

Being Loyal to God by Loyalty to His Word: Dealing with the Great Departure

Sam Horn, Ph.D., Brookside Baptist Church
James 4:4

Introduction

I have been asked to speak to you on the topic of loyalty to Scripture.

Perhaps one might think it strange that this topic would need to be addressed to a group of believers and pastors who make up a segment of evangelical Christianity that has come to be known as Fundamentalism. After all, the first and foremost Baptist distinctive is that the Scriptures are the sole authority for our faith (what we believe) and our practice (how we behave as a consequence of our belief).

Historically, our movement arose precisely out of the loyalty our spiritual forefathers had to the Scriptures when they were challenged by men who were more interested in making Christianity palatable to the scientific culture of the day than they were in defending the historical accuracy and reliability of the Scripture.

Our spiritual forefathers understood what James was saying – that to make friends with the world in ways that demanded compromise to the Scripture would eventually lead to enmity with God. In other words—to put it bluntly—they recognized that their loyalty was being tested.

Would they be loyal to God and His Word, or would their desire for respectability and relevance before and to their culture cause them to depart from the historical orthodox stand on the inspiration and inerrancy?

The answer to that question put men who were otherwise unified on a necessary collision course. And, at the heart of the matter was a question that every man had to answer—where would his loyalty lie? Would it lie with Scripture even if it meant ridicule and reproach? Or would it lie elsewhere in light of the perceived advantages of the respect that could be garnered by being relevant to the surrounding culture?

Our spiritual ancestors answered that question decisively—their loyalties would lie with the Scripture. And, as a result, many of them were driven out of their institutions or denominations. Others suffered great loss of influence. Some were accused of making an idol of the Bible. All of them were relegated as irrelevant and hopelessly out of touch with where cutting-edge ministry was headed.

However, we, their descendants, look back on these men and recognize both the great sacrifice they made for the truth and the great debt we owe them for the heritage they have handed down to us in our day!

Our spiritual
ancestors
answered that
question
decisively—
their loyalties
would lie with
the Scripture.

Almost 75 years has passed since those early days, and I would argue that our kind of evangelical Christianity is again facing a decisive departure from those same Scriptures – this time from within the very ranks of a movement that arose out of a deep loyalty to the Bible.

This departure has occurred in two primary ways; and, in my opinion, at least one of those ways has occurred because of a third departure that we almost never consider in the equation.

- The departure of the evangelical church at large from loyalty to the Scripture to loyalty to the culture.
- The departure of many of the future generation from loyalty to the Scripture to loyalty to the world or to compromised evangelicalism.
- The departure of some fundamentalists from loyalty to the Scripture to loyalty to certain strongly held preferences, forms, and traditions.

And the second departure—that of many who are in the coming generation—has in part been aggravated by the third departure—our own!

The departure of some in our movement (fundamentalism) from loyalty to the Bible itself to a loyalty to certain strongly held forms and religious traditions has in some cases occasioned and in other cases aggravated the departure of our own children from the movement our spiritual ancestors embraced out of genuine loyalty to the Scriptures.

It is not my intention to be critical of our movement. I come before you as a pastor committed to our movement for the duration!

I am also greatly concerned for this generation. What kind of faith will they embrace? How will they practice it?

I don't come as someone who has departed the ranks, is disenchanted, or disenfranchised. I come before you as someone who deeply cares about the future of the next generation. I come as a pastor of the next generation of church members and leaders. I come as an instructor of the next generation of pastors and theologians. And perhaps, most of all, I come as a father of two children who will be impacted in very real ways by the answers we give to these considerations.

On the one hand, I am greatly encouraged at the number of young people who want to serve the Lord. I have spent the last 20 years of my life teaching the next generation of Christians. In many respects, there is much for which we ought to rejoice and be thankful!

However, I am also greatly concerned for this generation. What kind of faith will they embrace? How will they practice it? Perhaps my question is really this: As the church grows increasingly more secular, how will the next generation of our own children be “in the world” but “not of it”? How will they preserve their distinctness from the culture they have been called to reach for Christ?

