

PITFALLS AND DANGERS FACING 21ST CENTURY EVANGELICALISM

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I am grateful, brothers and sisters, for the welcome that I have been given and I find it a delightful privilege to be sharing in the 105th birthday of the Alliance Bible Seminary. That is both because seminaries are such key places and because so much of my own life has been in seminaries. Seminaries, as I said, are key places and here I remember something which my puritan mentor Richard Baxter once said. Baxter said churches rise and fall as the ministry rises and falls. And that is as true in the twenty-first century as it was in the seventeenth when Baxter spoke those words. That is what makes the work of the seminary so important. A good seminary produces good ministers of the gospel of Christ. A bad seminary where the gospel is not taught produces ministers whose ministries are barren from beginning to end.

And as I said, I have spent a great deal of my life in seminaries. I was 15 years teaching in Bristol, England and have been 25 years

teaching theology in Regent College, Vancouver. And though I love ministry in local churches and for the past 30 years have been a member of the ministry team in a local church, I found it a supreme privilege to be working in a seminary teaching the truth of God to tomorrow's clergy and helping to guide them in the path of godliness. And in this task I think of the Apostle Paul as my mentor and my guide.

I. Colossians 2:1-10

Paul was a role model in theological education and you see this in all his letters. He was an evangelist preaching the gospel, and then he disciplined those who came to Christ through his ministry, teaching them the principles of Christian life. In addition to that, often in his letters we see him writing as a one-man seminary addressing church leaders. It is leaders who may be in his mind as he writes the letter to the Colossians. At Colossae, the ideas were being put around obviously by leaders that it would be good to worship angels alongside the Lord Jesus and it would be good to bring Jewish ritual back into Christian worship. Paul wrote his letter in order to teach the teachers that these ideas were all wrong.

Let us look at the words that Paul uses in Colossians 2:1-3. You see there something of the strength of his feeling for these are very strong words. He says, "I want you to know how great is the struggle I have for you." "Struggle" means that Paul was praying hard because he cared much and he thought it very important to hit on the head these false ideas. And he says, "I have a struggle for you and for those in Laodicea," and in verse 2, "that their hearts may be encouraged." He knows, you see, that it is very discouraging to find yourself in a church that is split over doctrine. It is doubly discouraging when the doctrine has to do with the place of the Lord Jesus and the heretics are seeking to rob him of his glory. Says Paul, "I want to encourage you by showing you the full glory of the Lord Jesus and so restore him to a proper place in your heart." So he says, he wants their hearts to be encouraged to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery,

which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. That, you will agree, is rather a mouthful. But Paul is expressing his heart in that great statement of what he is about. Full assurance of understanding, he believes, is basic to fruitful discipleship. He is calling on all his readers to learn to think and think hard about the place and the glory of the Lord Jesus. He knows that at heart all of us want to understand in every area of life where we take an interest and it is understanding of Christ that he wants to communicate here. And he says, "what I want you to understand and know is God's mystery." When he says "mystery", he is not thinking of something that bewilders, he is thinking of a secret God has kept in the past and has now revealed in the present. The secret is something to be taught and learned. The secret he says is Christ, the whole truth about Christ.

You may remember that in Colossians 1 he has already spoken of the Lord Jesus Christ as the one whom the Father has made pre-eminent in creation, in providence, and in grace. The person we know as Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, was the Father's agent in making the world; in him Paul has said all things hold together; and it is the Father's will that he be supreme in everything that happens and be the head of the Church. That teaching given in chapter one shows clearly enough what Paul is aiming at. He wants a Christ-centered and Christ-exalting church at Colossae.

He goes on to speak of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Christ. That word "riches," which he uses when he speaks of the riches of full assurance of understanding and this word "treasures," that he uses here both show us the supreme value of understanding the truth of Jesus our Lord. And, says Paul, "I want you to reach these riches of wisdom and knowledge" – wisdom and knowledge all being there for us in Christ. Those two words, "wisdom" and "knowledge," are pointing to the practical importance of understanding the truth about the Lord Jesus. Knowledge means an understanding of the life that we have to live and wisdom means skill in living it. So Paul's heavy doctrine of Jesus Christ is very practical doctrine, very much down to earth.

I would say at this moment, before going any further, in churches and seminaries today the same struggle must be maintained. We too are confronted with many views that diminish the glory of our Lord Jesus and those views must be recognized and rejected.

