

5 Evangelical Heresies

Christianity Today recently published the latest results of this year's "State of Theology" report, conducted by Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research. These surveys are done every two years and are designed to track changes in beliefs among those who self-identify as Christians and as Evangelicals.¹

Several on staff at BFC took note of the trends I'm going to share with you tonight, and Pastor Todd plans to do a series of messages in the coming year covering these same 5 topics. We feel that this is needed because, as you'll see tonight, there are at least 5 heretical beliefs gaining ground in American Evangelicalism. Perhaps no one here tonight will have fallen into these traps, but "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," as our forefathers assured us. So, in that spirit, with your permission, I'd like to administer a spiritual vaccine tonight by waking you to the growing danger facing evangelicalism in our day.

Before we get to Evangelicalism let me point out the most basic danger of all: Among those who self-identify as Christians – not Evangelicals only, but all stripes of Christians – 53% now agree that the Bible "is not literally true," up from 41% when the survey was first taken in 2014. Understanding that the Bible is God's Word is essential to any healthy Christian faith. Francis Shaeffer called it "the watershed" doctrine, dividing those who are true Christians accepting Biblical authority, from those who are mere "religious Christians" who reject God's authoritative Word. Refusing to accept the Bible as God's Word leaves faith without a foundation, subject to personal opinions rather than authoritative truth. Christianity in America is in fundamental decline when a growing majority question the Bible's veracity. By the way, among self-identifying Evangelicals, 26% agree that the Bible is not literally true, up from 15% since 2020.

Among Evangelicals, the "Top 5 Heresies" give reason for just as much concern.

Heresy 1: "Jesus isn't the only way to God." In the survey, 56% of self-identifying Evangelicals affirmed that "God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam." That is up from 42% in 2020. The Bible in no way affirms this, Jesus Himself saying, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6).

Why It Matters: The result of the survey reveals a growing universalism among those who call themselves "Evangelical." Universalism affirms that all roads lead to God and that God accepts the sincere faith of everyone in anything. Under the tenants of universalism, even the most hardened atheist is going to heaven, therefore. Universalism is already accepted by the majority of people in our nation it seems if we are to take seriously the things that are said at the funerals of unbelievers. To believe that Jesus isn't the only way to God also cuts the ground from under any need to evangelize. If all roads lead to God, what is the point of fulfilling the Great Commission? Wouldn't it be better to simply help people with their material needs since their eternal future is evidently secure? If all roads lead to God, then Jesus died for no reason other than possibly to be a good moral example. This belief will lead to an eventual abandonment of the Faith among those who accept it because it logically makes Christianity of no particular value compared to any other belief system. So, 56% of self-identifying Evangelicals say, "Jesus isn't the only way to God."

Heresy 2: "Jesus was created by God." 73% of the self-identifying Evangelicals agreed with the statement "Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God." The Bible clearly reveals that this is

¹ Christianity Today, September 2022.

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wrong. **John 3:16 (ESV)** says - **16** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only [begotten]² Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” and **John 14:9 (ESV)** says “**9** Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” Jesus therefore was “begotten” not “created.” To be begotten means that one shares the same nature as the one who begat him. That is why Jesus could make the amazing statement, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” **John 1:1–2 (ESV)** equally affirms that – **1** “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God.” Jesus is NOT a created being but is co-equal with His Father.

Why it matters: The idea that Jesus was created is an ancient heresy condemned by the Church in 325 A.D. The name of this heresy is “Arianism.” Arianism teaches that Jesus is a created being, though highly exalted and worthy of worship.

- Arianism therefore is heresy because it affirms the central tenant of paganism: the worship of a creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). This opens another door of error:
- Arianism invites polytheism because it denies the essential unity of the Father and the Son yet affirms that both should be worshipped.
- Arianism also destroys the foundation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity because it teaches that Jesus is neither equal with nor one with the Father.
- Finally, Arianism destroys the certainty of eternal salvation because if there were ever a time in the past when Christ did not exist, there might reasonably be expected a time in the future when he would cease to exist.

For these reasons, to affirm that “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God” is to deny the Christian faith.

Heresy 3: “Jesus is not God.” CT points out that “Given the above beliefs on Jesus as being a created being, it’s not too surprising that 43 percent [of Evangelicals] affirmed that ‘Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God,’ which is another form of the Arian heresy.”³ The Bible rejects this belief. The divinity of Jesus is clearly affirmed in **John 10:30 (ESV)** where Jesus said, - **30** “*I and the Father are one.*” The fact of Jesus’ divinity has been accepted by the Church from the beginning and is taught in many passages of our Bible.

