

# The Next Evangelicalism

Releasing the Church from  
Western Cultural Captivity

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## Individualism

*The Heartbeat of Western, White Cultural Captivity*

KELLY ENTERED THE WORSHIP SERVICE with great expectations. The past week had been filled with disappointments. Her husband had been preoccupied and inattentive. Her three elementary-aged children had been acting up all week. Every day of the week had been an exercise in testing her patience. Throughout the week, she had been unable to find time to pray or to read the Bible. About two months back, she and her husband had stopped attending their small group meetings. Her husband had lost interest a long time ago, and she was getting weary of hearing about the crisis of the week from various members of the group. Everyone politely nodded their heads as they shared their weekly woes, but nobody was sure if they were nodding their heads in agreement and sympathy or were subtly asking the person sharing to hurry along. The Bible was hardly opened as the group spent most of their time hearing individual stories of struggle.

Her church had been her solace in so many different ways, and she was hoping for a bit more this Sunday morning. The worship team kicked off with a few of her favorite songs, with lyrics that reflected her personal faith, such as: “Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down.” / “I have a living hope, I have a future, God has a plan for me, of this I’m

sure.” / “Your grace is enough for me.” When the pastor preached that morning, his sermon spoke to her personal need for spiritual renewal. God is *her* God, able to meet *her* needs, and wanting to be *her* Savior. The closing worship song (“My Savior loves, my Savior lives, my Savior has always been with me”) punctuated the power of God to meet her personal and individual needs.

As she departed the service, however, she felt a bit of a letdown. She greeted the pastor warmly but felt that he had disappointed her somehow. The sermon had scratched her itch but had not addressed the source of her itch. Her world still felt small and her God still felt small—a God limited to the personal realm of her life, rather than a big God able to transcend her seemingly small world. The God of her church was only as big as the individuals in the church and the personal needs of those individuals.

As a pastor, I am often confronted with the sense of letting down a congregation that is expecting a personalized worship service that ministers specifically to the individual member. In the formation of the Sunday worship service, I realize that I often fail to meet the expectations of the individual members of my congregation. On Monday mornings, I often picture the faces of individual members who were disappointed that I did not speak to their specific need for that week. I am also aware that even if I make every effort to meet every personal and individual need, someone will still not have had his or her personal needs met. Maybe a larger and more important question is: why am I trying so hard to meet the specific and personal needs of the individual? What drives me to see the church not as the expression of God’s kingdom but merely as a forum to address individual needs?

#### ME, MYSELF AND I: THE UNHOLY TRINITY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

A few years ago, our family was packing for our move from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Chicago. I hate moving, but I actually enjoyed the process of culling through and categorizing my collection of books. During this process, I stumbled across an intriguing little book called

*Philosophy for Beginners*.<sup>1</sup> The book traces the entire history of Western philosophical thought in comic book form. For instance, Nietzsche is portrayed as a superhero (or more accurately as an *Übermensch*), Daffy Duck narrates the discourse on Hegel, and so forth. So before packing the book for the movers, I decided to read through it to get the comic book overview of Western philosophy. Interestingly, even a comic book was able to discern the central theme of Western philosophy: individualism.

From Hellenistic philosophy to medieval thought to the Enlightenment and postmodernity, each phase of Western philosophy has put forth as its central tenet the primacy of the individual. Whether it is Plato's philosopher hero emerging from the cave of shadows on his own accord, Rousseau's prioritizing of the individual in the application of the social contract, the "majority of one" advocated by the residents of Walden Pond, Ayn Rand's contention of the redemptive value for society of an individual's selfish egoism or the individualistic reading of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism—regardless of the philosopher's context, the repeating motif of Western culture has been the centrality and primacy of the individual.

Numerous social analyses of American culture reveal our obsession with the individual and our struggle with the effects of an individual-focused worldview. One of the earliest assessments of American society comes from Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.<sup>2</sup> The French academic postulated that the then-young nation would struggle balancing strong individualistic tendencies with the collectivism required by a democratic form of government. In reflecting on Tocqueville, Herbert Gans asserts that "the United States has changed only slightly in over 150 years, and one of the stable elements is the continued pursuit of individualism by virtually all sectors of the population."<sup>3</sup> From the earliest stages of American history, individualism has been the defining attribute in understanding our nation's ethos.

