

STRONG

STAND FIRM. BE COURAGEOUS.
STRENGTHEN WHAT REMAINS.

KEVIN SWANSON

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“This book is a bracing tonic. It is a refreshing and much needed wake up call for a somnolent church. I pray the Lord will use it to fortify our resolve, bolster our steadfastness, and invigorate our commitment to strengthen the things that remain.”

George Grant, Pastor, Parish Presbyterian Church, Franklin, TN

“*Strong*,” is born out of the anguish of a man’s soul over the state of the church. Get ready for a journey through the heartbreaking trends of the culture and their encroachments on the church. Kevin Swanson takes you on a tour of the demonic strongholds all around us. He brings the receipts. He believes the only hope for the purity of the church is true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Read this book and pray that God would give you a sense of the moment. But more than that, you would find yourself shaken out of your nonchalance to become like our Lord Jesus Christ when he cleansed the temple, “Zeal for thy house has consumed me.” (John 2:17). “Lord, increase our faith,” (Luke 17:5) make us “Strong.”

Scott Brown, Pastor at Hope Baptist Church and President of
Church and Family Life

“Kevin Swanson has issued a scathing critique of weak, complacent and compromised churches in the West. In the spirit of the Old Testament prophets, Kevin calls us to repent and follow our mighty King. If you have grown weary of weak, pop-culture “churches,” you will appreciate *Strong*.”

Israel Wayne, Author, Speaker, Founder of Family Renewal

“May the Lord use this book for the advancement of His kingdom and the purification of His people.”

Dr. Joel R. Beeke, chancellor of Puritan Reformed Theological
Seminary and pastor of Heritage Reformed Congregation,
Grand Rapids, MI

“Kevin Swanson is uniquely positioned to write this book on the state of the church in our day. Like a wise physician, Swanson correctly diagnoses the various problems and weaknesses of the church and then provides us hope by prescribing the Biblical solution. We need a strong church more than ever. We need strong Christian families, strong Christian education, strong believers, and strong pastors, for we have a strong foundation in God’s Word with a strong gospel to face every attack that we face in this world. There is no need for weakness when we have a strong Savior and a strong God on our side. This is a timely book that I am happy to wholeheartedly endorse, for it is rooted in the Christian worldview and founded upon the sufficiency of Scripture.”

Jeffrey D. Johnson, Pastor of Grace Bible Church and President
of Grace Bible Theological Seminary, Conway, AR

“The degradation of Western civilization can be traced to the societal collapse of Christianity. As biblical morality and theology become increasingly distant from modern man, the culture at large has embraced a weak religion of post-modern humanism. Whether it’s cheap grace, seeker-sensitivity, easy-believism, wokeism, or deconstructionism, each movement has at its core a rejection of strong, biblical orthodoxy and faith in the Triune God, in favor of man-centeredness. The result? Weakness in the home, church, and society. What Kevin Swanson has so helpfully done in this work is not only put his finger on the pulse of what’s wrong in modern day evangelicalism, but has also provided clarity and exhortation for Christians today who are seeking to “strengthen what remains.” Study this work and be strengthened to serve our Triune God!”

Jacob Tanner, Pastor of Christ Keystone Church, author,
and podcaster

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CONTENTS

Preface	7
Introduction.....	11
Chapter 1	
Strong Foundations	29
Chapter 2	
Strong Savior	37
Chapter 3	
Strong Gospel.....	49
Chapter 4	
Strong Men of God.....	59
Chapter 5	
Strong Faith.....	73
Chapter 6	
Strong Ministry	83
Chapter 7	
Strong Teaching.....	95

Chapter 8	
Stronger Salt.....	111
Chapter 9	
Strong Lordship	123
Chapter 10	
Strong Against Strongholds	137
Chapter 11	
Strong Grace	149
Chapter 12	
Strong Love of God	157
Chapter 13	
Be Strong and Very Courageous	167
Notes	176

PREFACE

And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him.” Then Jesus answered and said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me.” And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” (Matthew 17:14-21)

J*esus loves faith*—strong faith, mountain-moving faith, or at least faith the size of a mustard seed—apparently not quite achieved by the disciples at this point. He commended the Roman centurion for his “great faith,” such as He had not seen in all of Israel (Matt. 8:6-10).

He was likewise impressed with the faith of the Canaanite woman who persisted in her appeals for her daughter's deliverance from the demon (Matt. 15:22-28). On the other hand, He was not happy with Peter's "little faith" when he was intimidated by the rising winds and waves (Matt. 8:24-26). You can almost hear the disappointment in the Master's voice: "Why did you doubt?" A little faith is better than no faith; but clearly, our Lord does not want to settle for doubt and faithlessness among His people. He reprobates the "faithless and perverse" generation of the Jews. A faithless generation is submerged under the drag of demonic strongholds, and ministry is prevented by lack of faith and by little faith. The disciples were incapable of casting the big demon out of the little boy because of their faithlessness and lack of prayer-life.

The enemy is pressing more into our institutions, churches, and nations today. This is not a time for weak faith, especially among our pastors and leaders. We cannot commend weak faith or make excuses for doubts. Jesus insists upon stronger faith from every one of His disciples. We have every reason to seek after, encourage, teach, and exemplify stronger faith.

The Christian Church in this country is at a low spiritual ebb. Pastors are quitting at higher rates than ever—53% say they have considered leaving the ministry, up from 37% a few years ago. Since 2020, average church attendance on a Sunday has dwindled from 137 to 60 people (a 56% drop-off in 23 years).¹ Following on the heels of a century-long decline for the Christian church in the British Isles and the rest of Europe, the American church is experiencing a similarly devastating downgrade. If there was ever a time to commence a salvage operation for what remains of the Western faith, that would be now.

