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## CHAPTER ONE



# *The Contemporary Problem of Nominal Christianity*



*F*ew things in the world speak to the soul with greater depth than a committed marriage relationship. When two people share love and cling to one another through decades of life, weathering trials, tragedies, and tense times, they offer the world an image of a greater reality.

But if the sweetness of true love easily moves us, the specter of half-hearted marital commitment equally raises our passions. Many of us have watched with sorrow and surprise as the covenants of many couples collapse. We have seen the story play out time and time again: the sweethearts everyone admires marry and raise adorable children in a happy home. Without warning, the marriage crumbles, often as a result of

a spouse's unfaithfulness. Though everything seemed so perfect, we learn in the end that all was not well. There may have been sparks of true affection over the years, but ultimately, what looked like love was no love at all.

### Relating Marriage and Faith

This situation parallels a matter of even greater significance: Christian faith. Just as marriage is not merely a slip of paper and a big ceremony, Christian faith is not merely a one-time confession of Christ and occasional church attendance. If we would reach heaven, if we would truly live by faith, we must be personally transformed by God such that we pursue Him, however imperfectly, on a constant basis. This, at base, is the nature of Christianity. Though still bearing sin, we fight for holiness and watch as God, over time, conforms us to the image of His Son. We back up our “profession”—our verbal commitment—to God by our lives, thus showing ourselves to be truly saved (see 1 John 1).

Unashamed sinners and passionate Christians form two clear scriptural groups. The Bible deals extensively with the unredeemed and the redeemed. But the Scripture also recognizes a third group. This group mirrors the half-hearted spouse discussed above: the lukewarm, interested but non-committal, nominal Christian who professes true faith but shows little evidence of it (nominal refers to “name,” that is, a faith in name only). To this group the voices of Scripture also devote much attention. The prophets call Israel to stop

wandering from God; Jesus Christ tells deeply frightening stories about those who pursue Him half-heartedly (see Matthew 13:1–23, for example); Revelation informs us that at the last judgment, the Lord will spew the lukewarm from His mouth (Revelation 3:16). In these and many other instances, the Scripture warns the nominal Christian of clear and present danger. We are not merely dealing with earthly situations here. On the matter of true Christianity, we are confronting matters of eternal consequence.

### Nominal Christianity in Our Day

As we will see in the quotations and statistics that follow, lukewarm faith is alive and well in our evangelical churches. By studying this problem in its contemporary form, we prepare ourselves to enter Jonathan Edwards's world in coming chapters.

Nominal Christianity is a notoriously difficult problem to trace and spot. Like a transmittable illness, one knows it's out there, but one can't pinpoint exactly where. Two things are immediately clear, though: the state of maturity of many Christians is quite low, and many churches are failing to educate their people in the basics of Christianity.

### Confused Beliefs

Pollsters D. Michael Lindsay and George Gallup conducted research several years ago that revealed alarming

beliefs among a significant number of people who claim to be evangelical.

According to Lindsay and Gallup, of those claiming to be born again:

- 33% hold a pro-choice stance on abortion
- 26% believe in astrology
- 20% believe in reincarnation (Lindsay, 40)

Many of these people are likely in evangelical churches that ostensibly teach biblical doctrine, and yet they hold views on various spiritual and moral subjects that directly conflict with the biblical witness. If their beliefs conflict with true Christianity, it is likely that their lives conflict as well.

### Deficient Living

In a study of members of prominent evangelical megachurches, Rodney Stark found the following data:

- ONLY 46% attend services weekly or more often
- Only 46% tithe
- Only 33% read the Bible daily (Stark, 47)

When Stark and his researchers asked the megachurch members the following question, *“How often in the last month did you participate in witnessing/sharing your faith with strangers?”*

the following percentage answered that they witnessed one or more times:

- All Conservative Protestants 44%
- All Liberal Protestants 19% (Stark, 25)

This could initially seem encouraging. When one considers, though, that more than half of all *conservative* Protestants, people who seemingly have a great concern for personal evangelism, did not share their faith even once in the month with an unbeliever, reality begins to sink in.