The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. The cultural captivity of the church has meant

that the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces Christian faith to a personal, private and individual faith.

#### FUNDAMENTALISM, EVANGELICALISM AND INDIVIDUALISM

Late twentieth-century evangelicalism owes much of its formation and shape to early twentieth-century fundamentalism, which prioritized individualism at the cost of recognizing the corporate nature and corporate role of Christianity. This emphasis arose out of the cultural norms of American society. Historian George Marsden describes the religious individualism that reflects a central element of fundamentalism. “The individual stood alone before God; his choices were decisive. The church, while important as a supportive community, was made up of free individuals.”<sup>4</sup> Despite its claims of separation from larger cultural influences, fundamentalism built its theological foundation on the central cultural influence of individualism.

The evangelical successors to fundamentalism continued to prioritize individualism as a primary expression. Paul Metzger in *Consuming Jesus* addresses the role of individualism as the thread linking fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Metzger notices how the two movements are bound up in the “privatization of spirituality, dissolution of public faith, and loss of an extensive, overarching social consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> Less enamored with hard-line doctrinal positions, evangelicals were even more susceptible to cultural captivity and acquiescence to larger cultural influences. “As American evangelicals, we prize the individual and personal relationships. . . . The Bible has much to say about the importance of the individual, personal responsibility, and the need for [personal] evangelism.”<sup>6</sup> A personalism and a prioritizing of the individual can be found at the sociohistorical roots of evangelicalism. Life and ministry in the local church, therefore, became the race to please the individual so that the pews might be filled.

**INDIVIDUATION VS. INDIVIDUALISM**

It is important at this time to make the distinction between the negative impact of an *excessive* individualism found in Western culture versus the healthy role of individuation. Individuation is a valuable Western philosophical, psychological contribution which allows for the healthy and necessary differentiation of the individual from family/society/culture/people groups/nations. Individuation allows individuals to grow up and make their own decisions—not based solely upon the pressures of society. Individuation allows for an important and necessary process of developing a personal relationship with Jesus. Individuation, therefore, reveals an important aspect of the individual expressions of faith and the need for individual salvation. God is not only a transcendent God that is beyond our comprehension, God is also an immanent God—nearby, close and personal. The individuation of our relationship with God and the personal appropriation of God's grace are crucial developments of Christian faith.

In my last year in seminary, I was facing a crisis of calling. I was struggling with a deep sense of inadequacy that I would be unable to fulfill my calling as a pastor. During my years at seminary, I had begun to formulate a list of my inadequacies and all of the ways that I did not live up to God's expectations. I was operating under a covenant of works in order to fulfill my calling as a pastor. The formation of this mental list led me to the conclusion that I should not pursue a pastoral calling. The grace of God was an abstract concept removed from my personal reality. The grace of God had not been able to break through the barrier of my personal history.

When my father left our family when I was in elementary school, we did not hear from him for several years. One day, seemingly out of the blue, I received a phone call from my father. Without too much formality he began to ask me a series of questions. "Are you getting straight A's in school?" "What level math are you in?" "Who's your favorite Renaissance artist?" (I think I said Picasso.) I was on the phone for over ten minutes as my father asked me a series of questions. At the end of the phone call, my ten-year-old mind had formulated a conclusion. I have to

earn my father's love. If I want my father to love me, then I need to fulfill the list of achievements and accomplishments he had listed. When I got off the phone, I went to my room and cried.

After that phone call, I began to live out that conversation and internalized the pressure to achieve in order to earn my father's love. My personal identity and self-perception were shaped by an absent father's expectations. So I got A's in school and excelled academically. I got degrees from Ivy League schools. I did the things that I thought would earn my earthly father's love. Concurrently, I began to look for ways to earn my spiritual Father's love. I led my church's youth group, I participated in my church's evangelistic outreach programs and short-term mission trips, I became involved in campus ministry, I even attended seminary. But the list of "must do to earn my Father's love" kept getting longer and longer. Eventually this list became a list of my failures.