My intention in writing this book was not to go after a particular ministry or denomination, or even some certain doctrinal strain in the churches. Admittedly, this is a broad discussion. These are questions I have grappled with over a period of thirty years in Christian ministry. Since 1991, I have enjoyed the benefit of working in perhaps a wider

ecumenical context than others, having actively served in the field of Christian education and Christian home education in this country and at least twenty other nations. I have traveled well outside of my ecclesiastical neighborhood, so to speak, and encountered quite a range of spiritual conditions within the Christian community. I have learned a great deal, especially from indigenous church leaders laboring in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. Viewing the Western Church from the outside, taken from the vantage point of other nationalities, can be helpful. This short book is intended to summarize the more urgent concerns, in my own mind, from my own experiences and interactions with those who claim the Christian faith.

Let it be said from the outset that no single denomination contains “all the healthy churches.” There is a wide range of spiritual health, even within a single denomination. Some churches within a certain denomination may be quite healthy and fruitful, while others will be dead on the vine.

To be clear, I do not presume to quantify the problem within Evangelicalism or Protestantism. I do not know the precise extent to which the Church has compromised. It is enough to say that the Western churches are in decline. No denomination is safe from the attacks of the evil one and the worldly zeitgeist that intends to break down the Church. I believe that Evangelicalism is in crisis. Sincere leaders within the Church are desperately seeking to identify “the problem with us.” Here is one more attempt to that end.

Kevin Swanson
February 2025

INTRODUCTION

“And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”
(Revelation 3:14-22)

The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Source of the creation of God has something to say to the Laodicean Church: He is about to vomit them out. The Lord Christ is sickened by lukewarmness in the Church. Of all the faults that characterized the seven churches in Asia Minor, lukewarmness is the one thing He cannot tolerate. This pronouncement marked the official end of the Church at Laodicea. This lampstand was removed soon after John penned these words. The problem was a spiritual poverty—a workless and a cheap faith that was far less precious than “gold that perishes” (1 Pet. 1:7).

It should go without saying that Jesus Christ is concerned for His Church, for which He shed His blood, and to which He is committed for eternity. The Church is far more important than politics, wars, business, sports, entertainment, or anything else playing out in the world around us. Therefore, every Christian should be vitally concerned with this one thing: what is the Spirit saying to the Church now?

Wherever there is doctrinal compromise, a lack of fervency in prayer and evangelism, a lack of generational faith, chronic apostasy among the youth and others, continuous scandals and schisms, dominant worldliness, constant demonic interference, and a failure of manhood and fatherhood, every true Christian must be extremely concerned.

This is not the first time the Church has encountered—call it what you may—“lukewarmness,” “gelatinization,” or a “nothing-burger faith”. The problem has gone under different names since the birth of Evangelicalism, whether it be Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s argument with “cheap grace” in the 1930s, dispensationalism’s hyper-grace or “free grace” movement of the 1970s and John MacArthur’s “Lordship salvation” response, Evangelicalism’s “easy-believism” and “carnal Christian” cop-out popular in the 1980s, Walter Chantry’s “synthetic Gospel” treatment, or the “evangelellyfish” caricature drawn up in Douglas Wilson’s 2012 fictional work. Evangelicals have been

plagued with this cheap grace for a long time, which may very well be defined as the grace we bestow on ourselves. Bonhoeffer had diagnosed the problem this way: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”²

This could be better termed “the evangello” (/ˈvān-jəllō/)—faith converted into a gelatinous form or into a jelly. Scientists explain how protein fibrils break down to form gelatin, which—when it is mixed in hot water—turns into a soft elastic gel. Similarly, gelatinized faith subjected to hot trials will morph into a similar form.

The condition of Evangelical faith is as bad as or even worse now than it was in the previous century or two. Arguably, this is the softest age in the history of mankind. Developed countries are living at fifty times the average standard of living at which the peoples of the world existed for thousands of years—until the 20th Century. This is part of the cause of the present malaise. The Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans had their soft eras, which quickly gave way to homosexuality and then to social collapse. Today, everything comes too easy and everything is too cheap. Nothing is esteemed to be of much value. Nothing is holy. Nothing is held in much awe, unless it is some cheap bauble without lasting value. Ours is a soft world. Fearfulness is palpable everywhere. “Safe” is the preferred word of the day. Churches sell themselves for “safe places.” Mental fragility and insanity are mainstream, but the prison cells come with padded walls and rounded corners so nobody gets hurt.

Yet the problem is more than softness, weakness, cheapness, fearfulness, and mental instability. The better words are doubt, shallowness, and faithlessness. Biblical words are always the better terms for diagnosing the disease. The heat of the sun, or tribulation and persecution, withered the plant in the stony soil because it lacked depth of earth (Mark 4:5). Reuben was as unstable as water (Gen. 49:4). The Old Testament Israelites hardened their hearts (Heb. 3:8).

The Jews honored God with their lips, but their heart was far from Him (Matt. 15:8). Our Lord warned them that they would lose their saltiness (Matt. 5:13). The Church at Ephesus had left their first love (Rev. 2:4). Others tolerated Jezebel and refused to implement church discipline (Rev. 2:20). Sardis had defiled their garments (Rev. 3:4). Laodicea was lukewarm, proud, and rich (Rev. 3:16-17). Pergamos was worldly, eating things offered to idols, and committing sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14). Paul warned of some who would have itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3). This perilous age would yield plenty of a *form* of godliness, but it would deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5) and lead astray gullible women loaded down with sins (2 Tim. 3:6). The apostate world would become entangled in pollution, while speaking swelling words of emptiness and alluring through the lusts of the flesh (2 Pet. 2:18, 20). The Corinthian Church was carnal (fleshly), giving way to strife and envy (1 Cor. 3:3). James warned the Church at Jerusalem of those who were unstable in all their ways (Jas. 1:8). They doubted and were faithless (Jas. 1:6).