A. Evangelicalism Means Christianity according to Paul

I was given the title to which I am speaking "Pitfalls and Dangers Facing 21st Century Evangelicalism." Before I go any further, I want to make sure that we all agree on the meaning of that word, "evangelicalism," in the title. I remember how when I was born again at age 18, I was being taught and nurtured by people who called themselves evangelicals, and when I told my close friends that that was so, they scratched their heads because they did not know what evangelicals were. They suspected that evangelicalism was some kind of sect out of the mainstream of Christian life. The real problem I think, as I look back, was that they did not understand the meaning of conversion. In evangelicalism, the importance of conversion has always been underlined. But what I want to say to you is this: whereas these folks thought that evangelicalism was out of the mainstream of Christian life, the truth is that evangelicalism is the mainstream of Christianity in this world. And evangelicalism is neither more nor less than Christianity according to the Apostle Paul.

1. Historical Description

"Evangelicalism" has been studied in recent years by both historians and theologians. The historians, with the best will in the world, have rather reinforced the idea that evangelicalism is a bit of a novelty, having arrived only in the eighteenth century and not having been known before. It has become very popular among historians to say evangelicalism stresses four things: the Bible, the cross of Christ, conversion and mission, and that is true as far as it goes. The historians go on to say that evangelicalism first broke surface in the eighteenth century revivals, the evangelical revival in England and the Great Awakening in North America, and that also is true as far as it goes. But the truth is that from the days of the Apostle Paul to the eighteenth century, the essence of evangelicalism was a

reality somewhere in the Christian world all the time. Though the word "evangelicalism" was not used before the eighteenth century, men like Augustine in the fifth century and Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth, and puritans like Richard Baxter in the seventeenth, all maintained the emphases of evangelicalism. So at a deep level, to say evangelicalism began in the eighteenth century just because it was then that the word was first used is very misleading.

2. Theological Description

In any case, a better way to understand evangelicalism is in terms of its doctrines. And these doctrines in fact run all the way through Paul's letters. I am thinking of the doctrine of the Trinity. I am thinking of the doctrine of the incarnation. I am thinking of the doctrines of creation, and of sin as the marring of creation. I am thinking of the doctrine of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. I am thinking of the doctrine of life in the Holy Spirit for the Christian. I am thinking of the doctrine of the Church as the fellowship of those who are born again. I am thinking further of the truth that fellowship is a reality in the body of Jesus Christ. And I am thinking of the hope of glory that Christ will bring us into at the end of our life in this world. These are the central doctrines of evangelicalism and they have been in the Church ever since the Apostle's days.

B. Paul's Ideal of Evangelical Health

But now in evangelical faith and religion there is a further feature that must be highlighted. It is the aspect of things that Paul has already stressed in Colossians 1, as I said. It is the truth that the Lord Jesus himself is to be central in our attention, our thoughts, our faith, our love, and all our attitudes to life. In mainstream Christianity, our Lord Jesus Christ fills the horizon. And evangelical health means keeping it that way. That is why in Colossians 2:6-7 Paul says, "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught" – Christ is at the centre and must stay there. The summons to keep Christ at the centre of things is as much a word to us as it was a word

to the Colossians. In the modern world, there are basically three versions of Christianity side by side. There is the version that has the Church at the centre and looks to the Church to determine the attitudes of Christians to just about everything. This version of Christianity says that the right question to ask at every point is "what does the Church teach about this or that." You recognize, I am sure, the profile of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches in what I have just said.

Then the second version of Christianity puts the Lord Jesus and the Scriptures together at the centre and insists that Christ and the Bible, indeed the Christ of the Bible, must determine all our attitudes and convictions and tells us that the question to ask at each turn of the road is "what does the Bible teach" and "what does Christ have to say about this or that." And that is evangelicalism as all of us know it.

There is, however, a third position alongside that one which in some parts of the world today is very vocal and very distractive. It is the version of Christianity which puts human ideas at the centre and says that the question to ask about every matter of divine truth is "what do we think." For this position, neither the Church nor the Bible speaks the last word. The last word is what we think in light of seeing what the Bible and the Church have said. We are at liberty, however, to differ from the Bible and the Church if we think that is right. Here, I am sure, you recognize the profile of liberal Protestantism which is such a thorn in the side of the evangelical people. I do not know whether liberal Protestantism is strong in Hong Kong, but I know it is strong in Britain, in Canada, and in the United States. And we who seek to maintain evangelicalism in those countries have to be battling with liberal Protestantism constantly. Now you see, in both positive and negative terms, what I mean when I speak of evangelicalism.