I have no doubt that in my last year in seminary, the emotional impact of that phone call was still affecting me and playing out in my formation of a list of failures before God. I could not be a good pastor because of all the ways I did not live up to my heavenly Father's expectations. It was around that time that I attended a conference that was held in Toronto. After the sermon a group of people went around and prayed for individuals. I knelt nearby to pray and I began to rehearse the list of failures in my mind. I began to bargain with God, reviewing the list of my personal failures. "God, how could I ever serve you when my list of failures is so long?" It was at that moment that I heard God speaking: "What list are you talking about?" God had not kept any record of wrongs. No list of failures existed. As people gathered around me to pray, instead of being overwhelmed by tears of guilt, I was flooded with joyful laughter.

I needed to know that my God was a personal God that cared about me as an individual, whose love for me was not based upon the expectations of others. Through my evangelical experience I was exposed to the power of grace appropriated on a personal level. I am personally indebted to Western culture's expression of an individual faith. Without it, my Christian worldview would not have an opening to the importance of knowing

and being loved by a personal God that loves me as an individual. One of Western Christianity's greatest contributions is the possibility of experiencing the grace of God on a personal and individual level.

However, this individuation does not need to occur at the expense of an appreciation of a corporate point of view. Excessive and hyper-individualism contrasts to the healthy process of individuation by enslaving the individual to the tyranny of individualism, leading to personalism and privatism. The danger of the Western, white captivity of the church is an excessive individualism and personalism that reflects the narcissism of American culture rather than the redemptive power of the gospel message.

#### THE BIBLE AND ME

The priority of the individual shapes how American evangelicals live out our local church experience, how we study and learn Scripture, how we shape our corporate worship and even how we live and interact in community. For example, our Bible studies become the search for a personal and individualized understanding. If we were to pay attention to the intended audience of the various books of the Bible, we would find that only a handful of books were actually written exclusively to individuals—such as 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon. An overwhelming number of books in the Bible are written to communities: the people of God, the nation of Israel, the church in Colosse and Corinth, the seven churches in Asia Minor, etc. Yet, why is it that our reading of the text centers so much on the individual reading of Scripture versus a corporate reading as the overwhelming majority of the Scriptures demand?

In a typical American church, are we taking teaching intended for the community of faith and reducing it to an application exclusively on an individual level? Our Sunday sermons emphasize how the individual can live his or her best life or how to have a purpose and direction from Scripture for his or her personal life by claiming the promises of a specific prayer for the individual. Too few Sunday sermons focus on how the community is called to respond to social problems or to reflect a corporate identity as God's people.

The Western hermeneutic of Scripture relies upon an individual focus and an individual application. Individualism dictates not only *what* we preach, but *how* we preach. In recent years, narrative preaching has come into vogue. More and more preachers are exploring the lost art of storytelling as a means of communication. The power of storytelling is in the way it can move beyond the individual experience to a community experience. Stories have the power to change cultures and social systems. But because our individualism is so deeply embedded, even that genre of preaching gets reduced to a series of propositions and an individualized, personalized application.

I was at a pastors' conference on the inner life of the Christian. The main speaker was very good at telling stories of his own life and stories of pastors he had mentored. The stories were gripping and moving. If he had just told the story and allowed the Spirit of God to move through the story, his teaching would have left a more favorable impression on me. But at the end of each story, he insisted on "explaining" the story to us so that we got the main point, that is, the propositional truth embedded in the story. At the end of one particular story, his propositional application was that we should vote a politically conservative agenda if we wanted to fulfill our spiritual calling. He had taken beautiful and powerful stories and reduced them to a Republican agenda that I could specifically apply in my individual life by voting his personal agenda. Even if the forms of our sermons change, they still remain individualized applications for the most important subject of the Bible: me.

Scripture does speak to an individual faith and the possibility of a personal relationship with Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus is intentional and deliberate about addressing individuals on a personal level. He interacts with Zaccheus not merely as a corrupt member of a warped society, but as an individual in need of redemption. He connects with the adulterous woman, not simply as a creation of social structures but as an individual deserving of grace. Jesus is very personal in his interactions. However, to reduce Jesus' teachings and his life to merely an individual expression is to do disservice to the full canon of Scripture. The doctrine of the incarnation reveals that Jesus is a personal God; however, Jesus' incar-

nation is a heavenly invasion that has a social as well as an individual implication. Jesus comes announcing the kingdom of God, not merely expressed on an individual level but also on a societal level.

