



James Emery White,

author of *Christ Among the Dragons: Finding Our Way Through Cultural Challenges*

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## An Interview with James Emery White

### What prompted you to write *Christ Among the Dragons*?

**James Emery White:** I believe we are at a pivotal crossroads in regard to American evangelicalism. There is a real and growing divide over the evangelical alliance with the Republican Party, among approaches to ministry and theology, and between the generations. Further, recent days have been marked by the passing of many of the founding leaders of the eighties era who first guided evangelicals into the political arena, such as Jerry Falwell and James Kennedy. Nearly one out of every three Americans under the age of thirty has never even *heard* of Billy Graham. Meanwhile, a younger generation of evangelical pastors are pushing the movement and its theology in new directions: a push to better this world as well as save eternal souls, a focus on the spiritual growth that follows conversion rather than the yes-or-no moment of salvation, a renewed attention to Jesus' teachings about social justice as well as about personal or sexual morality. The result is a new interest in public policies that address problems of peace, health and poverty—problems, unlike abortion and same-sex marriage, where left and right compete to present the best answers.

### Who or what are the dragons? Where did this image come from and why did you decide to use it?

**James:** The medieval cartographer of the Lenox Globe (c. 1503-1507) wrote the phrase “Hic sunt dracones,” translated “Here Be Dragons,” to describe the outer boundaries of the world as he knew it—the “dragons,” in his case, being the unexplored and possibly dangerous world of the unknown. Evangelical Christians today are facing the unknown in four areas that have historically unified us: a shared approach to truth, a joint sense of cultural engagement, a commitment to unity, and a deep commitment to and understanding of the church.

### Why should Christians care about the current state of evangelical faith?

**James:** Without a doubt, the changes of our day are not necessarily to be disparaged, much less met with alarm. One could welcome a broadening of traditional evangelical emphases to be more holistic and inclusive. The concern is a new fragmentation that leaves evangelicals bereft of their moorings and unable to speak with a single voice to the world's great questions, which is the beginning of the loss of evangelical identity itself. Nothing could be more dangerous in a post-Christian world. And on certain issues, such as basic Christian community and civility, we run the risk of losing our very witness.

**How has your evangelical identity shaped your life ministry?**

**James:** As I write in the book, my evangelical identity has shaped me profoundly. I *am* an evangelical Christian. This means that my ministry has been marked profoundly by the four marks of classic evangelical faith: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. *Conversionism* is the belief that individual lives must be transformed. *Activism* is the conviction that we must not be passive when it comes to the gospel, but active in our expression, proclamation and application. *Biblicism* captures our high regard of the Bible—we go *to* the Bible, and then we go *with* the Bible. And *crucicentrism* is the emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together we have the basis of evangelicalism. And, many would add, the basis of the gospel.

**You devote a large portion of your discussion to the nature of truth and orthodoxy. Why is this conversation so crucial for Christians today?**

**James:** Because we are more prone to “truthiness” than “truth.” Yet nothing is more foundational to Christian life and thought than truth. As Paul writes, either Jesus rose from the dead in space and time, or we are to be pitied above all others. So it is always a relevant conversation. But in our day, the very idea of truth is facing revision and even rejection—from among those who follow Christ! This speaks directly to orthodoxy, which simply means “right thinking.” If we have, as Lesslie Newbigin once wrote, “truth to tell,” then we cannot afford to not know what that “truth” is. Apart from truth, we have nothing to offer the world it does not already have.

**Why is it important for Christians to understand current cultural contexts and strive for a biblical sense of cultural engagement?**

**James:** First and foremost because we are missionaries. Understanding our cultural context is foundational to effectively fulfilling the Great Commission given to us by Jesus himself. We must build bridges of understanding to our world. But even further, it is because inherent within the Great Commission is a cultural commission. We have tried to retreat from culture, revive culture, recapture culture and even reflect culture. It is time to *renew* it. Many fall prey to simply being cultural “despisers,” but the real call is to be cultural change-agents.

**In your book, you discuss the importance of the church being our “mother.” Why is it important for Christians today to align themselves with the church?**

**James:** You cannot read the New Testament and escape the fact that Jesus came to establish his church, and that it is the means for ministry and impact in the world today. The New Testament knows nothing of an unchurched Christian. Evangelical Christians have an atrociously weak ecclesiology that seems more married to American free-market entrepreneurialism than robust biblical theology. This is worse now than at any other time in recent memory, and adds to the fragmentation we face.

# Q&A

## AUTHOR INTERVIEW

**In your book, you state that the “heart of evangelicalism is fading.” Why do you think evangelicalism is losing the urgent need to reach people for Christ?**

**James:** There is a tragic passivity in relation to the state of those who are apart from Christ. We have seemingly lost a sense of urgency in reaching them, in seeing them as truly being in eternal danger. But there is also a latent hostility toward those who are not Christians. Many Christians view those outside of the faith as needing to go to hell. They are the bad guys, the enemy; we refer to them as “pagans,” “secular humanists,” “liberals” and worse. Our relationship seems intensely adversarial in nature. And finally, there is a growing movement to making our faith about this world rather than the world to come. That is all fine and good as a corrective—to care for the needs of the poor, not just their souls—but the dilemma is when we swing too far in the other direction and leave out confronting people with the gospel altogether.

**What is the central message of your book, and what do you hope for those who read it?**

**James:** That we as Christians stand at a pivotal crossroads on some very decisive issues. We can go in one of two directions on almost every issue facing us: in regard to truth, civility, mission and the church. Which way we choose will determine everything. I hope that in some small way this book helps us choose well, and bind together anew as we seek to make a difference for Christ in the twenty-first century.