II. Evangelical Advance in the Twentieth Century

I am to speak of pitfalls and dangers that face twenty-first century evangelicalism. But first let me speak some words of encouragement. Paul says that he is fighting the battle that he does fight for the faith of the Colossians in order that their hearts may be encouraged, and I want your hearts to be encouraged, brothers and sisters, this evening.

A. Numbers Increasing Globally

Here then is the encouragement: in the second half of the twentieth century evangelicalism made enormous advances. It was a reaping time for the gospel throughout the world. Here are the figures. In the world there are approximately six billion people. A third of those people profess to be Christians. Of those two billion, a billion and a quarter are Roman Catholic. A quarter of a billion, that is 250 million, are Eastern Orthodox. And half a billion, that is 500 million, are Protestants of whom 450 million are evangelicals. The enormous expansion has been largely due to the power of Pentecostal missions. I hope you will agree with me that Pentecostalism is a form of evangelicalism and I thank God for the wonderful way in which Pentecostal and Pentecostal-type evangelism has been blessed. I know in Hong Kong Christians are a small minority: two hundred and fifty thousand, I am told, in a city of seven million. And in a situation like that, it is not so easy to feel that Christianity is making great strides and the word of God is triumphing in the world. Yet this is the truth of the matter.

B. Theological Recovery

Evangelicalism is far stronger today than it was 50 years ago in the days when I was still a theological student. There has been a spectacular theological recovery. At the turn of the twentieth century, evangelicals were staggering because of the pressure of the liberals who believed in biblical criticism, and in a diminished view of Jesus Christ as a man who was less than God, and who insisted on taking control of the older denominations and their seminaries. You will know of the warlike defensive movement in America called

Fundamentalism, which fought a rearguard action at the beginning of the twentieth century against these trends. But today evangelical orthodoxy is clear-headed and strong. It is acknowledged by the rest of the Christian world as a responsible position. It is respected.

C. Theological Education and Seminaries

Evangelicals during the last half-century have founded a number of new seminaries where evangelical theology is entrenched. I do not want to be making the mistake that David made when he numbered the people, that is, glorying in numbers and thinking that our strength lies in numbers and institutions. It does not. Our strength is in God and our hope is in God. But nonetheless, you and I are permitted to be encouraged by noting how much God has been doing in recent decades to restore his truth in this world.

D. Evangelical Unity

Another thing that has happened in recent years is that evangelicals have learnt how to co-operate, something which a hundred years ago they really did not know how to do. A hundred years ago, evangelicals felt a loyalty to their denominations which kept them from co-operating beyond their denomination alliances. Today, however, evangelicals have learnt to put first things first in this matter of co-operation. A great deal of the credit here, I think, goes under God to Billy Graham, who has organized so many grand scale pan-evangelical cooperative activities of evangelism during the last 40 years. The result is that nowadays, there are countless evangelical para-church activities in which evangelicals of all denominations work together happily and fruitfully. That has greatly strengthened the sense of evangelical unity and I think greatly strengthened the evangelical cause in the Western world. Now that is the good news that I have to share with you. The bad news follows.

III. Evangelical Vulnerabilities

A. Constant Conflict Is Certain

I do not claim to be a prophet or a son of a prophet but I think I can put my finger on some real problems, which as evangelicals we have to face and battle with as this century goes forward. We should remember to start with that there is always a battle where the gospel goes because this world is Satan's domain and Satan is going to oppose the work of the gospel any way he can. Our church history is always a story of the war of the Word of God with the world, and of the world with the Word of God. The church history story is not properly told unless this constant conflict dimension is highlighted. And it is certain, I think, that the future will be like the past in this respect. Satan will be seeking to destroy and to disfigure and spoil every bit of work that God is doing. And if he cannot keep evangelicalism from expanding, he will try to ensure that evangelicalism is weakened and corrupted from within. We must be realistic in expecting this and not be surprised when troubles come.