A recent survey by an evangelical megachurch backed up this conclusion. It revealed that a significant number of its members who self-identified as spiritually healthy—“close to Christ” and “Christ-centered” were the words used in the survey—also marked themselves as “spiritually stalled” and “dissatisfied.” *Christianity Today* commented on the survey that “About a quarter of the ‘stalled’ segment and 63 percent of the ‘dissatisfied’ segment contemplated leaving the church.” (CT) These findings come from a seemingly thriving church reaching many thousands of people each year.

It is true that all Christians sometimes feel “stalled” in their faith. Sin is a part of our lives, and it will not leave us until we reach the other side. But because of the vast number of members who described themselves in this way, these numbers do not indicate health in the church.

## Biblical Illiteracy

In his book *Today's Pastors*, George Barna documents the disheartening results of his study of the biblical literacy or knowledge of many Christians. First, Barna found that just four out of ten Christians read their Bible on a weekly basis. Second, according to Barna:

THOSE PEOPLE WHO DO READ will commit about one hour to Bible reading during the week. Those people actually will spend more time showering, commuting to and from work, watching television, reading the newspaper, eating meals or talking on the telephone. Obviously, the Bible is not a high priority in the lives of most people. (Barna, 48)

If we're still skeptical about the specter of listless Christianity, this statistic wakes us up. The decided minority of professing Christians who do crack the pages of the Word of God spend less time in it each week *than they do in the shower*.

David Wells, the eminent theologian and critic of evangelicalism, cites other Barna polls that show that a majority—52%—of evangelicals “reject the idea of original sin outright” (*Courage to Be Protestant*, 57). This means that a majority of professing believers simply reject one of the core doctrines of a Christian view of mankind altogether. Furthermore, Wells cites statistics that show that only 32% of professing evangel-

icals believe in absolutes in truth or morality (*Above All Earthly Powers*, 93). These are the sort of statements we expect from outspoken unbelievers, not professing Christians.

## The Problem of Pornography

The harmful effects of pornography are well-known. Yet the church, commissioned to be an outpost of holiness in a world of evil, has struggled mightily to help its members turn away from pornography. Some of the most discouraging data comes from pastors, those charged to lead congregations through holy lives. The following data comes from the Safe Families website ([www.safe-families.org](http://www.safe-families.org)):

- 37% of pastors say pornography is a current struggle
- In another survey, over half of evangelical pastors admitted viewing pornography last year
- Of pastors who had visited a porn site, 53% had visited such sites “a few times” in the past year, and 18% visit sexually explicit sites between a couple of times a month and more than once a week

If the pastors of God’s churches are struggling as mightily as these polls suggest, one wonders how church members, many of them far less spiritually mature than pastors, are faring in the fight against lust.

## The Tragedy of Divorce

Other data indicate that the church is not only failing in its mission to be distinct and unique, but it is full of the same cultural sins that the world practices. In some cases, the church actually may be *surpassing* the world in its sins. In 1999, the Barna Group found that conservative evangelicals apparently divorce at a higher rate than non-Christians. The following figures comparing rates of divorce between Christians and non-Christians echo this shocking claim:

- Non-Denominational 34%
  - Mainline Protestants 25%
  - Atheists/Agnostics 21%
- ([www.associatedcontent.com](http://www.associatedcontent.com))

This statistic paints an unflattering portrait of the state of Christian marriage. Of course, it needs to be qualified; one could point out here that professing Christians are more likely to marry than unbelievers and thus are more susceptible to divorce. One could also note that many conservative Christian theologians believe that divorce is allowed in some circumstances. With these points noted, though, it is clear that many Christians have bought into the American divorce culture. Rather than standing apart from the world in this area, many Christians mirror their unbelieving neighbors. In a society rapidly releasing itself from connection to Christian moral and theological thinking, many Christians are not even fighting

the cultural tide, let alone stemming it. It is sweeping them away.