What can be said for the Christian Church today? The adjectives “tough,” “resilient,” “strong,” “steadfast,” “immovable,” “salty,” and “on-fire hot” would sound almost ridiculous if applied to the American Church. This can hardly be thought of as the rugged age of John Knox, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, John Wycliffe, Samuel Rutherford, George Whitefield, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, C.T. Studd, or John G. Paton. To the average pew-warmer, there appears to be “no foes for me to fight,” no citadels to bring down, and no more blood left in the cadaver to shed.

These are extremely sobering times. Any person concerned with the Christian faith should consider the heart-stopping realities of Western apostasy. Church attendance has dropped into single digits, under 5% throughout Europe—at least half of which is dead and dying. The mere thought of 98% of a population rejecting the Christian faith, in a place where it was most accessible, and going to hell should cause one to tremble just a little. The decline continues everywhere. For example, a thoughtful statistician has calculated the

rate at which entire Christian denominations would disappear in the United Kingdom, given the present rate of attrition. The United Reformed Church in the UK would be non-existent in 2038. The Welsh Presbyterians were also expected to be non-existent in 2033. The Church of Scotland would be completely gone by 2042. The Methodist Church would be non-existent in 2045, and the Church of England by 2060.³ These are grim realities, to say the least.

If there is anybody who is not dead, but only a little comatosed, the last of the “prophets” have attempted a wake-up call. Is there any hope for a remnant to wake up to the high-stake spiritual realities about us? Hymns like “A Mighty Fortress is our God” come across as so irrelevant to modern existence. Yet the Scriptures depict the reality of this world as extremely perilous, men and women as being under the power of an extremely malignant force, sin as a devastating and soul-corrupting disease, and the consequences of it as being an eternal horror beyond the wildest imagination. Such descriptions command the utmost sobriety—a state of being which is quite unfamiliar to the modern mind. A complete deliverance from this unspeakable horror by the almighty power of our Savior God calls for an appropriate measure of faith.

Now this description of the true spiritual reality comes across as a mere allegory or fairy tale to the religious mind. The academic mind defines “redemption” and “soteriology” in theological terms, but doesn’t quite feel the claws of the devil scraping down his back as the Savior tears him out of the dragon’s lair. He can hardly shout “hallelujahs” to Luther’s hymn because the “demon-filled” world isn’t quite the reality of an academically-trained theologian. This heady faithlessness fails to come to grips with the true metaphysical realities.

Actually, “we must through many tribulations enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The believer is given new life to suffer, to deny self, to take up a cross, to engage the fight, to watch and pray, and to take the kingdom by force. If he is alive, he must wake up and fight! The disciples were sleeping in the garden—certainly not watching or praying—on that night when the Lord faced the most intense

spiritual war against the powers of darkness that has ever been encountered in the history of the universe. Jesus told His followers to “count the cost” before committing to follow Him. Following Jesus involves hating one’s own life, rejecting the world’s trifles, and signing up for a life of hardship, sacrifice, and pain.

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody
seas?⁴

Preaching and hymnody like this is reprehensible to the modern “itching” ear. Warnings, encouragements to courage and faith, urgings to perseverance, wake-up calls, and reality checks like these are passed off as “legalism,” “burdensome,” and “works-righteousness” to the dead and dying Church which does not have the ears to hear.

The problem reached crisis proportions by the 2020s. After eighty years of Evangelicalism wavering over the halfway-house of orthodoxy, the dead and dying Sardis Church was pretty much dead. The foundations were cracked, and the building was jacked. The church growth and megachurch movements of the 1990s were bogged down in moral scandals. The young millennials were momentarily enamored by the big box entertainment centers of evangelical church life, but that faded quickly. The liberal apostate church of the 1920s had given birth to neo-orthodoxy-apostates of the 1930s. The “Jesus Movement” of the 1970s had provided a temporary salvaging of faith, but this also disintegrated by the 2020s. The Evangelical Church was incapable of standing against the world. The chief elements of this movement collapsed under the zeitgeist-force of feminism, birth implosions, racist wokism, sexual perversion, and COVID-19 statism. 70% of white Evangelicals gave up on church attendance during the COVID months;⁵ 82-87% of self-identified Evangelicals said they agreed with women teaching Sunday school or leading worship at church services; and 73% of self-identified Evangelicals supported women preaching on Sunday mornings.⁶ The “end of men” and “demise of guys” had fairly-well infiltrated the Evangelical Church by the mid-2020s. Meanwhile, 75% of practicing Christian men were

accessing pornography, and 62% of them were comfortable with it.⁷ When it came to the use of abortifacients and high-efficiency birth control, Evangelical women were more likely than Catholics and liberal Protestants to make use of these things.⁸

When it came to the salvage-operation for the faith in the fall of Western civilization and the Great Apostasy of the 2000s, Evangelicalism proved itself to be of no help in salvaging the faith. Here was a deflated life-vest in the perilous waters of the post-Christian West.