Reading Scripture from only an individual perspective and framework allows for a number of different misinterpretations and misapplication of God's Word. For example, Christians often cite Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future," as an expression of comfort for the individual going through a difficult time. Many Christians assume that the "you" of this passage is singular and that this passage holds a promise of a better life for the individual. In actuality, the "you" of this passage is plural and the direction of this passage is to speak of a corporate, not a personal, blessing for the people of God.<sup>7</sup> Our individualized theology limits how we understand Scripture: rather than living out scriptural truths we focus on an interpretation of Scripture that caters to the needs of the individual.

#### IT'S ALL ABOUT ME . . . AND ALL THIS IS FOR ME

In another important area of church life, the worship life of the congregation, the Western priority of the individual determines the approach to worship over the biblical guidelines for worship. Worship in the white captivity of the church is oftentimes a collection of individuals who happen to be in the same room. Worship is just between the individual and God, and the church service exists to help facilitate that individual communion.

Many years ago, I was the worship leader for a church that used contemporary worship songs. Back then (before the ubiquitous use of PowerPoint and LCD projectors), we had transparencies placed on an overhead projector. There would be a designated individual in charge of the large box of overheads, which were filed in alphabetical order based upon the first line or title of the song. The file folder containing the songs that began with the letter A, J or G (as well as most of the other letters of the alphabet) would be fairly thin—songs like "Awesome God" / "Jesus, You Are Lord" / "God Is so Good"—but the one folder that

seemed to contain half of the songs in the transparency box was the folder of songs that began with the letter *I*. While there are times when we should express our personal adoration of God, should the subject of the majority of our songs be the great *I* rather than the great *I AM*? Worship, which should be the ascribing of worth to an Almighty God, becomes an exercise of attaining a personal self-fulfillment.

Christopher Lasch's assessment of American culture is best described by the title of his book *The Culture of Narcissism*. In this book Lasch employs the phrase "the third great awakening," an ironic phrase considering that the first two great awakenings in America involved major spiritual revival. Lasch describes this third great awakening as a therapeutic experience, not a religious one. "People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security."<sup>8</sup>

Our overreliance on therapeutic culture is a reflection of excessive individualism—the desire to have one's personal needs met with the focus of an entire hour being upon the individual. Therapeutic culture that arises out of an excessive individualistic focus yields a narcissistic focus in American society. This narcissistic individualism, of American society finds a direct corollary in the American evangelical church. Our church life becomes an expression of an individualism, yielding a self-absorbed narcissism. Instead of the church becoming an expression of a spiritual life lived in the community of believers or a spiritual life expressed in the context of a neighborhood community, our church life becomes a fulfillment of our individual desires and needs. Elements of the worship service, including the preaching of the Word and the worship of God, become reduced to a form of therapy that places the individual at the center of the worship service.

Excessive individualism in American society yields, therefore, the loss of community life. Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, describes American society as becoming increasingly disconnected and lacking in the important value of social capital. "Voting in America is down by about a quarter, and interest in public affairs by about one-fifth, over the

last two or three decades.”<sup>9</sup> In nearly every area of social life and using various measurements of civic involvement (such as serving as an officer in a club, serving on a committee in a local organization, writing a congressperson, signing a petition or attending a public town or school meeting), there is significant decline. Putnam characterizes this phenomenon through the motif of bowling alone—an individualized social activity. “More Americans are bowling than ever before, but league bowling has plummeted. . . . a profile that precisely matches the [declining] trends in other forms of social capital.”<sup>10</sup> The image of bowling alone reflects the decline of social capital and connection, which arises out of the excessive individualism that dominates American culture. Consistently, we see that the central characteristic of American society is shaped by the philosophy of the primacy of the individual over and above the community. Individualism guides the American way of life.

The individualized narcissism of our society translates into our church life in not only our self-absorbed worship and our longing for sermons that speak to us or bless us personally but even in how we live out our church community life. A therapeutic culture translates into the context of the local church with an individualized and personalized approach to counseling and self-care. Community is lost in the process of a highly individualized approach. Even small group ministry, which is supposed to be the primary expression of community life in the American evangelical church, often yields a narcissistic, individualistic focus. Small groups become a place of support and counsel rather than a place where Scripture challenges the participants toward kingdom living. They can feel more like support groups rather than a place of spiritual growth. As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* point out: “Almost the only groups that are growing are the support groups. . . . These groups make minimal demands on their members and are oriented primarily to the needs of individuals: indeed [they involve] individuals who focus on themselves in the presence of others, what we might call being alone together.”<sup>11</sup> How we approach counseling in the church is a highly individualized approach reflecting a personalized psychology.