### Sub-Christian Faith Among Young Adults

The lives and testimony of our children, though surely not ultimately dependent on the faith of parents, reveal with painful precision just how much faith makes its way into nominally Christian homes. Interviewers and researchers who have talked with hundreds of children of conservative Christian parents have found that modern “church kids” live and talk much like their secular peers. Christian Smith, a sociologist who has extensively studied the lives of religious young people, has found that in general, American teens practice what he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a bland, relativistic spirituality that emphasizes doing good, feeling good, and believing in a benevolent, harmless, one-size-fits-all God. Smith’s book *Soul Searching* includes many brief and often depressing interviews with teens conducted by the sociologist and his staff. For example, Smith comments:

VIEWED IN TERMS of the absolute historical centrality of the Protestant conviction about salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone and not by any human good works, many belief professions by Protestant teens, including numerous conservative Protestant teens, in effect discard that essential Protestant gospel. One 15-year-old white

conservative Protestant boy from Mississippi, for instance, explained, "If you just do the right thing and don't do anything bad, I mean nothing really bad, you know you'll go to heaven. If you don't, you're screwed [laughs], that's about it." Similarly, this 16-year-old black conservative Protestant girl from Pennsylvania told us, "Being a Christian, um, don't do many sins, read the Bible, go to church, living godly, that's about it. It's basically not committing sin, basically" (Smith, 136)

In another section, Smith discusses the absence of a connection between biblical thinking and day-to-day life:

QUITE OFTEN, TEENS said they did not think their religious faith affected their family relationships, they did not believe religion was relevant to the conduct of a dating relationship, they did not see that religion affected their life at school, and so on. This was often even true for teens who in the religious discussion explicitly said that faith was important and influential in their lives. One 16-year-old white mainline Protestant girl from Michigan, for example, who explicitly stated, "Religion is very important to me," denied in every other section of the interview that religion had anything to do with her relationships, dating, school work, or any other aspect of her ordinary life. (Smith, 140)

One could cite numerous other examples from Smith's text that make this same point. At base, it is clear that many modern teens from a wide variety of churches have little sense of the personal importance and eternal significance of Christ and His Word.

The teenage years are known for their difficulty and turmoil, and that must be stated. In addition, Christian parents cannot produce faith in their children, and even the best parents may see their children drift away from the faith. But these necessary qualifications do not silence the point made above. On a broad level, Christians and churches are struggling to pass on biblical Christianity. Many of us are not living robustly Christian lives; a good portion of our children are not, either.

### **A Brief Sweep of Factors Behind the Current Situation**

It is not the purpose of this chapter to exhaustively trace the factors that led to our current situation. We are more concerned with the state of things on the ground, and cannot take the space necessary to sketch out a full-fledged answer to this important question, so the following survey will be brief. Readers desiring to look into this further would do well to look at a number of volumes cited in this chapter, including David Wells's texts *No Place for Truth, Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, and *The Courage to Be Protestant*.

To concisely identify a few key factors, we need to travel

back in time a couple of centuries to eighteenth-century Europe, the “Age of Lights” or “Enlightenment.” In this era, a number of key thinkers reacted against state churches and their dogma, labeling religious faith “superstition” and emphasizing the primacy of the human intellect. They questioned the authority and truthfulness of the Bible and sought to strip it of elements they deemed false and superstitious. It took some time for this manner of thinking to trickle down into society, but eventually, many European countries once characterized by religious faith became increasingly secularized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This unbelieving line of thought spread to churches and seminaries and caused many in traditional church traditions to fall away from orthodox faith.

In time, religious leaders began to doubt even their hard-line liberal commitments. In the second half of the twentieth century, they accommodated to the secular “postmodern” spirit, avoiding “dogma” of any kind, and embracing mystery. Instead of emphasizing absolute truth, they spoke of truth for communities. That is, certain communities believed one way, and that was truth for them; others might believe something entirely different, and that was also true (for them). Some Christians from both conservative and liberal backgrounds adopted this spirit, creating a new kind of church, one light on doctrine and heavy on personal experience and mystery.