Bad doctrine drives the tare-to-wheat ratio higher in the Church. Whereas the Church always lives with this mix to some degree, the Vinedresser doesn't let it go on forever. Eventually, the Lord of the Church must pull a lamp from the stand (Rev. 2:5), and the Father must prune back and cut to the bare nub (John 15:2).

Has the time come for another ecumenical statement distinguishing between the dead faith of modern Evangelicalism and a true, living faith? What is the major dividing point? What is the dry rot that has introduced such corruption to the body of Christ? What is the gelatin in the mix? This book is yet another attempt to isolate the Achilles' heel and the worm in the gourd.

Given the almost-complete collapse of the Christian faith in Europe, and the imminent collapse of the faith in America, the remnant is collecting itself in the back of the cave of Adullam to identify the cause or catalyst of the failure of the faith (see 1 Sam. 22:1-2). Based on a survey of 10,000 millennials raised in Christian homes in the 1990s and 2000s, conducted by the Generations ministry, not many churches could claim an increase in membership. Only some non-denominational churches and Reformed churches registered any increase among the younger generation.

The non-denominational churches took in 6.5 million attendees between 2010 and 2020, but they were generally Baptist and charismatic churches without the name. These were mostly "Evangelical" in name, although the percentage of US Evangelicals had slipped from 23% to 14% between 2006 and 2020.⁹ They

retained the distinctive doctrines of their former denominations while eschewing confessional statements, thus surrendering any commitment to fundamental and substantial truths. Most of these new churches steadfastly resisted all compromise on “how much water they used in a baptism,” all the while refusing to oppose the godless public schools and bad worldviews taught in the universities.

The term “worldview” has turned into a catchword for foundational truths—those basic presuppositions which form a person’s most fundamental perspective of truth, ethics, and reality. While these new Evangelical churches spoke of somebody named “Jesus,” they failed to build any firm foundation of truth for the millennial generation. By 2023, only 1% of American millennials under 30 years of age retained a biblical worldview.¹⁰ The metric had further contracted from a miserable 2% in 2019. Only 4% of Americans, in general, held to a biblical worldview. With church attendance still at 30% in 2023 (down from 46% in 2000), one wonders what the Church was doing. Twenty-five years earlier, at least 12% of Americans still maintained a biblical worldview, as formulated in extremely basic terms by the Barna Research Group.¹¹ The fault must lie with the pastors and the seminaries failing to equip the people of God with foundational truths upon which to build their faith. No wonder that half of Evangelical pastors themselves do not possess a biblical worldview.¹² Also, of churches touting more than 600 members, only 15% of their shepherds possess a biblical worldview. If the church has fewer than 250 members, the shepherd has a much better chance (42%) of possessing a biblical worldview.¹³ The Evangelical Church itself was powerless to address critical race theory, with pastors split right down the middle on the “woke gospel.”

There are two issues with which we all must assess the faith: first, the doctrinal construct of the faith, and then the liturgy (or day-to-day expression) of that faith. Every teacher in the Church must retain a robust doctrinal construct, and also properly and consistently express that construct in the day-to-day liturgy of the Church. In too many cases, teachers in the Church fail to coordinate these two

elements. In other words, one's *stated* system of belief may not actually express itself well in the teaching and the day-to-day discipleship and conversations in the Church. Thus, one's *actual* system of belief turns out to be that which is expressed in the liturgy of life. We may mindlessly recite a creed concerning the death and resurrection of Christ, but never really live in the light of it. We may give some tacit assent to the distinct-but-not-separate relationship of justification and sanctification, but then go on to only speak of justification as the essence of the Christian faith (completely ignoring sanctification). In this way, the *daily expression* of the faith fails to comply with the *stated system* of faith.

To drill down into the crux of the problem, one might ask, "Why would Jesus walk out of these churches? Would any person of robust faith tolerate this nonsense? Would the church service continue after the gendarmes locked up the building during COVID?" When the Chinese communist officials shut down the Christian Church in Chengdu for their Christmas Eve service, the congregants, not to be deterred moved the service into the town square that very night. Would an extremely mild pandemic (in comparison with pandemics experienced in the 19th Century) result in shutting down the churches for eighteen months in a row? And why? Will there be anything left after the fire burns?

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

The ministry of wood, hay, and stubble is combustible and does not survive the 3,000°F flames. Whatever has been happening within the four walls of the Church is unfit for the fire. Like steel, faith is

strengthened and work-hardened by heat. But within these ministries, there has been no robustness of faith, love, and hope. Or the object of that faith, love, and hope has shifted from God to self (or to man and his institutions). There is a lack of a “stick-to-it” attitude within the Church itself. Here is also an unwillingness to face off the antithesis, to cast down imaginations, to resist the devil, to put on the whole armor of God, to pray without ceasing, to move mountains, and to suffer persecution. To put it in the words of a Christian evangelist from China, the Evangelical Church had plenty of silver and gold, but was incapable of telling the crippled men and women, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!”

The conversations in the foyer of the Church were laced with fear of the future, fear of disease, fear of death, fear of global warming, and dreadful fear of conspiracies (the nature of the conspiracies depending upon whether the faithless ones were liberal or conservative). In the words of that poet-prophet of the 19th Century, “The women had no more children, and the men lost reason and faith.”¹⁴ Fearful women were subject to every allergy, every demonic suggestion, every far-fetched superstition, every phobia, and every anxiety-laced neurosis. They were not saved by childbearing because they would not continue in faith (1 Tim. 2:15). They did not “rejoice in time to come” (Prov. 31:25 ESV). They could not trust God and call their husbands lord because they were gripped with terror (1 Pet. 3:6).