The answer is deceptively simple – they have the Bible, and that is enough. Peter stated that the Scriptures contain all that we need for life and godliness.

And so, as helpful as all of our structures are, as important as all of our forms might be, and as dear to us as our traditions are, they are no replacement for what God provided—His Word.

And I would suggest that perhaps (even if unintentionally and with the best of motives) we have created a situation where our strongly held preferences and deeply entrenched traditions may have at times actually obscured the very thing we are hoping our children will know and love—the Scriptures that will lead them to God!

To put it bluntly, I am concerned at times that our loyalties lie more with our preferences, forms, and positions than they do with the Scripture. If I am right, then we have departed from the loyalty exercised by those who gave us this movement, and we must find our way back to the ground upon which they stood!

In order to find our way back, we need to go back to see if we can discover where we stepped away from the path charted out for us by our predecessors.

I. The Reality of the Departure—What has Happened?

A. An Unbiblical Embrace of Culture—Evangelicalism

American Evangelicalism over the last five decades has experienced an intentional radical departure from Biblical worship that is authentic, accurate, and, therefore, acceptable to God.

This is a concern voiced by evangelical writers and theologians themselves! Let me give you two examples:

Worship is serious business! It is at the heart of all that the church is and does! However, a strange thing has happened to the church in the last fifty years—worship has been turned into a means or a tool for growing the church! The result has been ‘worship wars.’ . . . When we worship because it ‘works’ and produces large results, we are no longer rendering acceptable worship. We don’t worship because it works; we worship because of who God is! Any otherwise motivated worship is in reality false worship no matter how similar it may look to the truth. . . In many evangelical churches a subtle shift has happened. The sanctuary has become a theater, ministry has become performance, worship has turned into entertainment, and applause rather than the glory of God has become the measure of success. . . The modern church has for the most part trivialized worship. If our worship is not followed by obedience, then it is false worship, and we are worse off for our hypocrisy. . . . We can go to church and sing, clap, lift our hands, and even weep – and by this convince or impress those around us that we are sincerely worshipping – but we can’t deceive the God we are claiming to worship!” Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship*

Os Guinness confronts us with the inescapable question: How have we Christians become so irrelevant when we have tried so hard to be relevant?

By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant! *Prophetic Untimeliness*, p. 15.

This is a sobering warning that forces us to take stock of the actual state of American evangelicalism—of which we, and churches like ours, are a part!

Part of arriving at a Biblical answer to all of this involves making sure we understand where we took a wrong turn and worship became perverted. The church was supposed to impact her surrounding cultural context by being distinctly different at core levels. However, evangelical Christianity is in a cultural context that is increasingly dominated by relevance and driven by narcissism. Two things inevitably happened to evangelicalism as a result of a misplaced loyalty in a desire to be relevant in a culture dominated by relativism and driven by narcissism:

1. In a culture dominated by relativism the church changed her message as God's Word was downplayed or ignored.
 - Pluralism is the idea that all truth claims have equal value.
 - Relativism is a logical expression of pluralistic thinking. Truth becomes individually determined. What is true for me may not be true for you.
 - What we are all confident about is that there is no such thing as absolute truth that governs our thinking, shapes our character, and flows out of our life.
 - In short, God is no longer allowed to speak authoritatively in any way to His church!
 - Ryken put it this way:
 - In an age of relativism, when people are allergic to absolutes, the Bible becomes increasingly irrelevant. People who demand freedom to define reality on their own terms have little use for a divinely ordained perspective on their experiences.
2. In a culture driven by narcissism the church changed her audience in search of an experiential, entertainment, egocentric approach to Worship. In a narcissistic culture, it is all about individual experience--it is all about me!
 - Consequently, the focus of worship moves away from what pleases God to what pleases the audience generally and me particularly. Worship is not for God's glory but for my benefit or pleasure!
 - Ryken observed:

Ours is a narcissistic culture, preoccupied with personal pleasure. There is an exaltation of the experiential in worship. In this self-centered age, worship is no longer about glorifying God; it is about satisfying myself, even feeling good about myself. It is all about me – what I need, what I like, and what I am going to get out of it!