At the same time, the intellectual weakness of the church and the accommodation of its formative seminaries to liberal modes of thought drove many conservative Christian leaders

to look to the booming American business sector for clues to vitality and growth. In the process, some American Christians lost connection to a Bible-centered model of preaching and, accordingly, a biblical worldview. Others who remained consciously biblical concentrated themselves so narrowly on political and social concerns that they seemed to make the church another Political Action Committee. Many “mainline” churches adopted liberal doctrines and deemphasized or even discarded fundamental doctrines of Christianity, though in the present day, a biblical witness of varying size persists in some denominations. Still more professing Christians have lost confidence and interest in local churches and have invested in parachurch organizations, trusting national leaders and ministries to lead them from afar without meaningful contact with a body of believers.

### Pragmatism and Postmodernism in the Church

With the rise of the financial market and the cultural abandonment of various tenets of a Christian worldview, many of our evangelical churches have shifted from a richly biblical and theological perspective to one driven by pragmatic concerns. Congregations often do not make this shift to spite doctrine; instead, they do it because they think it will bring health and growth. Though they may mean well, a concern for numbers over a concern for personal faith makes it easy for nominalism to creep into the church. When churches concentrate

so much on bringing people in, they can lose sight of building people up. That kind of atmosphere can make it easy for people to adopt a half-hearted faith, a Christianity that may be no Christianity at all.

Cultural critic Os Guinness has written persuasively about the pragmatic mindset in the church. He notes that

THE CONCERN “WILL IT WORK?” has long overshadowed “Is it true?” Theology has given way to technique. Know-whom has faded before know-how. Serving God has subtly been deformed into servicing the self. At its worst, the result is a shift from faith to the “faith in faith,” which—along with faith in religion—is a perniciously distinctive American heresy. But even at its best, pragmatism results in an evangelicalism rich in ingenuity and organization but poor in spirituality and superficial, if not banal, in doctrine. We have become the worldliest Christians in America. (Guinness, 59)

This is a key problem. As Guinness identifies, many of our churches have bought into the modern American consumer mindset in which we understand ourselves primarily as consumers and our churches as service-providers. Some pastors no longer preach prophetic, biblically robust, God-centered sermons meant to feed the people of God a delicious and healthy biblical “meal.” Instead, they offer the church short, airy homilies aimed at the practical and psychological “needs” of people.

Because size is at a premium in modern church life, many

Christians wander through their church buildings, not knowing where to begin to connect with believers on a meaningful level. The result is, in some cases, churches with huge membership rolls but little biblical discipleship and corporate involvement (the same can be true of small churches as well). Few people have effectively studied what our modern church culture, with its emphasis on size and numbers, has done to discipleship. Where are the vital intergenerational connections spoken of in the Pastoral Epistles (Titus 2, for example)? Where is church discipline and its essential display of the church's commitment to holiness before the Lord (Matthew 18:20)? How do Christians in large churches without significant corporate togetherness care for one another in meaningful ways (Galatians 6:2)? These and many other biblically derived questions go unasked and unanswered in many Christian circles today.

Pragmatism, however, is not the only temptation that churches face today. As noted earlier, certain corners of evangelicalism have shifted away from staunch doctrinal stances. They have instead accommodated postmodernism and have moved from teaching the absolute truths of Scripture. They give great weight to personal experience and emphasize that as the world has changed, so the church and the church's gospel must change. They consider those who profess belief in absolute truth and morality to be "judgmental," the worst sin of all in a postmodern world. Leading progressive thinkers like Brian McLaren sound this horn, while figures like D. A. Carson, Kevin DeYoung, and Ted Kluck have countered this

new way of thinking. The postmodern wing of the evangelical church is notoriously hard to pin down, but it presents a threat to the health of the church today, just as pragmatism does.

