in allegedly evangelized areas. Far too frequently the numbers proved to be little more than a mirage.

Large numbers of alleged converts joined church ranks only to exit through the back door never to be seen again, statistics rarely made public, especially to donors. Furthermore, numbers became meaningless given the fact that so little priority was placed on discipling and unleashing new believers. Far too many became passive participants to the point where thousands of pastors worldwide have told me that fewer than 10% of their members (usually 5% or less) are active in the faith over and above Sunday attendance.

Through these years I sounded the alarm that the secular planning methods and marketing strategies we were adopting were missing the mark in a serious way. I remember how often I was in situations where we planned grand strategies and asked God to bless our strategic wisdom. For some reason, corporate prayer and fasting to seek the mind of Christ before we reached this point was pretty uncommon. What kind of faith is this? Needless to say, I found myself all but abandoning what by then I had come to see as a misdirected “managerial missiology.”

PUTTING PROGRAMS BEFORE PEOPLE

I can't begin to remember how many times I have heard the admonition that we must sacrifice everything to reach a dying world—our comforts, our personal dreams, our very life itself. Of course Christ made it perfectly clear that those who save their life will lose it. But does this also mean that work weeks of 80 or more hours are required and that we must put ministry ahead of everything else? I hardly think so. What we have done is to enthrone and even publicly honor an evangelical workaholicism that has torn personal and family lives asunder behind the scenes. Even today I, a recent retiree, continue to be admonished that a Christian cannot step back from the firing line and retire.

I make these comments with real sadness, because I am a reforming workaholic who has paid the price for my time in the evangelical spotlight. I also have consulted with hundreds of Christian organizations in well over 80 countries and have seen first hand that burned out leaders and workers are tragically commonplace.

This problem is made even worse by the fact that people are often seen as little more than cogs in the world evangelization machinery. Although all churches and agencies loudly proclaim that “people count,” I have seen far too little priority given to making sure that all involved in the ministry are productive and

fulfilled, a cardinal principle in responsible management. This is guaranteed to produce ranks of demoralized people, a disturbing reality we have yet to address seriously.

SOME LESSONS LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

In my ministry over the years I have had the great privilege of joining hands with many others worldwide to help bring about a return to a more authentic Christianity freed from the contamination of modernism. Will Norton (my dean and mentor at Wheaton) and I sounded the alarm in 1975 that something had gone wrong with the harvest⁴. These issues are discussed in much greater detail in the recent book *Changing the Mind of Missions* by Bill Dyrness and myself⁵.

I now am retired from active ministry responsibilities, but I still continue as a learner on a pilgrimage with my Lord. Here are three major foundational lessons I have learned (and keep on learning): (1) Christ's came to establish and extend his kingdom; (2) the gospel is not a consumer product; and (3) his primary method is spontaneous expansion of his church. But there is yet another much more personal lesson: (4) the Christian life is a pilgrimage characterized by struggle.

CHRIST'S GOAL IS TO EXTEND HIS

KINGDOM AND REIGN ON THE EARTH

As I have contended many times in writing, our zeal to win the world and “finish the work of Christ in our lifetime” has tended all too often to reduce Christ’s Great Commission to a great evangelistic commotion. This was indelibly impressed on me some years back in these words from a Central African Republic Christian leader speaking on behalf of many colleagues—“the missionaries brought us Christ but never taught us how to live.” This summed it up—a truncated evangelical agenda focused on mainly evangelism without building disciples who will transform their world.

To me this is tragic and demoralizing in light of Christ’s goal to establish and extend his kingdom and reign on earth. Jesus announced his great mission (Luke 4:18-19) to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (liberation from sin and its consequences). He called for a radically new lifestyle, the narrow way, and offered salvation to all who are willing to respond and repent.

Christ’s method of extending his kingdom was summarized for the disciples before his ascension in what we know as the Great Commission. He told us to make disciples as we live our daily

lives through sharing the good news, baptizing and teaching those who respond everything that he himself taught and modeled on earth. Christ, in other words, put forth a seamless agenda with no dichotomies or variations in priority between evangelism, holy living and social transformation.

This great truth about Christ's kingdom and reign almost completely eluded me until the first of the famous Lausanne conferences, Lausanne I held in 1974. One leader after another from the Two-Thirds World prophetically declared that our western evangelistic preoccupation, while foundational and necessary, has not transformed the world as Christ intended.

They issued a clear call to return to a local church based, kingdom-focused gospel that would penetrate all of life with the lordship of Christ. Then and only then will the church have a compelling message in a pluralistic world. At their insistence the famous but now almost forgotten and ignored Lausanne Covenant called for church-based holistic ministry which takes the entirety of the Great Commission seriously.

