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Missions at Risk: A Failure of Nerve

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America's evangelical Christians are facing a critical testing-time as the twentieth century draws to a close. Among the most important of the tests we now face is the future of missions, and our faithfulness to the Great Commission.

Just as doors of opportunity are opening around the world, the Church seems to be losing its voice. A virtual repaganization of Western culture is occurring, indicating that the failure of the American Church is evident at home as well as abroad. What is the root issue?

At base, the issue is a failure of theological nerve—a devastating loss of biblical and doctrinal conviction. The result is retreat on the mission fields of the world and regression on the home front. Since mid-century, the mainline Protestant denominations have been withdrawing from the missionary enterprise, some even declaring a “moratorium” on the sending of missionaries charged to preach the Gospel. Among these denominations, the total missionary force is now a fraction of the force at mid-century, and many of those who remain on the fields have been assigned duties far removed from conversionist witness.

This loss of theological nerve is a fundamental failure of conviction. Put bluntly, many who claim to be Christians simply do not believe that anyone is actually lost.

The essence of this belief is *universalism*, the belief that all persons will be saved, whether or not they have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Universalism presents itself in many forms, including modern inclusivism, pluralism, and our pervasive relativism. In its boldest and most honest form, it is the absolute declaration that all persons will be saved (if indeed there is anything from which to be saved). By this account, all religions have an equal claim to truth which underlies the “religious” character of humanity.

In its more romanticized forms, universalism is the belief that God would not actually sentence rebellious human beings to eternal punishment, in spite of what He reveals in Holy Scripture. These persons believe in a God of their own devising, and not the God of the Bible.

Universalism also presents itself in a naïve form, by which Christians refuse to deal with the issue and simply declare no position or conviction on the issue. Their stance betrays their lack of conscience and conviction. Their conscience is uncluttered by concern for the lost.

The believing Church down through the ages has steadfastly resisted the universalist temptation, because universalism is so directly opposed to the clear teaching of Scripture. The Bible presents Jesus Christ and His atoning work as the only means of salvation; His gospel as the only “good news” for a lost world; and the gospel as the global mandate of the Church.

There is no room for universalism—whatever its form—in the evangelical churches. By rejecting the finality of Jesus Christ and the integrity of His gospel, those who promote universalism are witnesses to *another gospel*, as the Apostle Paul warned.

Given their commitment to the gospel, could evangelical Christians allow universalism to make inroads into their ranks? There are signs that this is now well underway. In the evangelical academy, some are advocating views well in line

with the liberal Protestant arguments of the mid-century. The challenge of pluralism has found many evangelicals with weak knees. The pattern of evangelical compromise is also evident in those who seek to reduce the unique claim Christianity makes to truth, and also among those who promote the idea of a second opportunity for saving faith after death.

The pattern is not restricted to the academics, however. The most dangerous trend may be found in the pews of evangelical churches, where more and more Christians are willing to reject or compromise the uniqueness of Christ and His atonement, citing the apparent “sincerity” of those who worship other gods, or no god at all.

Where will the Church stand? A recent report indicates that at a recent Urbana missions conference (bringing together thousands of college-age evangelicals), only a third of the participants indicated their belief that “a person who does not hear the gospel is eternally lost.” As one missionary veteran responded: “If two-thirds of the most missions-minded young people in America do not affirm the lostness of mankind, the Great Commission is in serious trouble!” Should these trends spread within the Southern Baptist Convention, we will be in serious trouble indeed.

Let us make our convictions clear. We stand for the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone has atonement for our sins. We believe in justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the sum and substance of the genuine gospel.

The missionary impulse logically follows, for we are called to bear witness and to make disciples of all nations. Southern Seminary—always a leader in the training of missionaries—is now multiplying that commitment through an unprecedented partnership with the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. This new partnership is demonstrated in the development of two new degree programs designed to meet the unique needs of missionaries. A new masters program is now underway, and beginning in the fall, Southern Seminary will become the first Baptist institution to offer the *Doctor of Missiology* degree. This will augment the Ph.D. in missions already offered through the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth. In an era when commitment to missions is at risk in other quarters, Southern Seminary is determined by God’s grace to advance, and never to retreat.