## An Undeveloped Christian Mind

These trends have not had only macro-level effects. On the ground level, many Christians have an undeveloped Christian mind and a largely untouched life. The church, not the academy or any other institution, is responsible for the spiritual development of the people of God. David Wells drives to the root of this problem in his cultural analysis, arguing in a number of places that the modern church has imbibed the spirit of modern culture, which is intellectually fragmented, market-driven, style-based, personality-driven, and morally relativistic. He contends that:

[C]ONSUMER SOCIETY PRODUCES only brief, fleeting connections and no bonding in the melting pot. The more descriptive image of the postmodern experience would be not the melting pot but the cocktail party. This is the place of brief encounter where those who may be strangers perform the ritual of instant, but evaporating community, one that springs into being as the sun sets and is gone before the moon arises. The modern self, as a result, has grown very thin, insubstantial, and distracted. It lives in a world of fleeting experiences and constantly shifting images, images

which we create and by which we sometimes even pass ourselves off as something we are not. In this world of images and shadows, the only constant is not the self behind them, or the self consuming them, but the corporations which create and exploit them. (*Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 45)

Wells's elegant imagery does not obscure the heft of his thought. In a consumerist world where advertising reigns and ethical and spiritual ideas must kneel in the presence of the almighty market, we have become "insubstantial" people with "thin" selves. In other words, we are not deeply rooted in any sense. Oftentimes, we don't think profoundly; we don't connect meaningfully; we don't focus extendedly. We can all too easily flit through life, trying new experiences, inventing new selves through online media. We watch endless amounts of television, keep a constant vigil over our email accounts, and update 800 of our closest friends when we make a piece of toast, but we often cannot be bothered to read, or think, or delve into the lives of unbelievers who are everywhere around us. We have focused on ourselves, pumping ourselves up through self-esteem exercises, redefining our sins as "tendencies" that require therapy of one kind or another, and discarding traditional marks of maturity to gratify desires we refuse to tame. In the process, we have not grown. We have shrunk.

God, it seems, has shrunk with us. So says Wells, noting that in our society:

GOD IS MUCH FRIENDLIER, too. Gone are the notes of judgment, though these are more displaced than denied, and they are replaced by those of love and acceptance. . . . Sin is preached but is presented more in terms of how it “harms the individual, rather than how it offends a holy God. Sin, in short, prevents us from realizing our full potential.” Conversion is insisted upon but then, paradoxically, it is the this-worldly benefits that are accentuated, the practical benefits of knowing Christ receiving all the attention with scarcely a look at what happens if we turn away from him. (*Above All Earthly Pow’rs*, 306)

Here is the ultimate mark of our decline. Because the church has largely lost its theological orientation in the wake of the Enlightenment and the ascendancy of a consumer culture, we have, perhaps unwittingly, redefined our God and what it means to know Him. He is a preference, a choice, who when we convert bestows upon us what we’ve always deserved. With little grip on a biblical understanding of the Almighty, we who are called to be shaped in His holy image have done the reverse: we have shaped Him in our image. As a result, He looks a lot like us.

### The Untouched Lives of Many Professing Christians

We have looked into the life and thought of the contemporary evangelical church in this brief little chapter. We have

found reasons for discouragement in numerous places—in the way evangelicals live, in the testimony given by their children, in the sway pragmatism and postmodernism hold in church life. The church, created by God to represent His holiness in this world, has instead accommodated the culture, adopting in many cases its practices, concerns, and even ideologies. In too many of our churches, Christians do not live or think differently from the world. Many may simply be struggling as all who follow Christ in a sinful world do. But the combined weight of this testimony should lead us to consider another possibility: a sizeable portion of Christians are nominal believers, people who profess faith in Christ but who do not truly know the Lord.

We know from Scripture that until Christ returns, the church will be imperfect. It will have some “wheat”—some true believers—and some “tares”—those who falsely profess faith (see Matthew 13). At the same time, we must also know that the church can grow strong or wax weak depending on its love for the Lord and His Word. In some eras, the church thrives; in others, it weakens. In our age, we need to identify the significant challenges and temptations before us in order that we might glorify God and thrive.

