When the Church Staggers, Stalls, and Sits Down

(In the Middle of a War!)

by Ralph D. Winter

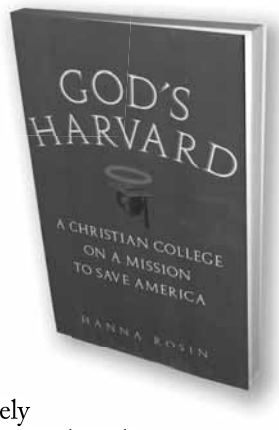
I. THE DIAGNOSIS

The church, all around the world, is badly wounded today by the seeping departure of its members. We Evangelicals track the number of new members the way some people track the rise in the stock market. But we don't know how to count things when members just fade away.

Our Inherited Doctrine and Church Culture

One high executive told me his denomination reports a total each year that includes disappeared members. Those people may have stopped attending, moved away, or died. They are still counted. "We are focused on getting people saved. We don't pay equal attention to much else."

That's not necessarily bad, but even casual contact with non-Evangelicals will tell you that a hallmark of Evangelicals (in the eyes of the outsiders) is their zeal to know decisively whether or not people are saved. To believe that God approves some people more than others is terribly important and crucial. But, to think that we Evangelicals can be certain who those people are and who they aren't is something else.



To an Evangelical it often boils down to whether a person is saved or not, and we often use our relatively simplistic and mechanical measuring stick such as repeat after me or "Do you believe that Jesus died for you and rose again?" If so, you're okay.

Jacob Loewen was one of the foremost missionary thinkers in his day. He deplored the Evangelical doctrine he called "Instant Conversion." It is not as though things of great importance, turning points, cannot happen in an instant. It is rather the fact that the Bible stresses far more a salvation that is constantly being worked out, as in Phil 2:12. We Evangelicals are thus often impatient and insistent on knowing only what God knows about the state of any one individual's life.

Homeschoolers' College

An example of this "hallmark trait" of Evangelicals can be seen in a relatively friendly book about the outstanding students at Patrick Henry College. The book is entitled *God's Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America*.

The author, Hanna Rosen, a Jewish woman journalist working for the *Washington Post*, was assigned for a year and a half to do an in-depth study of this college whose graduates are more and more in evidence in the corridors of congress and even the White House.

Again and again in passing she mentions the potential significance to this country of increased Evangelical influence in local, state, and national government.

This assignment took her into the confidence of the leadership of the college, into faculty meetings, classrooms, student center activities, and even student homes as far away as Montana, Seattle and California.

She is quite willing to admit how impressed she is by the dead seriousness and high morality of the students. They are all products of homeshooling! One of the many really fine girls she followed in great detail for that year and a half was invited to stay with a family that did not measure up to her Evangelical understanding of conversion. After some time in their home she was asked, "Do you believe that if we were to die today we would go to hell? This student, one of the campus leaders, paused a long time, and then said softly, "Yes, but I'm not jumping up and down about it."

Why couldn't she have simply said, "I am not your judge. All I want for you (as well as for me) is to know God better, the Bible better, and Jesus better. God is the only judge of a person's status before Him."

But she didn't say that. Of course the Jewish journalist knew better than to ask such a question. She knew where she stood in this admirable girl's eyes.

This is one thing that drives people out of church and keeps outsiders away from Evangelicals. This is so sad, because, as this book clearly describes, there is

immense good, significant morality, and impressive integrity in the Evangelical movement.

Truly amazing are the aspirations of these incredible students, many having scored all 1600 points on the SAT. They are super confident about Evangelicals taking back the government. At least three are hoping to become President of the United States, others senators, etc. Already 200 grads have infiltrated Washington and are optimistic that in time Evangelicals can dominate the government.

Thus, until now the unblinking eye of the world has never stared so seriously at the Evangelical movement. Ever. Patrick Henry's collection of super-achieving and super-believing Evangelical youth may represent one of the pinnacles of the movement, and only the tip of the iceberg.