The personalized psychology of American culture is counterproductive in the long run. When the self becomes the focus of nearly every element of human life and cultural expression, the community begins to die. Sociologist Richard Sennett reveals Western culture's priorities by stating:

Each person's self has become his principal burden; to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world. And precisely because we are so self-absorbed, it is extremely difficult for us to arrive at a private principle, to give any clear account to ourselves or to others of what our personalities are. The reason is that, the more privatized the psyche, the less it is stimulated, and the more difficult it is for us to feel or to express feeling.<sup>12</sup>

This excessive emphasis on individualism is crippling to American society, but even more so to the body of Christ.

Is there a possibility of restoring a sense of community to our approach to church life? A significant part of expanding our framework away from the individual worldview is experiencing multiethnic and multicultural worship, allowing us to see worship expressed in the context of the next evangelicalism rather than merely in the context of the Western, white captivity of the church. More and more individuals are seeing the importance and necessity of a crosscultural experience in moving beyond the self-absorption of individualism to experiencing a community of faith in the context of a crosscultural community.

In our worship setting, we need to see more of a corporate and community call to worship. Even the simple act of changing the "I" focused to "we" focused songs can signal a shift to the congregation. Our preaching and worship should direct our attention toward a God greater than our own experience. Recently, I visited a church that made a conscious effort in their worship service to direct attention toward the needs of others in the choosing of liturgy and the selection of worship songs. The prayers offered focused on prayers for the community and neighborhood. The call to confession incorporated corporate confession as well

as individual confession. Churches can also reexamine the intention of small group gatherings to determine if the groups exist for the affirming of individualism or the building of community. One of the ways a church can build community is by accepting the weaknesses and shortcomings of others.

During a training seminar for our small group leaders, a scenario was raised by one of our leaders. She was concerned about an individual in the group who was struggling with a very difficult issue. The problem was that the leader felt that the issue was beyond her scope of expertise and the fact that the same issue came up week after week was now proving to be a distraction to the other members in her group. The small group leader's first reaction was to ask the pastor to intervene and remove the individual from the group context. My first reaction as the pastor was to refer this individual as soon as possible to a professional counselor. Both the small group leader and I were seeing the individual need rather than the power of life in community.

Noted Christian counselor Larry Crabb speaks about the need to move Christian counseling and pastoral care out of the realm of an exclusive professionalism toward a model of counseling in community.<sup>13</sup> Crabb proposes that "communities of God's people, ordinary Christians whose lives regularly intersect, will accomplish most of the good that we now depend on mental health professionals to provide."<sup>14</sup> The counseling needs of the individual are best served in the context of relationships rather than in isolation. Rather than prioritizing the narcissistic needs of the individual, small groups are a place where the brokenness of individuals can serve to strengthen the entire community. These groups become a place of healing, not just for the individual with the personal need but for the entire community of faith.

#### SALVATION FOR ME AND ME ALONE

The expression of excessive individualism in local church life is rooted in the excessive individualism of Western evangelical theology. Evangelicalism's idolatry of the individual has crippled the church's ability to view sin and salvation outside of the narrow parameters of a personal

faith. Evangelical theology becomes exclusively an individual-driven theology instead of a community-driven theology. In an individual-driven theology, individual sin takes center stage. Individual sin leads to a sense of personal guilt: I, the individual, did something personally wrong and I feel guilty about my actions. I am responsible for my personal, individual actions and nothing more. Therefore, I can personally confess my sins and be absolved of my individual sinfulness and my personal feelings of guilt. Because the individual is only responsible for an individualized and personal guilt, there is no sense of shame for corporate actions that are also expressions of human sinfulness.

Our reduction of sin to a personal issue means that we are unwilling to deal with social structural evils, and this reduction prevents us from understanding the full expression of human sinfulness and fallenness. We have reduced the power of redemption to a personal salvation from personal sin. Evangelism programs and methods, such as the Four Spiritual Laws and the Bridge Illustration, focus exclusively on an individualistic worldview and emphasize a personal salvation experience.