There are Christian movements, churches, and leaders that give us great hope. We should support these works of God and take much encouragement from them. Though we do believe that nominalism affects every church in some way, it does not affect all churches to the same extent. We would not desire for churches and Christians to embrace a posture

of needless fear or anxiety. Many churches in this era are recognizing the importance of church membership and doctrinal discipleship. Where these biblical practices are celebrated and where, in general, the Word is faithfully preached and accountability and togetherness are pursued, we should expect to find health, and encouragement, and the sweet savor of God's glory.

But we must not be naïve. As we will see, Edwards's own example shows us that biblical preaching and zeal for the gospel cannot guarantee church health. We face even greater challenges in our day. It is clear that the culture is increasingly moving away from Christian belief. The academy, the media, and the entertainment world challenge Christian faith on intellectual, spiritual, and moral fronts. Pragmatism lures us with promises of vast size and huge budgets. Postmodernism suggests we lay down our absolute truth and morality. Everywhere we are urged to esteem ourselves and make God smaller, the greatest sin of all. Churches and Christians of all kinds are confronted by these problems. Sadly, many who give in on these fronts and suffer from weak faith and weak morality may not merely struggle in their faith. They may have none at all.

We do not have an easy road before us, as Israel's history and the church's past teach us. In the next chapter, we will find abundant proof that even a theological titan like Jonathan Edwards, living in a time and place amenable to biblical Christianity, struggled mightily to counter nominal faith. As we learn from his heroic example in successive chapters, we

will discover how we can respond to our present situation and stand for true Christianity in this fallen world.



## *Embracing True Christianity*

### *The Need for Evangelical Self-Examination in Our Denominations and Churches*

**T**he problem of nominalism described above requires that we adopt a spirit of humility and self-examination before the Lord. Church history abundantly testifies to the idea that nominalism is a problem that all churches and denominations face. Some circumstances may expedite the spread of these problems, and others may more effectively fight them, but all Christians and churches would do well to put down pride and address this challenge with sobriety and confidence in a sovereign God. We cannot take refuge in membership rolls, especially when in seemingly booming denominations, experts suggest that perhaps half of the many millions of members on church rolls rarely set foot in a church building, let alone exercise vibrant faith.

Beyond our denominations, we cannot look around our churches and assume that attendees know the Lord because they belong to the church or attend it faithfully. To put this more simply, just because someone raises their hand in a time of singing doesn't mean that they are a Christian. Just because

someone smiles when greeted, gives generously to the church, and signs up to help in various programs does not mean that they are a Christian. Just because someone has said they are a Christian does not mean that they are. All of the above may sound tough, but we must confront hard realities in a time of great challenge for the church.

We need to be very careful about thinking that a Christian necessarily looks and acts a certain way. We must constantly keep in mind that however healthy our particular congregation, there is no church, no style of worship, no creed one recites that can in itself ensure the conversion of a sinner. Recognizing this fact alone can help us begin to examine our churches and denominations.

### *The Need for Sober Evangelical Self-Examination in Our Families*

One of the scariest things about the data presented above is the sad state of the spiritual lives of many children who have grown up in sound churches. The inability of many children from Christian families to articulate even the simplest biblical truths—who God is and what saving faith is, for starters—shows that many of us have fallen short in our efforts to instill a biblical way of thinking and living in our children. We cannot, of course, save our children by our efforts, but the Bible makes very clear that parental training greatly affects the spiritual lives of our offspring (Proverbs 22:6).

Contrary to our event-centered, leader-oriented, excite-

ment-driven view of childhood training, the Bible seems to suggest that children learn best about true faith in the simple, mundane things of life, in watching parents honor God in the midst of the normal rhythms of everyday life (Deuteronomy 6:7). Though parents may feel inadequate to teach and train, they can take great comfort in knowing that an authentic witness, coupled by sound instruction, has great power. The lives of countless believers raised by godly parents testify to this reality. Though they may buttress our parenting, we do not *need* flashy children's programs or charismatic youth speakers. We need to be godly parents whose lives back up our faith.