A thousand sermons on faith could not instill faith in the faithless, for two reasons. First, hearts were too hardened against believing in God in an apostate age. Second, the Object of faith was too depreciated in the minds of the modern churchgoer. Jesus was preached, but which Jesus? Was it the Mexican drug lord “Jesús” whose objective is to make his constituents feel good after a sniff of his cocaine? Or was it the biblical Jesus? Was it a contorted caricature of a “meek and mild” Jesus, imagined in such a way as to be thoroughly incapable of crushing the head of the dragon? Was it the Jesus who would readily tell the woman taken in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you,” but was reticent to follow up with the words, “Go and sin no more”?

There were plenty of evangelists among the nominal, shallow-rooted Evangelicals. They wrote books. They were found heading the list of the Evangelical bestsellers. In the early 2020s, more than 90% of the top 50 bestselling Christian books were written by women. They were mainly divorced women and sometimes lesbians.¹⁵ They wrote faithless little books called *I Want to Trust You but I Don't*, and they offered guides to interpreting dreams. The stories were more about *me* than about *God*. The focus reverted back to *me and my faith struggles* instead of the Object of faith—more staring at one's own knuckles than a focus upon the Rock. The stories were more consumed with the works of man than the works of God. “Self-help” was the category of books attracting the Christian market, with *self* at the center for hearts that relied upon *self* to help *self*.

Each successive generation of the shallow and the unstable were more attracted, distracted, or temporarily moved by the amped-up music, smells and bells, star-preachers, big media, comedy routines, the clever turn of the phrase, circus side-shows featuring men smoking cigars and drinking whiskey, the use of expletives from the pulpit, and popular culture than by the Word of God—which is more powerful than any two-edged sword, cutting to the bone and marrow (Heb. 4:12-13). The temporary convert was more committed to the faith by his “Jesus” tattoo than by his baptism into Christ—what we might call “God’s tattoo.” God’s ordinances were depreciated and replaced with powerless, ineffectual substitutes.

Those who were raised on highly-honed television and film productions had a hard time distinguishing between the Holy Spirit and the powerful spiritual and emotional influence of media. Were they more filled with movies wherein is excess, or were they filled with the Holy Spirit? The filling of the Holy Spirit has less to do with listening to unrestrained frenzied expressions of music, and more to do with singing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, making melody in our hearts to the Lord (Eph. 5:19).

Many were more powerfully affected by “Christian-produced” movies than by the Holy Spirit’s power in working in their own lives.

They would leave the theater in tears, but they were not so much convicted under the preaching of Pastor Billy Bob at a boring little local assembly of believers that they would attend on Sundays. They were more in awe of themselves than of God, and more taken by the mode than by the message. Divine power that comes by the true Gospel needs no human contrivances, no worship band, no technological accoutrements, and no apologies.

Some Christian groups were still living in the past, unwilling to face the present-day antithesis. They could build monuments to the prophets of the Reformation, but somehow they failed to pick up on the spirit and faith of these stalwarts. They failed to define the present-day attacks of the enemy or to face him, and thus they were always dead meat in his assaults. They were “Reformed” in the past tense, and there was nothing left in their own lives to reform. There was hardly a spirit of *semper reformanda* (“always reforming”) among them.

DIVERSIONS AND SUPERFICIALITIES

Much of what was purported to be effective Christian ministry didn’t really produce anything. The activities were equated with spiritual progress, but the metric was misbegotten. The Bible presents simple discipleship, preaching, prayer, and sacraments as sufficient. The spectacle of music concerts, comedy routines, mega-conferences, the megachurch experience, youth programs, Sunday schools, therapeutic counseling, Christian fiction, and movie-making were mainly diversions and superficialities. The Christian contemporary music machine—spearheaded by Amy Grant, Sandy Patty, and Larry Norman, with their divorces and adulteries—could hardly keep the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. God was supposed to bring forth the increase.

The conservative Church was easily contented with mere externalism and superficialities. Conservatism was equated to orthodoxy, as if retaining the Latin liturgy for the Catholics or the King James Version rendering of “thees” and “thous” would constitute core faith, or salvage it. Fundamentalism was sometimes described

as the list of “15 things we are against”—these people were great at hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans, but not so good at loving Christ (Rev. 2:1-7). For some, the essence of orthodoxy involved separation from everybody else, but without the defining core doctrines and the proper biblical emphases well for their adherents. Others reduced the essence of the faith to modest dress, procreation, and the practice of homeschooling. Avoiding worldliness had more to do with externals like “not drinking, smoking, and chewing, or going with girls who do,” without any reference to 1 John 2:16. Still others reduced the essence of the faith to a narrow Sabbatarianism, while ignoring the weightier matters of the law. Ultimate piety for some was defined as the degree to which the preacher hammered on a particular aspect of eschatology, or how loudly the people responded with an “Amen” to it. Conservatives failed to identify the radical elements: the root issues. They were grasping at straws. An immoderate fixation on the superficial matters distracted them from the higher calling of discipleship, love, and good works. Somehow, the core was lost and disconnected from the distinctive elements of conservatism among the conservatives.

To distinguish themselves from charismatics, Baptists, Presbyterians, or Lutherans, the “conservatives” quickly identified relatively minor differences. But in the process, they would loosen their grip on the core or trunk doctrines. This inability to distinguish the gnats from the camels reduced the conservatives themselves to flakes.