New Confrontations

Suddenly both inside and outside the Evangelical movement it has become terribly important to test out every belief and trait of Evangelicalism, which is now the major religion of the USA—a religion which some hope (and some fear) will be the major political force.

Sure, thousands are being attracted to this Evangelical movement, which is becoming the culturally established church of America. But could these be paper gains and concrete losses? Does Evangelicalism also contain within itself seeds of its own destruction?

Actually, the situation in some respects is no less than a catastrophe. Much of our carefully, patiently, and proudly built-up global church is coming apart at the seams, even in the USA. Is this true? Many good things are happening, but there are deep problems as well.

Nowhere, in fact, is this catastrophe more obvious than in the United States. Here, estimates are that 75% of the teenagers in Evangelical homes will lose their faith after high school. One denominational study says 85%.

No doubt Evangelicals can fairly claim to be experts on getting people TO faith. But in the case of our children coming to faith, that may happen only after they have floundered in the world for twenty years, finally sensing an emotional emptiness, and a few of them limping back.

But "Is that trip into the world necessary?" Do 75 percent of our young people have to first lose their faith and then only a fraction of them later stumble back into the church confused?

Why do they leave in the first place? And why do so few return? And do those few who return see Christianity as merely a preferable environment for their kids—but in fact a more healthy pattern of habits than a matter of personal faith?

Missionaries to Japan and Japanese churches are embarrassed by the tiny percentage of Christians. However, studies show that Japan's tiny church wins proportionally as many people into the church as do churches in other mission fields—but few stay.

Similarly, around the world millions of poor and uneducated (desperate) people flock to churches because they vaguely see hope there—hope for better things in this life (and only maybe for the life to come). How long will they stay?

In contrast to the many of the poverty-stricken populations of the world, fewer people in Japan are forced (out of desperation) to take chances on a foreign faith. When they do duck into church they may not see any significant problems in this world being addressed. Even if they stay awhile they may not discover that the Kingdom of God includes the conquering will of God in this world as much as it assures eternal life. Such drop-ins may eventually leave thinking that Buddhism is not that different.

Quite a few people in the USA who seem to be "coming to Christ" may not be coming to a belief system as much as to a preferable community. That community glue may not always hold. If it does hold, it may only add numbers but not add to the number of truly believing and committed members.

The Powerful Acids of Rust and Corrosion in the University World

We need to realize that almost all our Evangelical youth are exposed to more facts, opinions and pressure in college than in all their years in church. In fact the time they put into grade school far outranked the time spent in Sunday School.

Since 15 out of 17 Evangelical youth never go to a Christian college, what goes on in the university world is a defining experience.

Why do we need a film called *Expelled—No Intelligence Allowed*? Why is the university world so harshly anti-theistic? And masses of people in the media and politics so ballistic about the growing Evangelical influence?

This was discussed in an earlier issue. Evangelicals began the 20th century as predominantly a non-college movement. It took a hundred years for 157 Bible institutes to turn into colleges, universities and seminaries. At the end of the century thousands of Evangelicals had crept back into faculty positions in higher education. But they discovered that they were in a decided and rejected minority.

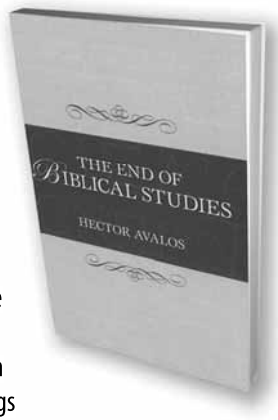
For decades, if they kept their heads down they were mainly oddities. Now with the new visibility of their tribe in secular society, there is a strident voice against them.

In my editorial in the last issue of *Mission Frontiers* I mentioned two Evangelicals who had attained professorships in religion in state universities. Yet, in the process they had apparently been drawn into an agnostic or atheistic position. That takes the pressure off!