B. General Spiritual and Moral Pitfalls: Dangers in Every Age

In the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, you have the Lord Jesus appearing in glory to the Apostle John and dictating letters to John, as one would dictate a letter to a secretary. The letters, all of them we would say, are business letters, in which he, the Lord of the Church, is taking account of what is going on in the churches. A wise man once said, when our Lord sent letters to the seven churches, he was writing to all churches. As we read those letters to the seven churches, we run up against the weaknesses and problems and difficulties that recur over and over again in history and that we must expect to meet today. These are problems, pitfalls and dangers for the Lord's people in every age.

1. Minds Asleep (Rev. 2:14, 20, 24)

Minds go to sleep—that is one thing that happens. Christians should never stop thinking about what is true and false in the world in light of their own faith, and they should never stop thinking about

the things that they themselves are being taught in their own congregations. When Christians let their minds go to sleep for whatever reason, Satan gets in with error.

So you find the Lord Jesus, in his letter to the church of Pergamum, saying this, "You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality." (Rev. 2:14) And when you read on and go through the letter to the church of Thyatira, you find that in verse 20 of the same chapter something very similar is being said. "I have this against you," writes the Lord Jesus in his letter, "that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess," that is, who claims to be bringing messages from God, but is teaching and seducing Christ's servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols—the same two errors into which those who held the teaching of Balaam were leading the people in Pergamum. Then in verse 24 of the same chapter, still writing to the church of Thyatira, the Lord Jesus says, "to the rest of you in Thyatira who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say," then it goes on, but I end my quotation there. I want you to hear the phrase, "the deep things of Satan" because that, if I may put it so, gives Satan's game away. It is Satan who is inspiring this heretical teaching; Satan who is seeking to lead these churches into sin. And Jesus is rebuking the churches for not having realized that this teaching is Satanic and not having stood against it as such. What was the problem? They had let their minds go to sleep. They had supposed everything being said by anybody in the congregation must be right, godly and true. Also, Christians dare not make that assumption. You and I must not allow our minds to go to sleep. Error will get in as soon as we do. Test everything! Satan deludes sleeping minds.

2. Love Growing Cold (Rev. 3:1-2, 2:4)

Then in every age and in every church situation, love to the Lord can grow cold, and enthusiasm for Christian worship and Christian outreach and Christian service can diminish. Christians so

easily get slack. So you find Jesus writing to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1-2, "you have a reputation of being alive, and you are dead...I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God."

You can see the shape of the tragedy here. The church of Sardis had been strong, and lively, and active, and vigorous, and had made an impact on the city. So it had gained the reputation of being alive—a lively church. But now all of that is a matter of memory and in the present, at the time when Jesus is writing, no longer are that enthusiasm and that vigor and that energy present. The essence of being dead is that one does not respond to any form of stimulus from outside. That is what the Lord means when he tells the church of Sardis that it is dead. The members of the church are not responding to the Lord in worship and service any more. No doubt they still come to meetings and they look back with pride and joy on the way that the church glorified the Lord years before. But you cannot live on your reputation. Jesus is calling them to face the reality that in the present they are acting dead. In every generation, every congregation has to watch against that kind of slackness.

The reason it can happen is that love can grow cold. Writing to the church of Ephesus, in Revelation 2:4, the Lord Jesus says, "I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first." And then he goes on to say, and this is a wake-up call, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the works that you did at first." Real love is always active. You are always thinking of things to do that will please the one you love. Once the church of Ephesus had loved the Lord Jesus and had labored hard to please him. But the love of the Ephesians for the Lord had grown cold. And here is Jesus, Lord of the Church, rebuking them because that is so. Love grows cold and so zeal drains away.

3. Zeal Draining Away (Rev. 3:15-17)

When you look in Revelation 3 at what the Lord writes to the church of Laodicea, it is the same story. In verse 15 you see the Savior writing, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot..." And then in verse 16, "so because you are lukewarm, and neither hot

nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth," for I do not like your half-heartedness. He goes on to say, in verse 17, "You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing'. You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." Complacency has made these people unrealistic about their Lord. They have forgotten that we are always needy sinners. We Christians always need the pardoning and renewing grace of the Savior. But it is the easiest thing in the world for churches to forget this. What happened at Laodicea is thus a warning for us.

These are general spiritual pitfalls and dangers that threaten all churches at all times. And I spoke of them first because I want to alert us to the fact that even if outward circumstances seem to be entirely in our favor, we have to keep an eye on the inner quality of our church life and our church devotion and our personal devotion, lest we slip into deadness.

