

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
September 5, 2015

## ***America in Crisis: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Future of Genuine, Biblical Christianity***

Recently, I completed reading one of the most important books I have read in some time: George Marsden's *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief*. Marsden is arguably one of the most significant evangelical Christian historians writing today. I have read all of his books, which have profoundly shaped my understanding of both American history and of American evangelicalism. This most recent of Marsden's books helps us immensely in understanding the crisis currently unfolding in American civilization. I would like to summarize the major arguments of Marsden's book and then offer some implications about where we as the church of Jesus Christ go from here.

First, a summary of the salient arguments in Marsden's book:

1. America is a synthesis of Protestant and Enlightenment ideas: A high regard for natural science, reason, common sense, self-evident rights and ideals of liberty. This fusion provided the consensus on which America was built and continued even into the era of theological liberalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The cause of the American Revolution was a cooperative effort among Enlightenment giants such as Thomas Jefferson and prominent evangelicals such as John Witherspoon. It was an independence movement founded on the passion for both political liberty and religious liberty. This synthesis of Protestant evangelicalism and Enlightenment ideas provided the consensus on which American civilization was built.
2. The consensus culture on which America was built collapsed in the 1960s and 1970s. Liberty was redefined as autonomy and a formal recognition of Christianity (e.g., public school prayers, Bible reading, etc.) ended. A new set of radical mores and practices replaced the consensus.
3. In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, a cultural backlash occurred with the rise of the religious right and the ensuing "culture wars." But no dominant principles exist currently within America to deal with the widespread religious pluralism now characterizing American culture. The collapse of the Enlightenment-Protestant consensus has created a vacuum and the concomitant crisis in America we are now experiencing.
4. Developments in the 1950s that undermined the Protestant-Enlightenment Consensus:
  - A conviction developed that a humane, cultured elite (primarily intellectuals) must provide the culture with direction and coherence. These elites replaced pastors and other religious leaders who for two centuries provided the direction and coherence for the culture.

- Conformity was the key term of the 1950s, but everywhere there was evidence of alienation and despair (e.g., David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, and James Dean in the film *Rebel without a Cause*). Conformity was viewed as an enemy of *autonomy*, which is how freedom was now being defined (e.g., Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*).
  - Personal autonomy was now viewed by many as the solution to the alienation and despair that conformity was generating. But the problem was that there was no ethical or moral foundation for personal autonomy. Thus Walter Lippmann, in *The Public Philosophy*, tried to provide a foundation for autonomy—a return to natural law. Modern liberal culture and modern science could not find an adequate basis for ethics or moral behavior. William F. Buckley reached the same conclusion. Liberals, such as Arthur Schlesinger in *The Vital Center*, responded with a secular proposal that would balance individual autonomy with community responsibility. America's strength, he argued, rested with its relativism and lack of dogmatism; it was a pragmatically based consensus.
5. America thus accepted two sources of authority in this new consensus based on relativism and a lack of dogmatism: the authority of the scientific method and the authority of the autonomous individual. The contrast between B.F. Skinner, who argued that the science of behavioral psychology can make us better, and Carl Rogers, who emphasized the free, self-actualizing, autonomous individual, is telling! The late 20<sup>th</sup> century became the age of the expert (e.g., the Kinsey Report, Dr. Benjamin Spock). But, as Christopher Lasch demonstrated, this emphasis on the expert produced a “culture of narcissism” in which the free individual was guided by the manager and the therapist—not by religious convictions.
  6. Although the 1950s witnessed a profoundly important evangelical revival (e.g., Billy Graham), the growing secularization of culture also produced one of the legacies of the 1950s—the privatization of religion. Diverse religious voices were to be tolerated, but they were regarded as private options, not significant points that could contribute to the public domain.
  7. Thus, the 1960s became the decade of cultural upheaval and fragmentation. The radicalism of the 1960s (which ended in the early 1970s) was thoroughgoing—challenging (and eventually rejecting) everything about America: its past, its values, its standards and its ethics—all rooted in the synthesis of the Enlightenment and Protestant Christianity. In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* re-awakened evangelicalism (e.g., Jerry Falwell, Francis Schaeffer) from its decades of slumber.
  8. Therefore, the result by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Culture Wars, the “religious right” and the attempt to reclaim America's religious past and the prominent role that evangelical Protestantism had played in the American consensus. Today, Americans have no paradigm for accommodating to religious and ethical pluralism. We are indeed a culture in crisis; a culture with no anchor and no consensus—a culture firmly anchored in mid-air.

Second, as the church of Jesus Christ, where do we go from here? Because of what Marsden has charted in the breakdown of the American consensus, genuine, biblical Christianity finds itself marginalized. The privatization of religious convictions in America means that evangelicals are culturally irrelevant. We are in the culture but play no role in its direction and no role in shaping

its values and ethics. Owen Strachan of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville argues that the means of this marginalization is “sexual ethics . . . To oppose the enshrinement of same-sex marriage, transgender identity, and polyamorous practices is to mark oneself as an opponent of progress, liberty, and equality.” He suggests several noticeable elements about the future for biblical Christianity as we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

1. Followers of Christ will face opposition and even persecution for their beliefs. Christian organizations may lose their tax-exempt status and employees may find themselves out of work as they stand for Christ’s values, morals and ethical standards. The government, the media, higher education will all continue to push the “new sexual secularism” and those who oppose it will pay a price.
2. Christian organizations and ministries may need to adjust to a different operational mode that will affect finances, fund-raising, even their tax exempt status: “Financial discipline and gospel exigency must be practiced by all Christians.”
3. We will see deeper and more piercing effects of rampant sin in American culture. Children will feel less protected. Families will be increasingly dysfunctional and the pressure on Christian families will be great. Marriages will be more difficult to sustain. “Lostness, a chief form of suffering in this world, will spread.”
4. The church of Jesus Christ will discover countless gospel opportunities we had not previously noticed. Strachan writes: “We should see the darkening of our context as a gospel opportunity. The church was made for this. The gospel was given for this. We might not have wished for these changes, but they have come, and God’s people must recognize that we are ready for them.” The church cannot retreat and can never end its witness. The church must never cease its ministry of the gospel!

Before he died in 1984, I heard Francis Schaeffer declare that “the easy days of Christianity are over.” Thirty years later, we now understand the remarkable accuracy of his statement. It is probably going to cost Christians as they stand for Jesus Christ. The days are evil (Ephesians 5:16), but the gospel of Jesus Christ is stronger and is eternal. Our potential tough days ahead will soon fade as eternity dawns. We want to stand fast for Christ and not waver. Christ will triumph—and we will do so as well! The future is bright, for it is all wrapped around the Lord Jesus Christ.

See George M. Marsden, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* and Owen Strachan, “What the Future Holds,” in *Tabletalk* (August 2015), pp. 20-23.