During the early 2020s, Evangelicals rallied strongly around Donald Trump as their champion who would preserve the faith, save a civilization, and curtail persecution threatening men and women of faith. Alas! Trump was not enough. What these people failed to realize was that there wasn’t that much faith left to preserve. A reversal of *Roe v. Wade* only revealed the true heart of the nation in the referendums placed before the voters during the succeeding years. The heart of the nation was corrupted. Sadly, politics could not reverse the heart-condition of a nation sold out to abortion and sexual perversion.

The rot was deep in the grass-roots. Weekly church attendance in the US hovered around 30% in 2023 (down from 46% in 2000),¹⁶ but this offered no appreciable cultural influence. For any recipe, 1% of salt content is plenty to savor up the other 99% of the concoction. But what if the salt has lost its saltiness? In the words of Jesus, “It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Matt. 5:13).

The core problem afflicting the American Church, simply stated, was a powerless Gospel. It was an enormously magnified view of man, and a diminutive view of God, and thus a crippled view of His salvation. The gelatinized faith was a softening or weakening of faith, or a misplacement of faith upon an object of faith that is unworthy of faith. It was a faith without a worthy Object, and a faith without any solid foundation. It was the lapse of true faith. It was the dying of faith. It was the “draw back to perdition” (Heb. 10:39), and we read that God takes “no pleasure in him” (Heb. 10:38).

The evangelical-lite gospel was anything but God’s good news. This was no God-sized salvation, or God-forged power, or God-shaped grace. This gospel was about something else—nothing all that trustworthy or praiseworthy. The praise was hardly praise, and the worship was hardly worship in the service, because the object of the praise and worship had shriveled up. Redemption itself was nothing to celebrate because it was only a theoretical doctrine to the “frozen chosen”—and for the rest, there was nothing much from which to be redeemed. The worship service turned out to be a dud.

STRENGTHEN THE THINGS THAT REMAIN

All genuine Christian teachers, pastors, and evangelists will be steadfastly opposed to all counterfeit gospels and pseudo-Christ. They will settle for nothing less than the real thing. They will cry out with every ounce of strength for the real Christ, the authentic Gospel, and genuine faith.

The right Jesus must be the biblical Jesus. We cannot settle for a unidimensional Christ fashioned out of a few verses that are found

to be acceptable to the liberal church or the evangelical-lite church. We cannot allow for this Jesus to be molded into the preconceived die-cast that has been formed in the mind of the modern. He must be the Prophet, the Priest, and the King... the Lamb on the Throne... the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace... and everything else the Bible describes Him to be.

Jesus told the Church at Laodicea to buy gold—metal for which fire does nothing more nor less than purge dross. Only the grace of Christ provides this metal. Purchase a one-way ticket to Saudi Arabia, and open up a street evangelism ministry in downtown Riyadh. Invite people from your church to join you. Turn off the sound system and unplug the amps in the church for six weeks. Will there be anyone left in the auditorium to sing the praises of God? Take down the scaffolding. Eliminate the programs. Just preach the Word in season and out of season for six years. Stop paying the pastors for six months. Will they still have a burden to share the Gospel with the people? Close everything down for forty days, with the exception of the prayer meeting in the upper room. Watch the pastor get arrested for going one step too far on some politically incorrect topic, and see if anyone is left in the congregation.

Of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2 and 3, the other church on its way out was Sardis. It was dying, but it was arguably doing slightly better than Laodicea. To this church, the living Christ delivered this admonishment: “Strengthen the things which remain” (Rev. 3:2). And something still remains of the Western Church—the Church that was left by Luther in Germany 500 years ago, by Calvin of the Reformed Church, by Cranmer and Latimer of the Anglicans, and by Knox of the Presbyterians. Remnants of these once-vibrant Churches are cast up on the shores of the continents. The Reformed Church is Ephesus. The Evangelical Church is Sardis. And Laodicea is the entire Western Church. There is still much to “shore up,” to re-enforce, and to salvage from the wreckage. If ever there was a time to “strengthen the things which remain,” that time would be now. Here is an urgent call for things that are stronger—stronger formulations,

stronger liturgy, stronger faith, stronger life, stronger men, and stronger families. Every generation is tasked with keeping the faith and salvaging the Church, but especially now. This means a demand for 200-proof truth and a death-grip on the right Object of faith. The situation is desperate. To use a military term, the alert status is now set to Defcon 1. For the universal Church around the world, this is nothing less than an international emergency beyond all emergencies. It is the ultimate crisis calling for every emergency measure. The dead are already dead, but some of those who are dying might still hear the alarms. We have no time for the insipid, the sentimental, the lukewarm, the insincere, the hypocritical, the superficial, the concessionary, and that which compromises with the humanist antithesis, or apologizes for calls to repentance (taken from Revelation 2 and 3, or elsewhere). This cannot be fixed by brute human strength—but only by resilient faith in God, a tenacious devotion to God and His Word, and a return to the right Object of true faith. In this age of weakness, spiritual anemia, worldly synthesis, chronic disunity, and broken-downness, we will only gain that necessary strength by looking in faith to the Source of infinite strength.

He gives power to the weak,
 And to those who have no might He increases strength.
 Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
 And the young men shall utterly fall,
 But those who wait on the Lord
 Shall renew their strength;
 They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
 They shall run and not be weary,
 They shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:29-31)

Strengthening calls for the highest levels of discipline, faith-focus, and follow-through on that which is most critical. There can be no time wasted on diversions or entanglement “with the affairs of this life” in this warfare (2 Tim. 2:4). Fear of the enemy is the enemy. Expunge any and all of that fear. Preach the Gospel with the utmost clarity everywhere. Give them the hard message. Call to repentance

and let the chips fall. Just say it like Jesus said it, like Paul said it at Mars' Hill, and like Peter said it on Pentecost. Exercise triage on the field. Administer medicine to those who have the best chance of survival. Get on with intensive discipleship for those who are humble, teachable, spiritually alive, and growing. Thin the ranks in the Church, if necessary, by appropriate church discipline. First, recognize the gelatin in the mix and toss it all out—the music, the books, the ministries, the movies, and the podcasts. Then find rebar and shove it into the foundations of thought, liturgy, and life. Read the old books and walk in the old paths.