So you see, our spiritual quality is constantly being threatened and shallowness and apathy so easily come in. Let me ask you directly, friends, one or two questions. How concerned are we, deep down, about holiness? How concerned are we, deep down, to realize in our churches every member ministry according to the apostolic pattern? How deeply concerned are we to reach out to our neighbors and the people with whom we rub shoulders to seek to make Christ known to them? These things should be the passion of our hearts. I ask you, "Are they?" Please answer that question in your own heart before the Lord.

C. Specific Spiritual and Moral Pitfalls: Dangers of Our Time

I have not yet finished the bad news. There are specific spiritual and moral pitfalls, intellectual mistakes going with them also, that have arisen in our time. All the things I am going to mention have come to birth in the west, Western Europe or North America. They are long-term products of the movement in European culture called the Enlightenment. All of them diminish the importance of the Lord Jesus, and the importance also of holiness, righteousness, living according to Bible standards of goodness and truth. I would suppose

that all these Western mistakes would invade the universities of Hong Kong with very bad effect. The reason I am so certain of that is that they have already invaded the universities of the Western world with very bad effect, and the universities' fraternity in this world is global. Here are the four specific forms of error that I want to nail right now.

1. Intellectual Relativism (No Absolute Truth)

Intellectual relativism comes first. Relativism is the idea that there is no absolute and final truth about anything of ultimate significance and value. All that you have and all that you can have are rival opinions. All you can do therefore as you seek truth in any matter is compare the opinions that are there side by side in the world. You have no final criterion of truth and so you have no final truth in itself. You can see that in the world of relativism there is no place for the authority of God's truth as revealed, no place for the finality of the Scriptures. Yet this view is dominant, at least in the Western world where I come from, and it is still on the march. We have to stand against it.

2. Religious Pluralism (No Definitive Religion)

Secondly, I want to highlight religious pluralism, another idea that goes around in the west. Here is the idea: there is no such thing as a definitive religion. All that we have is a set of religions side by side. No one of them is better than any other of them. No one of them is the right religion to the exclusion of all the others. You take your pick, you follow the religion that you fancy, and there is no difference, finally, between the destinies to which more religions lead you. In the Bible, we are told by the Apostle Paul among others that non-Christian religion is the result of a mixture of general revelation from God through creation and the twisting effect of the way that human beings think in their sinful self-centeredness. Alongside these religions stands the religion of Christ, the faith of the gospel, which is God's truth and God's way of life and the only form of religion that leads to life. But the pluralist view is that no religion is definitive, all religions are equally valid and no one religion

is in a position to judge any other. This view is widespread in the part of the world where I come from and will, I am sure, increasingly become widespread here in Hong Kong.

3. Ethical Consequentialism (No Unchanging Standards)

Third modern pitfall is ethical consequentialism. Ethical consequentialism is the idea that the only way you decide what is right is by seeing what the consequences of particular lines of action will be. There are no unchanging standards revealed by God. But you decide that the best course of action is that which seems likely to produce the consequences that you like best.

This kind of thinking about what constitutes right action reflects very much the preferences and tastes and sometimes prejudices of particular cultures. One example, which has affected the church in the west very widely, is homosexuality. Western culture has developed a conscience about giving the maximum acceptance to minorities and eccentrics. This attitude goes under the name of freedom. Freedom here means allowing everyone as far as possible to do what they like. Every culture is supposed to do as much as it can to increase people's freedom. In the case of homosexual behavior, granted only a minority care to do it, but minorities must be given full freedom to do what they want to do. That is the idea. So criticizing homosexual behavior as really not what human nature and the human body were made for is something forbidden. The consequence of smiling on homosexual behavior and giving people freedom and acceptance as they practice it is that this minority is given full freedom, and that is the consequence which our modern culture calls us to approve of. The very fact that homosexual people are an eccentric minority means that we owe it to them to protect them in doing their eccentric thing.

You see how the reasoning works, you calculate the consequence of the attitude you adopt, and if you like the consequence, you applaud and justify the line you have taken for that reason. You have increased the amount of freedom in this world, and that, on this view, is the only thing that matters. And this way of thinking is applied to many

other patterns of behavior beside homosexuality: drug-taking, for instance. Since there are no unchanging standards, there can be no limits set to the oddities and the strangeness and sometimes the ugliness of human behaviors. This way of thinking about public morality is very widespread in the west and is advancing, I think, globally. I cannot imagine Hong Kong will be untouched by it.