Give up on the Bible?

One of them, Hector Avalos, had been a Pentecostal minister, and is now a Professor of religious studies at the University of Iowa (in mentioning him last time I mistakenly said University of Illinois). His book is entitled *The End of Biblical Studies*. He has come to calling himself a Secular Humanist and sets out to prove in great scholarly detail that everything in the Bible is irrelevant. Consider the final paragraph of his Introduction:

> Biblical studies as we know it should end. We should now treat the Bible as the alien document it is, with no more importance than the other works of literature we ignore every day. Biblical studies should be geared toward helping humanity wean itself off of the Bible and toward terminating its authority completely in the modern world. Focus then could shift to the still thousands of other ancient texts still untranslated and unread. One day, the Bible might even be viewed as one of the curiosities of a tragic bibliolatrous age, when dependence on a text brought untold misery and stood as an obstacle to human progress. We might then study the Bible as a lesson in why human beings should never again privilege any book to this extent.



Now, obviously, with this book if not before, he has proven to his faculty associates that he is no longer beholden to his earlier religious role. It must be a relief to him, in a way.

I would suppose his Evangelical heritage must have allowed him to embrace a false view of the Bible in the first place. He could well have thought we were supposed to believe that the Bible in every verse gives us only good, not bad examples. True, we do skirt around the most depraved things. The ancient Gothic Bible left out long portions of 1 and 2 Kings, apparently because their pre-Scandinavian forebears already knew too much about warfare. The Taiping movement in China simply dropped out chapter 19 in Genesis. Thus, when Avalos found bad things described in the Bible, things understandably not mentioned in normal church life, he rejected the Bible as if it were *teaching*, not accurately and honestly *describing* those things.

Rather than being impressed by how long God had to wait, how much patience was necessary, as a Divine School teacher, to lead a ruffian nation into New Testament times, he treats the Bible as though it approves everything it describes. He even quotes the Dallas Seminary journal, *Bibliotheca Sacra,* as admitting that not everything in the Bible is "valid" for today.

True, the Bible pulls no punches. It describes the weaknesses and limited understanding of its greatest leaders. It does not make unblemished heroes out of its human characters. It could not be inerrant if it did.

In contrast to his perspective, we can and do learn a great deal from biographies of individuals. But if they are accurate, we don't expect to find adult brilliance in every grade-school homework assignment. If we did it would be erroneous. The Bible in one sense is a startlingly honest and certainly accurate biography of a *nation*. It would not be inerrant if it described the failings of fallible humans as if all they said or understood was correct and edifying. God was patiently leading them in their understanding during two millennia.

Give up on God, Too?

Another book barely mentioned last time is the one by a very famous Biblical scholar, Bart Ehrman, a graduate of Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, also a former pastor, now a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Last time I quoted him from an article in *Biblical Archeology*, explaining why all the evil in the world led him to give up his faith:

> This made me think more deeply about my own understanding of why there is suffering in the world. Finally, because I became dissatisfied with all of the conventional answers I decided that I could not believe in [a] God who was in any way intervening in this world given the state of things. So that's how I ended up losing my faith

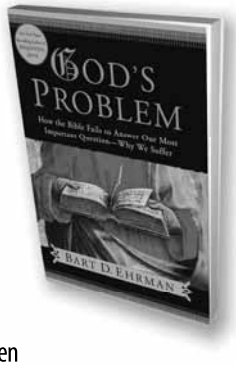
Now I have space to quote him from his most recent book, *God's Problem, How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer.*

He tells of going to a little Anglican church in England on Christmas Eve with his wife (who is still a believer) and how moved he was when a layman prayed,

> You came into the darkness and you made a difference. Come into the darkness again.