For many in attendance, including me, Lausanne I was the high water mark of evangelical Christianity during the last century, a point of radical change in our outlook and ministry. First and foremost we heard the voice of God, confessed our failures and

changed our priorities. We began the process continuing to this day of restoring Christ's holistic balance in our response to his Great Commission. Furthermore, we celebrated the fact that momentum in the evangelical movement had shifted once and for all away from the west and welcomed the new wineskins that emerged.

THE GOSPEL IS NOT A CONSUMER PRODUCT

I was taught that "soul winning" requires little more than finding the right way to package propositional truth to persuade people to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. After all, if it works it has to be good. This reflects sincere efforts by evangelists influenced by modernism at the beginning of the 20th Century to improve evangelistic impact. A plethora of methods emerged to present the gospel in such a way that it featured an "abundant life"—an entirely privatized good news--without the downsides of a counter-cultural narrow lifestyle that would repel rather than attract.

I cannot help asking this question: does this differ in any major way from marketing campaigns designed to promote consumer products? We seem to have revised the Great Commission to read "market the gospel internationally; emphasize an abundant life where 'dreams will come' true as the message and our competitive distinctive; do everything possible to close the sale

through skillful personal selling; and publicly reward the best producing distribution agencies and sales people.” I may well have overstated it here but who can deny that we advertise; we train and motivate evangelists to “close the sale;” we experiment and adopt those methods that increase the market share of Christianity; and we make sure that donors know which organization gets the most bang for the buck.

Let’s make it clear once and for all that the gospel is not a consumer product and that evangelism is not a marketing strategy. The Apostle Peter admonished his followers to “always give a reason for the hope that is within you” (1 Pet 3:15). This assumes, of course, that others have sensed the aroma of Christ present when believers, individually and corporately, dedicate their lives to being salt and light in a lost world. In short, the words of Jesus are made flesh by the evidence of believers who are genuine salt and light, and this is the message of the church.

Throughout the ages, evangelism has taken place as sensitive and caring believers enter a pilgrimage with those seeking to discover the reasons for this hope, a process moving from the known to the unknown. God calls believers to give testimony to this reality, not to persuade. In the process, Christ reveals himself and the Holy Spirit alone brings about new birth. This is evangelism at its best, a fact confirmed by decades of

evangelistic research and by those at the forefront in evangelism with today's postmoderns⁷.

HIS METHOD IS SPONTANEOUS EXPANSION OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Jesus left as his heritage a wonderful model for extending his kingdom and reign. He took ordinary people, often outcasts and misfits, and transformed them into extraordinary people known as disciples. Together in a counter cultural community referred to as church they became salt and light to the lost and shook the world in which they lived to its very foundations. Christ made it clear that the church always would be a minority, albeit a powerful one, with a powerful transforming influence far beyond its numbers. Nothing ever was said about numerical growth as a goal.

In my early days I was a gung ho new believer who unfortunately viewed the church more as the enemy than anything else, and I certainly was not alone. Many of us blamed the church for the fact that so much of our life was spent in the pews without power or meaning, and all but wrote it off as a vital force. Quite frankly, we embraced the parachurch movement as the only viable way to design strategies and mobilize the resources needed to win the world in our lifetime.

The church I knew then and even today tends to be an institution driven by top-down professional leadership and recruitment for ever-expanding programs. The result is passive laity largely uninvolved beyond Sunday morning. Churches of this nature are an unfortunate remnant of modernism. It is small wonder that parachurch agencies came into existence to fill largely to do what the church often would not for itself beyond its walls.

Fortunately, however, it was not long until I began to grasp that the church envisioned by our Lord is something radically different. It exists as a community characterized by love where common people are transformed by their faith to live uncommon lives and do uncommon deeds. The work of the Kingdom happens as they are empowered and unleashed to be true disciples.

A careful reading of the history of Christian witness clearly demonstrates that the church of Jesus Christ becomes revived when it breaks out of dead orthodoxy and institutionalization and becomes an "organism," not an organization. John Wesley had a vision which became a reality of the local congregation as "a body...compacted together, in order, first, to save each his [sic] own soul; then to assist each other in working out salvation; and afterwards, as far as in them lies, to save all from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and to set up

the kingdom of Christ.”⁸

Roland Allen, a respected Anglican missionary, shocked the missions world of an earlier day which was equally preoccupied with methods and strategy. He bluntly contended that the true community of believers follows the methods of the Apostle Paul and expands spontaneously through the daily life of the community, individually and corporately, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Spontaneous expansion is best conceptualized as a series of lights expanding in the darkness until whole areas are illuminated. Perhaps it starts with a few believers who discover one another and join together in community. This single light turns into many as believers on the narrow way demonstrate a winsome alternative to the broad way offered by the world.⁹

The primary work of the kingdom, then, is localized and often invisible. Strategies might well emerge as believers seek wisdom from the Holy Spirit, and certainly one would expect true believers to take biblical principles of servant leadership, stewardship and evaluation seriously. That is far different, however, than the hundreds of grand strategies of the 20th Century conceived by parachurch agencies in western countries calling for local churches to “sign on, be trained, and become

involved to “win the world.”