4. Unworthy Individualism (No Image of God in Man)

There is a fourth pitfall that I want to mention. Unworthy individualism is the phrase that I use to describe it. The idea here is that the human individual is in absolute and final control of himself or herself, and no one, finally, can tell him or her what to do. I expect we are all familiar with the way this plays out in what we call "life issues."

In the matter of abortion which is the killing of a baby in the womb, the argument is that the pregnant woman is mistress of her own body, it belongs to her, she may control it and she has an absolute right to decide what happens to the child she is carrying.

Today the parallel question of euthanasia has become a big thing in the west. The thinking here is that each individual is free to die, to choose to die, whenever he or she wants to. We are really here talking about suicide. The thought is that a person has the right to commit suicide any time that he or she feels that the pressures of life are too heavy and at the end of life, well, it is good rather than bad for a person who finds life burdensome to choose to die and ask the physician to help him or her to do that.

You see what is missing here: there is no sense of the sanctity of life, no sense that human beings were made in God's image and entrusted with the life we are given in order to use it to become like the God who made us. Those who believe in the sanctity of the life God has given cannot, of course, go along with this way of thinking. And such a person must say that the individualism that is built into this idea of each person having the right to decide for themselves whether they will live or die, and whether they will have a baby in their womb live or die, this is unworthy and indeed ungodly individualism.

A further application of this way of thinking has recently broken surface in the debate about harvesting stem cells. People in medical research are begging to be allowed to create human embryos, that is to fertilize human cells, so that then the stem cells in the embryo may be taken and preserved for experimental research. It is thought that the stem cells can be used in various kinds of therapeutic medicine to improve the quality of life for some disabled people. What for Christians is the moral essence of this idea is that it is scandalous to create a human embryo in order then to destroy it once you have taken the stem cells from it. As you can see the same fault in thinking lies beneath this idea as in the mistaken advocacy of abortion and euthanasia. The sacredness of life as a gift from God is being denied and the right, therefore, to manipulate human life, taking it away whenever it is thought convenient, is being asserted. Well, this is just one more of the ideas in the secular world that threatens Christian points of view.

Intellectual relativism, religious pluralism, ethical consequentialism and unworthy individualism regarding life, are all pitfalls of error which are very much embedded in modern culture, and which will threaten the thinking of Christian people for many years to come. I spoke a moment ago of what happens spiritually when people let their minds go to sleep. If you will permit me a very ugly illustration, what happens is that one then gets infected by the errors that are going around in the culture just as people pick up SARS through being too close to those who have it.

Well, that is enough bad news for one talk, you will agree. So, let me return to the encouragement that I want you to take home with you tonight, and bring my talk to an end.

IV. Evangelical Opportunities

A. The Only Stable Hope

I believe that despite all the dangers that threaten, this is a great day of evangelical opportunity. Hope is a crucial human question. The philosopher Kant back in Germany two hundred years ago said that one of the greatest questions of life was: What may I hope for? And the modern world has no hope. A hundred years ago, people hoped to bring in heaven on earth. They thought that by education and improved housing and social conditions, they could make a perfect world. I do not think anyone believes that nowadays. We live in a world of pollution and global warming, and over-population and famine, and deep down most people, I think, are feeling despair. When we think seriously about the kind of world that we are leaving to our children and our grandchildren, we tremble. The world then is in despair, and the Christian message holds out the only hope that there is. The Lord Jesus Christ, who is at the centre of everything, is at the centre of Christian hope. He gives his people right now hope of a glory beyond this world into which one day he will lead them. He tells us further that one day he is coming back to remake this world by the same creative power by which he brought it into being in the first place. This is Christian hope a great hope, and the promises of God in the Bible guarantee it, and this is a day of tremendous opportunity for proclaiming it.

B. The Only Solid Wisdom

It is clear that the world today is short of wisdom. Wisdom is a matter, first of all, of discerning the best goal to aim at and then of seeing the best way to achieve your ideal. But if the secular world today is honest with itself, it knows that it has no idea of what is the best goal to aim at, and no idea of what is the best way to live. We simply do not know what to do with ourselves. And Christians see people all around them wasting their lives because they do not know what to do with their lives.