He comments:

> Yes, I wanted to affirm this prayer, believe this prayer, commit myself to this prayer. But I couldn't. The darkness is too deep, the suffering too intense, the divine absence too palpable. During the time that it took for this Christmas Eve service to conclude, more than 700 children in the world would have died of hunger; 250 others from drinking unsafe water; and nearly 300 other people from malaria. Not to mention the ones who had been raped, mutilated, tortured, dismembered, and murdered. Nor the innocent victims caught up in the human trade industry, nor those suffering throughout the world from grinding poverty, the destitute migrant farm workers in our own country, those who were homeless and inflicted with mental disease. Nor to mention the silent suffering that so many millions of the well-fed and well-tended have to experience daily: the pain of children with birth defects, children killed in car accidents, children senselessly taken by leukemia; the pain of divorce and broken families; the pain of lost jobs, lost income, failed prospects. And where is God? (p. 6)



His book searches the Bible for explanations of suffering and finds four—and they don't all agree. Therefore he can't believe in God? Like Avalos he is apparently employing a false view of the Bible. Did he get that from Evangelicals? At Moody? At Wheaton? Possibly. Doesn't God have reason to give us an accurate account of *people as they were*, being guided by God as fast as they obeyed, but not always thinking or doing the right things?

The Bible is not merely a flash picture of a people at a given time. It gives flash pictures of a very lengthy sequence, more like a motion picture portraying growth and change, deeper insights and qualities of behavior.

I am not happy to say, but two things in the book I cannot put together. Ehrman says plainly (pp. 122, 123),

> Since human beings misbehave and hurt others out of their free will (which exists even if God does not) then we need to intervene ourselves and do what we can to stop the oppression, torture, and murder—whether here at home or in developing countries where the atrocities are more blatant and less restricted.

All things considered, here is an author—who has already endured the suffering of producing 20 books—a person not mainly building a case against believing in God but presenting and agonizing about the astounding catalog of suffering both in the Bible and within the human story in general. No book I am aware of is as comprehensive and feelingly a portrayal of evil.

But he lives in a university world where, almost in order to survive, you need to stop thinking about anything supernatural, especially intermediate beings like Satan and evil angelic forces.

I can't write to him and say, "Did you forget Satan?" You can be sure that a New Testament scholar would be very familiar with the numerous NT references to Satan, far exceeding OT insights. But such thoughts are even more off limits today in university circles than a benign belief in some kind of a supreme being.

Thus he could easily be aware subconsciously that thinking like that would likely endanger his entire career—now after many years of hard work in the limelight of the secular world. He might even think that his his legitimate anger about evil and what should be done about it would be damaged! If that were true, then this is in fact a book shocking us into an awareness of the true amount of evil that we may not want to think about.

We can thus be thankful that he has so keenly described evil, even if he does not mention evil angels. Yet, we must see this omission in the context of the enormous social pressures in the university world. Even in Christian colleges little is said of intermediate beings (angels) good or bad, especially in papers written for secular consumption.

Unfortunately, as he says, he is not providing a *solution* but describing the *problem* of evil. This leads him to an impossible tension between, as he says, enjoying life as fully as possible and also doing as much as is possible about defeating evil in this world. This is no doubt a view from the very real limitatonss of being a full-time university professor. Professors are to think and write, but for the most part in a world of young students, little action is possible.

We do not have to agree with their conclusions. They do help us see ourselves as others see us.

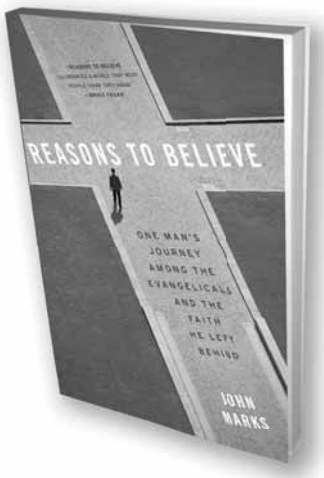
The Inadequacy of Our Cultural Theology of Suffering and Evil

A book, *Reasons to Believe*, to which I did not even make a passing reference last time, is written by John Marks, once an Evangelical who worked in Young Life for a number of years and attended a very fine, large Evangelical church in Dallas.