- Worship becomes an experience I seek or an entertainment I demand. And if I don't get it, I vote with my feet!
- So what was the response to this by those alarmed by the departure?

B. An Unbiblical Entrenchment Against Culture

The first group forgot that God had called them to be distinct from the world (*in it but not of it*). They did well on the "in it" part, but at the expense of the "not of it" part! And in response or reaction to this:

The second group forgot that God had called them to be in the world – (*in it but not of it!*)

Even though each group may have had good motives and reasonable concerns that drove their respective responses, their failure to guard all of God's words about this resulted in a catastrophic loss for the church as a whole!

In the first case the church lost her God-given distinctness in the world. And, like salt that has lost its savor, she has become spiritually useless.

In the second case, the church has lost her God-given position in the world. And, like light hidden under a bushel, she has become spiritually useless.

II. The Reasons for the Departure. Why Did This Happen?

A. Fear that resulted in spiritual compromise! (evangelical side)

1. The church lost her confidence in the power of His Word.
 - The Corinthians did this with the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:18-29. Paul refused to do this in 2 Corinthians 4:1-2.
 - Everything we know about theology (God and Christ) is in the Bible.
 - Everything we know about Anthropology (man and what he is like) is in the Bible.
 - Everything we know about Soteriology (salvation, gospel) is in the Bible.
 - When you lose confidence in what God has said in the Bible about these things, eventually you lose your ability to define and defend these things; and then you stop depending on them and look elsewhere for answers.
 - So where did the church look? Where did she place her confidence?
2. The church looked to pagan culture to frame her worship.

- Because she rejected the wisdom of God and counted it as foolishness, she was left with nothing but the wisdom of the world by which to carry out the work of God! (1 Cor. 1:18-29)
- She looked to find ways to appear “wise” in the eyes of the pagans.
- She looked for ways to appeal to the desires of the pagans.
- In so doing, she moved away from a relentless commitment to the authority of God’s Word to a relentless pursuit of relevance and respect in the eyes of the pagans around her who had despised her Lord and rejected His authoritative word.
- And, in the end, the world and not the Word became the deciding factor in determining what was and wasn’t acceptable in her worship and in her teaching!

Os Guinness observed after visiting one such church:

The two Sundays I was there, there was hardly a reference to scripture. There were far more references to George Barna and George Gallup than to either the Bible or God. Once culture becomes authority, you’re always shifting in terms of the latest trends and the winds of fashion. The scripture is no longer authoritative. You can see it in the Episcopal Church now in the way they’ve elected an openly gay bishop. It’s the winds of culture that are decisive, not the scriptures. And a good bit of evangelicalism is drifting down the same road . . . this brings with it a loss of identity. Eventually people believe things that have little decisive Christian content. What are they really believing? It’s just the world’s beliefs dressed up.

B. Fear that resulted in spiritual disillusionment

1. It is my contention that the same lack of confidence in the power of Scripture on our part has created a spiritual disillusionment and disinterest on the part of many of the young people coming up in our ranks!
2. Like the evangelical church looked to pagan culture to frame how they believe what they believe the Bible teaches, we look to our forms and traditions to frame how we believe what we believe the Bible teaches!
 - Our young people are not where they are because they lack exposure to the Bible (Christian schools, Christian colleges).
 - Nor are they where they are because they have not been warned against sin and wickedness.
 - They are where they are because we have feared to let the Bible be their protection.
 - We honestly don’t think it is enough on its own. So instead of arming them with the weapons and armor that God has given them in His Word, we have exchanged that armor for paper armor of our own making.
 - Instead of insisting that the Bible itself be their protection, we have fashioned protections and erected unbiblical fences designed to keep them

from real sin by teaching our traditions as the commandments of God, albeit with different motives and in different ways than did the Pharisees.

III. The Results of the Departure

- In both cases—the departure was motivated by legitimate concerns.
- In both cases—the departure may have started with good motives.
- In both cases—something other than the Bible is viewed as authoritative.
- In both cases—the results were devastating!