Here again the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ tells the world what the world needs to hear. Faith in Jesus as Savior and repentance

from sin and the practice of righteousness and the cherishing of the hope of which we spoke a moment ago is wisdom. It is wisdom because it is focusing on the best goal for anyone can conceive, namely to be renewed and restored in the image of the Lord Jesus himself. And the Christian message also shows the best way, the true path, the wisest course for achieving the goal which is the best goal to aim at. That course is faith in, and discipleship to, Jesus, the living, loving Lord. We have unparalleled opportunities, it seems to me, for proclaiming and explaining the Christian gospel as the wisdom that everyone needs.

C. The Only True Humanness

Then again in this modern world, people, quite seriously, have forgotten what it means to be human. Life is being trivialized by the way that people behave. In everyday morality, the notion of going against the accepted standards of the community around us is glorified. The rebel is the modern hero, but what is human about being a rebel? And in every society, brutality increases and instability comes with it. Civilization is being undermined by the madness of the human beings within its frame. The Lord Jesus Christ stands before us as the perfect human being. As I said a moment ago, the gospel offers us a path of transformation into his image. And if the world seeks a true humanism, this is it. It is the path of Christian faith—gospel faith that brings nobility into human life. The way of Christlike self-giving in love is the true humanism.

These things are at the heart of the riches, the treasures, of wisdom and knowledge, which are made known in Paul's gospel. These are truths that need particularly to be proclaimed today, proclaimed from the housetops, because the world is hurting so badly for lack of understanding them. So to return to the point from which we started, let Paul's purpose of making these things known to the Colossians shape the wishes and the prayers that we make for the seminary under whose auspices I have lectured tonight, that there will be a flow of well taught, spirit-filled leaders going out from the seminary to declare and witness to all this precious truth wherever they go. So the world will receive the blessing and God will receive the glory. So be it, amen.

ABSTRACT

With Colossians 2:1-10 as a prologue, Packer points out that according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, Colossians were to build up wisdom and knowledge that were Christ-centered. The author suggests that what it means by "evangelicalism" is Christianity that preached by Paul, emphasizing that men have to repent and convert. In the discussion, Packer traces the origin of the terminology "evangelicalism," and he expounds the theology of Paul from a doctrinal perspective. Moreover, the author points out that there are three versions of contemporary Christianity, namely Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, evangelicalism, and liberal Protestantism.

The number of evangelicals has been steadily ascending in the twentieth century, and the number of seminaries and para-church ministries are also increasing, Packer regards these good news. However, he reminds evangelicals to be alert, be watchful of Satan's destructive work, and be cautious of spiritual and moral deterioration. He also encourages believers to be diligent in cultivating their minds, and to reflect more on faith and lives. Packer restates the examples of churches of Pergamum, Sardis and Laodicea in the Book of Revelation, to remind believers the importance of holiness, and to encourage the churches to reflect on whether their ministries are of the apostolic pattern. Besides, the author observes that there are four crises brought forth by contemporary ideologies, namely intellectual relativism, religious pluralism, ethical consequentialism, and unworthy individualism. While facing all these crises, Packer insists that the gospel of Christ be the only hope for men, and that the salvation of Jesus Christ is an expression of God's wisdom. It is Jesus Christ who reveals to us a true humanism.

撮 要

巴刻以歌羅西書二章1至10節為引言，指出保羅教導歌羅西教會要建立以基督為中心的知識和智慧。巴刻認為「福音派」所指的意思，就是保羅所傳揚的基督教，強調人要經歷悔改歸信。他又追溯福音派一詞的緣起；並從教義的角度整理保羅神學，和指出基督教現存有三大版本——天主教和東正教、福音派及自由主義基督教。

巴刻指出，二十世紀福音派信徒人數不斷增長，神學院數目和跨宗派的合作事工也相繼增加，這是令人欣喜的現象。不過，他提醒福音派信徒須慎防撒但伺機破壞，要留心屬靈及道德的墮落，切勿懶於思考，要深思信仰與生活的關係。他特別提出啟示錄中別迦摩、撒狄和老底嘉等教會的例子，提醒信徒持守聖潔的重要，並反思教會是否按照使徒教導的樣式事奉。

最後，他指出當代思潮對福音派帶來四種危機：理性上的相對主義、宗教上的多元主義、倫理上的後果論、價值失落的個人主義。面對眾多危機，巴刻強調基督的福音是人類唯一的希望，主耶穌的救恩是神智慧的表現，主耶穌基督更為我們展示了真實的人性。