Now, buy gold—faith tried and tested true in the fire.

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.”” (Revelation 3:1-3)



CHAPTER 1

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
But fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

Whenever assessing the condition of any structure, the first thing to examine is its foundation. The strength of the building is first determined by the strength of its foundation. Fissures, dry rot, or gelatinized concrete in the foundation will be a major concern.

The superstructure of any building sits on foundations, and such is the case with a system of knowledge. Though this proposition is entirely foreign to secular schools, and sometimes marginalized in seminaries and churches, a biblical theory of knowledge starts here: *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*. All true knowledge concerning science, history, theology, the nature of man, and salvation itself must rest on this foundation. For over a thousand years, Western civilization was formed out of this worldview. Now, for at least 200 years, exceedingly powerful forces have taken jackhammers and wrecking balls to the foundation, and the building is teetering. Removing the fear of God and all Christian foundations in education and mass culture has brought about extremely detrimental effects upon the civilization itself. All good building contractors pay special

attention to the installation of the foundations before moving on to the superstructure.

Removing the fear of God diminishes the object of faith, and weakens the love of God in redemption. The fear of God is rightly considered the mathematical exponent for faith, love, and joy. The higher degree to which a man or woman considers the awesomeness of God, the deeper their faith, love, and joy. The more that God is revered, the more He is trusted and loved.

Yet, the fear of God comes across as awkward and inappropriate to the modern ear. Where do we hear of a God-fearing man or woman these days? The wording no longer shows up in the vernacular. It is hardly mentioned in the Church. When it is mentioned, the term is quickly reprobated as if it were contradictory instead of complementary to faith. If what the Bible and some of us refer to as foundational and fundamental—as the cornerstone to all knowledge and to every element of what we know and believe—is forthrightly cast away, we must be talking about two different systems of belief. A religion without the fear of God is as unlike the biblical faith as Hinduism or atheism.

Sobriety is a derivative of the fear of God. All mature men and women will achieve an appropriate level of sobriety, but Christian men and women will culture this sobriety in the fear of God. This character is of primary import for the young, who are most enamored by comedy. “Exhort the young men to be sober-minded” (Tit. 2:6). While Jesus may have used attack-humor or a hyperbole once or twice during His ministry, the immoderate use of clever humor characterizes too much of a hopelessly immature age. A fixation on fantasy (the crack cocaine of literature) and fiction reveals a continual impulse to escapism. Christians participate freely in an entertaining culture, taking one of a thousand exit ramps off the highway of reality.

To think soberly is to think rightly, in a proper perspective concerning reality (Rom. 12:3; 2 Cor. 5:13). The person who has lost touch with reality fails to see himself for what he really is, or to see the world as it really is. That which is not sober is easily influenced

by demons. The man doing the comedy routine in the foxhole while he is on the battlefield has lost his grip on reality. Thus, the sober man will have a right view of his surroundings—a right and reverent view of God, of God’s judgment, of self, of sin, and of salvation. He distinguishes what is fundamental and foundational, what is significant and insignificant, the majors and the minors.

The word “fear” is almost immediately taken as “dreadful” fear in the mind of the modern, but Scripture doesn’t distinguish forms of fear by the use of different words. Fear is fear. Occasionally, unbelievers will fear God, but they will not love Him. Believers will both fear and love. That’s the difference.

Foundations are made of heavy concrete. They are built to bear the weight of thousands of tons of building material. Similarly, the foundation of knowledge and faith must be heavy. The fear of God is weighty. To fear God is to feel the weightiness and gravitas of His person and work. Fear involves a measure of trembling (Ps. 2:11, Phil. 2:12, Is. 66:2). Fear causes the voice to tremble a bit. Fear is to be overwhelmed by a sense of grandeur, holiness, power, and awesomeness. Fear contrasts the bigness of God with the smallness of self.

The fear of God was fundamental in Jesus’ teaching, when He said “rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matt. 10:28). He assumed the eternality of the soul and consequences for sin—again, something quite rejected by the natural mind and the modern spirit of the age. The very notion of the wrath of God, the “treading out the winepress” of wrath, unquenchable fire, and the “smoke of their torment rising up” in the presence of the Lamb are not subjects for the homily. Trembling in the worship service is not the experience looked for by the average congregant, for concern that shaking hands might result in spillage of the cappuccino.

Judgement is a major theme in Scripture because God’s righteousness demands just consequences for sin. When Christians are asked whether they fear God, the common response is usually something to this effect: “Oh no! I don’t fear God, but I do love Him.” There is

nothing to fear, only to love here. Here is the Jello of modern religion. Without this fear of God, there can be no proper understanding or acceptance of Jesus' death on the cross. The crucifixion of Christ is public knowledge, the world over. But not many have stopped to ask the obvious question, "Why is this Man suffering on the cross like this?" The Gospel has already explained that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). The sincere inquirer would ask further, "Why would the Father give up His Son to such a horrible death?" Who or what would demand such a punishment as this? Actually, the explanation is easily understood. Certain crimes committed by men do require serious punishment. All peoples and cultures are familiar with such things as justice, judges, and judgment. So it should come as no surprise to learn that God is just and requires the death penalty for the violation of His commands. But this Man on the cross is innocent, for He has committed no crime against God or man. Why, therefore, must He suffer in this way? He has taken this punishment upon Himself, in the place of others who are guilty of crimes against God. There can be no other acceptable explanation than this. These violations of God's laws must have been very serious indeed to require such severe punishment as the suffering of God's own Son on that cross.