In our modernistic zeal we got the cart before the horse and it is time to call a moratorium on a managerial missiology that views the local church as just another cog in someone’s machine, rather than God’s primary force in his Kingdom. Fortunately enlightened leaders are recognizing that the greatest need now is to revitalize the local church to be all that the Holy Spirit intends it to be.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A PILGRIMAGE

CHARACTERIZED BY STRUGGLE

As a newly committed believer I was led to believe that my life would be a victorious one largely free from struggle if I remained filled by the Holy Spirit. Through teaching and Christian books I was given rules and guidelines to smooth the way and guarantee an inner joy. While this was well intended it was just another insidious example of modernism and its search for quick solutions. It worked pretty well until that early “new Christian bloom” faded as it inevitably does and I found myself falling into a cloud of confusion and sagging self-esteem.

Also, by temperament I have always been one who thinks outside of the box. I tend to be a pioneer who senses both problems and

opportunities and works to bring about change. Yet for much of my life I have felt like Sisyphus, that famous character in Greek mythology who always pushed a rock uphill only to have it come down on top of him as dreams and visions crumbled and opportunities were lost. Nothing can be more discouraging.

What this comes down to is that I was and continue to be a struggler in the faith finding “victory” to be an illusive goal. Much to my surprise I began to find many years ago that I was not alone by any means. Only then did it dawn on me that the “normal” Christian life always is a struggle as we learn more about ourselves and about Christ and that fellow strugglers desperately need one another for help and support. This is what Christian community is all about.

THE PILGRIMAGE CONTINUES

Thank God we have entered into a postmodern era where another generation wrestles anew with extending Christ’s kingdom and reign on this earth. How do I position myself in this interesting arena? Am I still a card caring evangelical? As a committed Anglican, I believe in the historic creeds of the church and in the Articles of Religion on which this faith is based. In that sense believing Anglicans always have been evangelicals long before the era of modernism when that term was introduced. I prefer say simply that I am a believing Christian. There is no need

to insert any adjectives.

Of greatest importance to me today is the reality of my faith as a solid rock that never moves and always provides protection, love and assurance. While I am increasingly convicted of my own unworthiness before God, the power of his love and acceptance is an ever-growing reality. I can well remember a birthday a few years ago when I thanked God for the first time that he created me and called me as a disciple. From then on I have come to love myself in fresh ways, one of the greatest things that can happen in the life of a struggler.

Contrary to some outspoken evangelical leaders of my generation, I welcome postmodernism. I am encouraged by the fact that relationships and community are once again prized as they were prior to the insidious individualism of the past century. Faith is being rescued from its imprisonment in the private sector of life. Serious attention at long last is being devoted to what I would call true discipleship—a process where we come to know and understand ourselves and are taught and encouraged become responsible and productive participants in the body of Christ.

I find myself in the wonderful situation where I can step back from the firing line. I have been blessed by the fact that my

leadership has been assumed by others who are far more qualified than I ever could be to cope with today's challenges. My role now is one of encouragement and support. My continuing prayer comes from Psalm 71:18: "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come."

REFERENCES

- 1 Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1994).
- 2 Noll, p. 42.
- 3 Kathryn T. Long, *The Revival of 1857-1858: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 4 James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan 1975).
- 5 James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Mission—Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 2000).
- 6 This is the position taken by John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is helpful to read this wonderful classic in modern English. See *Pilgrim's Progress* in *Today's English* retold by James H. Thomas. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964).
- 7 Brian D. McLaren. *More Ready Than You Realize—Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix*. (Grand Rapids MI: 2002).
- 8 John Wesley as quoted in Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*. (Downer's Grove Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 85.
- 9 Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and Missionary Methods, St Paul or Ours?* Both of these books were reprinted in 1962 by Eerdmans.

© Development Associates International

DAI enhances the integrity and effectiveness of Christian leaders worldwide so that the Church can fulfill its role in extending the Kingdom of God. In response to the needs of leaders, we use interactive educational tools to grow their management skills and spiritual life. Our ultimate goal is to see strong servant leaders emerge who deeply impact their community and accurately reflect Kingdom values over cultural values. To find out more about DAI, visit www.daintl.org.