Our approach to evangelism is shaped by an individualized soteriology (our perspective on salvation) based upon a Western framework. Our soteriology arises from our hamartiology (our understanding of the nature of sin). Our understanding of salvation is contingent upon how we understand what we are being saved from, namely sin and its consequences. When sin is limited to the individual realm and does not extend into the corporate realm, our understanding of salvation is also limited to the individual realm. Sin, therefore, is found only in the individual, not in structures and systems. The possibility of redemption, therefore, is also limited exclusively to the individual. A relationship with God limited to the private and individual realm ultimately limits our experience with God. Our understanding of sin limited to an individual level reveals a personal guilt over wrongdoing. However, lacking an understanding of corporate sin, we are unable to feel, perceive or understand the impact of the shame of corporate responsibility.

In *The Death of Satan*,<sup>15</sup> Andrew Delbanco laments the loss of the sense of evil in American society. Delbanco alludes to a loss of the cor-

porate sense of evil. While not directly addressing the church, Delbanco's book is a prophetic work by a secular academic, indicting the church for our lack of understanding of the full nature and expression of sin. We are challenged as a Christian community to engage in a larger dialogue about a corporate sense of sin. Our excessive emphasis on individualism keeps us from dealing with the implication of corporate sin—it exonerates us from addressing corporate sin that may be evident in our social and political engagement. As Metzger states, “The individualistic orientation of evangelicalism structures the church and makes us blind to negative patterns of consumption and suspicious of structural engagement.”<sup>16</sup>

Why are American evangelicals so willing to overlook corporate sin, such as the torturing of political prisoners, an unjust economic system leading to structures of poverty, or structural racism? Is it because we may personally benefit via cheaper gas prices, an improved economy and economic privilege? Is it because our favored political candidate will benefit when we overlook certain social and political injustices? As Richard Kyle explains: “Reflecting the old Puritan heritage and American individualism, evangelicals focus on abortion and sexual immorality while downplaying the issues of poverty, racism, and social injustice. And when they address such problems, they believe that they can be solved primarily through individual, church, or local efforts.”<sup>17</sup> Corporate sin is so disconnected from the reality of our typical American Christian life that we are shocked when it actually enters our world. Rather than confront sin, we begin to look for ways to categorize it as a theologically liberal agenda—thereby stripping corporate confession and repentance of its prophetic power.

#### REAL EVANGELISM, NOT THAT OTHER STUFF

Furthermore, an overemphasis on individualism in our theology and practice yields an evangelical Christianity seeing social justice and racial reconciliation as a distraction from the “real work” of personal evangelism. I am often invited to speak at Christian colleges on the topic of racial reconciliation and multiethnicity. I frequently raise the theme

that being a biblical Christian community requires not just being a superficial multiethnic community where we simply tolerate one another, but becoming a genuinely racially-reconciled community that exhibits racial justice. I challenge the students to consider ways that systemic and corporate racial injustice could be confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am very hopeful at the number of positive responses from Christian college students that reveal a deeper longing to move their faith beyond a merely personal expression.

After one particular visit to a Christian college, I received an e-mail from a student outlining her frustration as she attempted to raise the issue of racial justice on her campus. “It was the theology department at our school that shut us down. They believe that the gospel is really about the salvation of individuals and not about a liberal, social gospel. These justice-oriented activities distract from the real work of evangelism.” Unfortunately, this scenario has occurred enough times that it has taken on a sense of inevitability in Christian colleges.

The concerns of many of these detractors arise from the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the twentieth century. Theologically conservative Christians (oftentimes referred to as fundamentalists) were at odds with the theologically liberal Christians. Fundamentalists (and eventually their evangelical successors) held to a more theologically conservative position, particularly related to the authority of Scripture and the person of Jesus. Other elements began to distinguish the two groups, as liberal Christians were seen as supporting a social gospel focusing on the redemption of society, while conservative Christians were viewed as supporting a personal evangelism focused on the individual.

