

The Worst Of Times: Evangelicalism In Critical Condition

By Phil Johnson

With the wild popularity of so many evangelical fads like "Forty Days of Purpose"; the lucrative success of the Christian publishing and contemporary Christian music industries; the growing influence of the "emerging church" phenomenon; and a recent cover story by Time magazine featuring "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America," lots of evangelicals might be tempted to think these are the best of times for their movement.

My own assessment would be that evangelicalism's spiritual condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century is reminiscent of the medieval church just prior to the Protestant Reformation.

No, I take it back. Things are much worse among evangelicals today than they were in the Catholic Church in those days. Modern and postmodern evangelicalism is just like medieval Catholicism was-only more superficial.

Think about it: Luther was provoked by Tetzels, the charlatan fund-raiser who went through Europe promising people indulgences in return for money so that the Pope could build St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. We've got at least a dozen Tetzels appearing daily on TBN, promising people material prosperity in exchange for money. Jan Crouch uses that money to make the sets of the TBN studios more garish and more gaudy than any room in the Vatican, and she has added so many tawdry pink hair extensions to her hairdo that it now rivals the size of the dome on St. Peter's.

Tetzels peddled his indulgences with trite songs and sayings ("As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs"). Modern evangelicals are experts in writing doggerel and banal platitudes and have even made silly, superficial songs the centerpieces of all their liturgy.

The medieval church was overrun with superstition. We've got people reciting the prayer of Jabez every day who are convinced it's a magic formula that will bring them wealth and good luck.

The Medieval church produced Niccolò Machiavelli, the cynical and unscrupulous political theorist who believed the end always justifies the means. We've got a host of evangelical celebrities with shady reputations, from Gary Ezzo to Benny Hinn. We've also got a thousand church-growth "experts" who insist pragmatism is the only workable philosophy for the church today, and that we will never "reach" this generation until we first

study which way the winds of popular culture are blowing and follow along.

Evangelicalism as a movement has bought that lie. That's why we have so many Fad-Driven® Churches and so few where Christ is honored and His Word obeyed. That's why the gospel is not only in eclipse but actually under attack on several fronts within evangelicalism.

We don't need more hype and activity and mass movements. We need the pure Light of God's Word -"*the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises*" (2 Peter 1:19).

The alternative is a postmodern darkness that is shaping up to be worse than the murkiest spiritual gloom of the Dark Ages. We could sure use a new generation of Reformers.