He wrote for ten years for *U. S. News and World Report*, became a producer for Morley Safer in the CBS *60 Minutes* program, and authored three novels before this non-fiction *Reasons to Believe.* He should have added a question mark because he sought those "reasons" diligently and did not find them.

First, he felt that he had to withdraw from Evangelicalism. After marrying a Jewish girl with whom he is very happy, he got to thinking that if he continued to be an Evangelical, he would have to believe she was going to hell.

Some years later, covering Bosnia for CBS he ran into the fact that Serbian Christians had slaughtered tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims. He says he could understand how nominal Christians could do that. But he could not understand why God would allow them to do it. So he felt he should withdraw from even a belief in God.



As mentioned earlier, Hanna Rosen spent *a year and a half* studying Evangelicals from the standpoint mainly of a single college—Patrick Henry, exclusively populated by super-achieving homeschooled students. In contrast, John Marks, already possessing an Evangelical vocabulary, spent *two years* going everywhere and interviewing a whole range of different Evangelicals. His is thus a remarkable handbook on Evangelical culture—well-written, informative and consistently respectful of those he interviews.

He tells of the time he did the behind-the-scenes production of *60 Minutes* on the "Left Behind Series." He was asked at the end, "Are you going to be left behind."? At this point he had been swimming in the secular world long enough to be disturbed by Evangelical exclusivism which allows them (us) to tell, on the basis of relatively superficial details, just who is going to be raptured and who isn't.

The whole book, in a sense, is one long quest for clarification—would he or wouldn't he be "left behind."

But, as I say, he is very respectful, admiring, and even loyal in a sense. He is extravagant in his praise for the work of the churches in the aftermath of the Katrina devastation in New Orleans. By contrast the work of government agencies, he says, was pathetic.

He is not bothered merely by the quirks of Evangelical theology and our in-house jargon. Like Ehrman he is also deeply disturbed by the rampant evil in this world. The final paragraph in his book makes this clear:

> The twentieth century, my century, asks its own terrible questions. Bosnia? Hiroshima? Rwanda? Armenia? So many people, and so many Christians, looking away when the Jews of Europe were led to their deaths? So many people, and so many Christians, embracing racist policies all over the world during the era of colonialism, policies that led to murder and catastrophe on a cosmic scale? One species allowed its full, unfettered measure of violence for so long? A god has overseen this nightmare? A god whose divine plan accounts for all the torment, horror, and loss visited upon ourselves by ourselves over the course of this century, and all centuries? And it's not over yet, surely. Someone else, some other nation, is already preparing itself for the next slaughter, in which I do not want to voluntarily, unnecessarily implicate myself. A god who can't stop it has no right to my loyalty, or my belief. I can't speak for others. For now, I'm a free man in a free land. I am a man of the twentieth century, and I rest on the authority of the uneasy dead. Leave me behind [at the Rapture].

My basic response to this is not to question the rationale but to suspect a significant impact on Mark's thinking of an environment of anti-supernaturalism. Unlike Avalos and Ehrman, he has not been working for years in a university faculty where supernatural factors are unmentionable, he has been in the secular world of Washington D.C., New York City, and the media in general, where workers will also be sneered at if they are very religious or believe that Jews automatically go to hell.

Furthermore, in view of his both needing to defend his wife and also to face what he considers the unexamined fanaticism of many Evangelicals, he, like Hanna Rosen refers again and again, *with fear*, to what would happen if Evangelicals were to take over the country.

What Hope Our Young?

It would seem then, that both when our young people go off to college, and also when they get out into the secular world, the wind blows hard against them. Just to survive, to keep a job, to talk as equals with non-Evangelicals of whatever stripe, it may seem necessary to most of them to drop some of their inherited Evangelical views.

If people are being won into the front door and eventually move out the back door, what could be the answer? Is France the end product, where 80% are "Christian" but only 20% believe in God?