A. An unashamed embracing of an unbiblical mindset

1. Looking to the world to determine how we believe what we believe—looking to the world to determine how we behave as a result of how we hold those beliefs.

2. Looking to tradition/form to determine how we believe what we believe—looking to our own religious culture/traditions to determine how we behave as a result of how we hold these beliefs.

B. An uncritical employment of unbiblical methods

1. Methods adopted from the current sinful culture

2. Methods adopted from the entrenched religious culture

In both cases, these methods are insisted on! They are non-negotiable. And, if people don't get them, they will walk!

- They are defended by a pious pragmatism. It works (on both sides of the battle, evangelicals and fundamentalists).
- They are justified by a stubborn humility. We don't want to submit to the Bible alone; we each want to add something to it! And, both sides insist that their particular addition is necessary if we are truly going to obey the Scripture!
- They have resulted in sinful carnality—on both sides!

IV. The Response to the Departure—what must we do? (2 Peter 1:12-21)

- We must restore confidence in the Scripture. How?
- By listening again to Peter and Paul and the Apostolic witness!
- We must return to the ground that gave rise to our movement—Sola Scriptura. And we must refuse to be moved in either direction!
- How do we get there from here? Listen to Peter!

2 Peter 1:12: Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. ¹³ Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; ¹⁴ Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me. ¹⁵ Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance. ¹⁶ For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. ¹⁸ And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. ¹⁹ We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: ²⁰ Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. ²¹ For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

- A. By resting on Scriptural authority in our preaching (1:12-15)
- Peter, as an Apostle, recognized the importance of making sure that His authoritative message remained with these believers, even though they knew the truths he was stressing and were established in them!
 - He left them an authoritative, written reminder that was intended to stir them up.
 - Furthermore, although he had an incredible spiritual experience (transfiguration, v. 16-18), he argued there was something more authoritative than his own apostolic experience. It was a more sure word of prophecy, the Scripture (v. 18).
 - The reason for this was its source, the Holy Spirit (v 20-21).
- B. By insisting on Scriptural accuracy in our preaching
- It is not enough to rest on the authority of the Scripture. We must insist that it be preached and proclaimed accurately!
 - Peter noted that he was not preaching “cunningly devised fables” (things that were twisted or invented and presented as God’s words), but rather that he was teaching accurately what God had inspired authoritatively.
 - He did not even rest on his own experience or on the private interpretation of any of the prophets, but on the accurate interpretation of these texts given to the whole Body of Christ.
 - WE MUST INSIST ON THE SAME!
 - We must be bold to say all that the Scriptures say, and we must be careful to not go beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4.6).

- C. By displaying Spiritual authenticity in our preaching (v. 16)
 - Peter wrote what he wrote, but what he wrote came out of what he saw and heard!
 - He said, “We were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”
 - We need to be eyewitnesses of His majesty. That should fill our preaching!
 - If we preached and exalted Christ though the Word as much as we preach our traditions and preferences, perhaps more of our young people would embrace our position!
 - It is hard not to embrace Christ when He is lifted up and magnified!

- D. By striving for Scriptural accessibility in our preaching (v 19)
 - This word is a light in a dark place.
 - It will shine progressively in your heart until the day star rises.
 - As you get more and more understanding of this book, it will give you a clearer and clearer picture of Christ, until He rises in your heart!
 - But, how can this happen if we obscure Christ or replace Him?
 - How can this happen if we don't preach the text carefully and accurately?

Conclusion

At the end of the day all of us need to make sure we have not departed from our true loyalty –to the Word that reveals Christ and leads us to God!

That takes faith. It is admittedly hard to ‘just trust’ His Word! But that is what Peter did and Paul and the rest of the New Testament writers did, and that is what you and I must do!

If we look to the culture to shape the beliefs we got from the Bible, we will lose our way! If we look to our traditions and preferences to shape the beliefs we got from the Bible, we will lose our children!

So at the end of the day the way forward is the way back ... back to the ground on which those who founded our movement were willing to stake everything, in an unashamed, dependant loyalty to God's Word!