Theological liberalism may be defined in the simplest terms as the acquiescence to culture by the church and the subsequent compromising of the gospel message. Theological liberalism of the twentieth century sacrificed the high view of Scripture and an orthodox Christology for the sake of appealing to larger cultural norms. The central criticism aimed at twentieth century theological liberals was their unwillingness to recognize the reality of human sinfulness. This lack of recognition is attributed to theological liberalism’s yielding to cultural pressures. Society didn’t want to

hear about sin, so theological liberals chose to leave sin out of the discussion. Their actions reflect how theological liberals were subsumed under a *Christ-of-culture*<sup>18</sup> model of cultural engagement.

The tables have turned, however, since the early days of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early and mid-twentieth century. The liberals of the twentieth century allowed the culture to shape their theology, but how much of American evangelicalism is now shaped by the culture? When evangelicals deny the Scriptures' call to be concerned for social justice and social concerns, we are influenced by the cultural norm of individualism, rather than Scriptural norms. What, therefore, is the real expression of liberalism in the twenty-first century?

#### INDIVIDUALISM AND RACE

With only an individualized theology as a reference point, American evangelicalism fails to understand the power of corporate sin, especially as it relates to racism. Racism is an individual issue that needs to be resolved by focusing on individual prejudice. But by focusing on individual prejudice, we limit the understanding of racism to strictly a personal issue. As individuals we may feel guilty about an individual act, but we do not feel the debilitating shame of the corporate sin of racism. If I merely have to confront individual prejudice, then I simply right this personal wrong (a prejudiced thought, a racial slur) by doing a positive thing to confront individual prejudice (serving at a soup kitchen, taking the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday off). I don't have to confront the shame of corporate racism, which is not so easily undone.

I was told about a panel discussion that was held on the topic of race and race relations. One of the panelists was an African American sociology professor. A well-intentioned participant spoke about his experience of working as a delivery guy in a fast-food carryout. He described how he had to deal with prejudice in his workplace among his coworkers. When a delivery request would come up from a certain Zip Code, his coworkers would remark or joke about how that particular Zip Code was

a black or a Mexican neighborhood. Comments such as “be sure to take some *salsa* with you when you make the delivery to that neighborhood,” or “I bet they asked for hot sauce with that order,” would frequently be made. The well-intentioned young man asked how he should respond to such racism.

The professor responded: “I don’t care. . . . Why are you coming to these kinds of gatherings with your trivial questions? Why aren’t you concerned about the much larger and much more significant offense of why this city is segregated along racial lines according to certain Zip Codes and the subsequent economic injustice that follows?” The well-intentioned young man wanted to deal with the individual sin and ablu-tion of guilty feelings associated with prejudice, but the professor wanted to address the systemic issues that created the deeply rooted racism that pervades our society.

When it comes to the issue of racism, it is easy to be caught up in individual slights (though they have a validity in terms of the pain caused to others), but the emphasis on individual slights has become a convenient excuse to not deal with the corporate expressions of racism. Sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith point out in their landmark work *Divided by Faith*:

Individualism is very American, but the type of individualism and the ferocity with which it is held distinguishes white evangelicals from others. . . . Contemporary white American evangelicalism is perhaps the strongest carrier of this freewill-individual tradition. The roots of this individualist tradition run deep, dating back to shortly after the sixteenth-century Reformation, extending to much of the Free Church tradition, flowering in America’s frontier awakenings and revivals, and maturing in spiritual pietism and anti-Social Gospel fundamentalism.<sup>19</sup>

Evangelicalism’s obsessive fascination with maintaining the primacy of the individual deepens the disconnect with social sin, particularly as it relates to race. “The concept of individual sin lies behind many white evangelicals’ accounts of the race problem. . . . Absent from their ac-

counts is the idea that poor relationships might be shaped by social structures, such as laws, the ways institutions operate, or forms of segregation. . . . So white evangelicals are severely constrained by their religio-cultural tools. Although much in Christian scripture and tradition points to the influence of social structures on individuals.”<sup>20</sup>

The excessive individualism of the Western, white cultural captivity of the church reduces racism to an exclusively personal issue. Evangelicalism’s captivity to excessive individualism means that outrage for the corporate sin of racism is rarely present. Satan has been able to create a social system of injustice that ultimately demeans the value and worth of the individual. We are so busy trying to justify and deny the reality of personal, individual prejudice that we ignore the larger issue of a corporate shame that arises from a structural, systemic evil. This reduction of sin to a personal, individual level ultimately hinders the fullness of the gospel message.