II. THE CURE

In my opinion a basic problem is our blindness to the essentially wartime calling of those who follow Christ. The church has largely gone AWOL, distracted or preoccupied with programs that serve our own ends.

Everyone knows what happens to a peacetime army—it tends to fall apart, demoralization sets in. Soldiers want to get out of the army.

Evangelicals have misread the Bible. They are bored. Many are getting out of what they think is a peacetime army. But the Bible does not call us to save ourselves, to solidify our security, and just to talk about world problems.

There was a time in the USA, and it is still true in many parts of the world, that people did not worry about world problems simply because modern communications did not bring that world into their small world.

Now, the world's problems are ever present in our media. In addition, we are astoundingly more capable of doing something about those problems. We have greater opportunities and greater obligations than ever in history. Yet the chasm between our unemployed resources and an effective challenge to big world problems is very great.

A major reason people are leaving the church, losing their faith, and staying away in the first place, is thus because the church has not adequately stepped up to bat along with civil forces to beat down the corruption, disease, and poverty of at least a billion hopeless people.

It is apparent that organized believers are largely missing in the conduct of the Kingdom of God, in bringing His will into the dark and suffering places in our world.

The world is rightly impressed with the Gates Foundation, Buffet's $50 billion gift, and now Ted Turner's recognition that his $200 million is more likely to do good if mediated through overseas Christian communities than if he were to give it to the World Bank (which in the last 32 years has given away $3,600 billion "causing mostly harm and very little good," as the subtitle of a book indicates).

Is there any explicitly Christian organization with the specific purpose of fighting global malaria? Why not? Is there any explicitly Christian mission designed to fight the sources of disease in general—as does the Carter Center? Why not?

Should we wonder why John Marks and others can be amazed and full of admiration for the way churches in America dove in to help with Katrina, but unhappy when in general we are absent from the frontlines against many of the ugliest ongoing tragedies in our world? In fighting evil we can glorify God, not just help our own species. Remember, both Ehrman and Marks are thinking that Evangelicals believe that God must create or at least approve all of this evil. Why? Since the church does not believe forthrightly that it is Satan's not God's work? Are Evangelicals content to survive rather than to soldier against it?

What do Evangelicals have to offer at present? Some intellectual concern. Also, confusion about what we are able to do. And, a history of super individual Christianity that does not readily see the necessity of highly organized teams (mission agencies) to solve the most serious problems. We tend to assume that a whole lot of saved individuals (as beneficial as that is) will be all that is needed.

Evangelicals do have a conscience. They do have an intuition of God's will, even if they do not have a clear mission theology of the Kingdom of God. Is it any wonder that between 2001 and 2006 mission agencies thought to be doing mainly evangelism and church planting grew 2.7%, while mission agencies that focus on "relief and development" grew by 75%?

We are sending hundreds of long-term mission teams out around the world without either the knowledge, skill or theology to tackle effectively most of the profound practical problems real people have. We do a good job in talking to people about following Christ, but when their other needs cry out for serious practical solutions, we are often unprepared.

Historically, in hundreds of foreign fields, schools and hospitals have portrayed God's love, and have given meaning to the words of the evangelist, just as did the practical dimension of Jesus' ministry. Missionaries in the past have transformed whole countries in many practical ways. Today we know far more about the problems and far more about the solutions than ever before. Yet the world still sees us as merely religious fanatics propagating a salvation that is not here but only in the hereafter.

The cure for a church that is in many ways staggering, stalling, and sitting down, the cure for our malaise and evaporating faith, is clear-cut definitive obedience. We must face and define the need to get organized answers to this world's problems as well as getting individuals reconciled to God.

In fact, getting people reconciled to God AND to His Kingdom business must go together. Otherwise our absence at the frontlines of major global problems means we are misrepresenting God's will and misusing the wisdom and resources He has given us to act out and speak out His love and glorify His Name among all peoples. f