The pristine holiness of God and His ultimate commitment to righteousness call for this severe judgment and pouring out of wrath over the sin of man, witnessed here at the crucifixion of His own Son. We cannot help responding in quiet reverence and godly fear. Here, more than anywhere else, we come face-to-face with the terrible severity of our own sin. The children of Israel may have feared God as He thundered on Sinai. Surely, they had come face-to-face with the commandments of God and their own sinful condition. But even more so, we tremble at Calvary. What tremendous guiltiness, what terrible offensiveness, what deep-stained unholiness would require the most pure, most holy, most undefiled, and most beloved Son of God to suffer and die in our place? Here we tremble. Now, we fear God here at the foot of the cross, in the view of the Son of God

suffering for us. The atoning work of Jesus is meaningless to those who have yet to realize the severity of their sins, and who have never come to the beginning of knowledge concerning salvation.

The questioner pursues the matter still further. Why does this Man suffer on the cross for guilty sinners? Why would the Father give up His Son to meet the requirements of justice for sin? The answer is that “God so loved the world.” He did it for love. The cross is where mercy conquers judgment, and love meets the wrath of God. Our response, therefore, is both to fear and to love, because He first loved us.

Yet how many professing Christians prefer to see God as a Friend who loves and a Friend to love, as set against a Father to honor and an Authority to reverence? Surely there is no contradiction between fear and love. These two dispositions converge and dominate the soul, given a right estimation of the nature of God and the weightiness of the cross. The greater the awe-filled-ness that is experienced at the cross, and the greater the realization of the magnitude of sin and the holiness of God in the view of His suffering Son, the more we will respond with love for God and for His Christ. Here we tremble before the ultimate sacrifice. Why would any person receive or appreciate that divine sacrifice if there was no perceived need for it? Nobody would respond in love for God, or appreciate His love demonstrated at the cross, without first realizing something of the egregiousness of his sins committed against God. Both fear and love are absolutely appropriate dispositions toward God as Creator, Judge, and Father. Fear and love also meet together at the cross of Jesus Christ.

The modern mind has a difficult time maintaining multiple perspectives of God as Friend and Father, Kin and King, to be both loved and feared simultaneously. This fixation on the unidimensional has been catastrophic to the true faith. It is the inability to maintain the unity and the particularity at once in the mind. It is the failure to think in the Trinitarian mindset.

GELATINIZED FOUNDATIONS

What, then, constitutes the gelatinized foundations of the modern Church? With the absence of the fear of God enters the fear of everything else. The fear of man and the fear of rejection by man are snares (Prov. 29:25). Certainly, the dominant worldview has thoroughly inculcated the awesomeness of self at every turn. As far as modern Christians have been thoroughly educated in public schools and universities, these faulty foundations are firmly placed in their systems of thought. They have yet to repent and to renew their minds according to the truth of God.

But how can any man find any weightiness, significance, or value in himself without first acknowledging the ultimate Value, and that which places value on any and all things? “What is man?” the psalmist asks (Ps. 8:4). The answer comes back that “You have made him a little lower than the angels.” God put him there. God ordered a significance for him. To value man without first valuing God as the ultimate Value is to render no value at all to man. That being the case, humanist foundations for human thought and life are quickly eroded.

Modern man is caught between two contradicting views of himself—the ultimately optimistic and the ultimately pessimistic. The biology class informs him that he is a piece of cosmic dust floating about in a universe of pure chance. Just down the hallway, he visits the psychology class where he discovers that he is a god who must determine for himself what is true and right. He may also define or redefine himself, his gender, and his everything else. He is caught between these two perspectives—cosmic dust and godhood. The pessimistic almost always wins out, resulting in depression and despair.

BUILDING BACK FOUNDATIONS

Having been involved in new construction projects in the past, I have been impressed by how long it takes to complete a foundation. Quite a bit of time and effort is put into the digging out, the forms,

the footers, and the concrete work. The same can be said for laying the foundations of a Christian faith. Pastors and teachers involved with discipleship in the churches should concern themselves with laying these foundations, and with inculcating the ultimacy and awesomeness of God in their disciples. The concrete is laid over months and years of teaching. The fear of God is an every-day and every-week lesson for the parent and pastor. There is much to overcome in the corrupted remnants of the natural mind and the humanism of the day.

Does a fish know that he is wet? We swim in a man-centered world. The brainwashing and indoctrination are thoroughgoing. For generations, Christian denominations have argued over how much water to use in a baptism, while sending their children off to schools which indoctrinate them in a naturalistic-materialistic worldview—schools that refuse to teach the fear of God as the beginning of knowledge. This was a lapse of enormous proportions—a clear case of straining at gnats and swallowing camels. If there was some fear of God or love for God evidenced in the church service on Sunday, that all went out the window for the rest of the week. The secular-sacred divide was another indication of a heart that was not right with God—a symptom of a deep-rooted hypocrisy in the Christian Church.

If the faith is to be salvaged at all, Christians must avoid the godless education in public schools and universities, in favor of an education based on the fear of God in the science, history, and liberal arts classes. There isn't much hope for the true faith surviving in churches that support public education, sans the fear of God, in a thoroughly secularized age.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:28-29) ■