Why it matters: It matters because if Jesus is not fully God as well as fully man, He cannot be our Savior. Created beings cannot save themselves or anyone else. Only God can save. If Jesus is not God, then our faith is empty, and we are still in our sins. Jesus is a unique being in that He is fully God, and fully man. If He was not infinite divinity, He could not suffer infinite punishment required for our sins. If He was not fully human, He could not pay the penalty for sin by suffering death. The divinity of Christ is essential to true Christian faith.

Heresy 4: “The Holy Spirit is not a personal being.” Believe it or not, 60% of self-identifying Evangelicals do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a person but affirm the statement: “The Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being.” **Acts 5:3–4 (ESV)** makes clear that the Holy Spirit is

² KJV

³ Christianity Today. “5 Evangelical Heresies,” September 2022.

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indeed a person by saying, **3** *But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.”* This is a “two for the price of one” verse because it shows that the Holy Spirit is a person who can be lied to, and that He is God as well.

Why it matters: It matters first because the Bible clearly affirms that the Holy Spirit is personal. To deny what the Scripture affirms about the personality of the Holy Spirit is to put oneself on the wrong side of truth, if for no other reason than that it denies Trinitarianism (cf. Matthew 28:19). If the Holy Spirit is not a person, He is not co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son. Denial of the Holy Spirit’s personality also calls into question the believer’s comfort. Who can be comforted by an impersonal force?

Heresy 5: “Humans aren’t sinful by nature.” 57% of self-identifying Evangelicals agreed to the statement “Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.” That anyone could accept this who has read his Bible or his newspaper boggles the mind. **Romans 5:12 (ESV) - 12** *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* The affirmation that humans are basically good by nature is another ancient heresy known as “Pelagianism.”

Why it matters: It matters because if man is basically good, he does not need a Savior but is capable of doing things to justify himself before God. The Scripture clearly denies this in verses such as **Romans 4:2 (ESV) - 2** *“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God”* and **Galatians 2:16 (ESV) - 16** *“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”* A variation of Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, says that man cannot save himself, but has enough good in himself to cooperate savingly with God’s work of salvation. Semi-Pelagianism is a favorite doctrine of the cults and of works oriented forms of Christianity. Belief in this doctrine eventually leads to an abandonment of grace and a turning to self-righteousness in its place. The refusal to believe that mankind is sinful by nature is a denial of Biblical Christian doctrine.

Who is an “Evangelical” according to the folks who do this survey? Those surveyed are considered Evangelicals according to a four-part definition.

- If they strongly agree that the Bible is the highest authority.
- If they strongly agree on the importance of encouraging non-Christians to trust Jesus as their Savior.
- If they strongly agree that His death removed the penalty of sin.
- If they strongly agree that trust in Him alone brings salvation.

Given this definition, it is puzzling to consider that such a high percentage who “strongly agree” with these things feel no contradiction in holding one or more of the 5 heresies detailed above. This is possibly an indication that Post-Modern thinking (“We all have our own truth”) has made deeper inroads in Evangelicalism than most of us realize. It is certainly an indication that large segments of

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confessing Christianity are incapable of consistent reasoning and hold without questioning contradictory ideas about God's revelation.

What is the remedy for the declining spiritual condition of American Evangelical? I would suggest two urgently needed treatments for Evangelical Christians in today's America.

First, we need to return to a devotion to prayer. Christianity is a supernatural business and the distressing abandonment of corporate prayer by many Evangelical communities is an unfortunate indication of a feeling of self-sufficiency. The prayer life of our churches is an indication of our sense of dependence on God. God does answer prayer, and it may well be the case that the only prayer God doesn't hear is the one unoffered. We need to pray for renewed spiritual understanding and hunger in our churches.

Secondly, the growing doctrinal weakness in Evangelicalism is a clear call for churches to return to our roots in deep doctrinal teaching. Perhaps the decline in doctrinal understanding is the result of a turn from doctrinal teaching to teaching on felt needs, politics, family life, stewardship, prophecy, or other popular topics today. To be sure, the Bible speaks to these things. But has Evangelicalism gotten out of balance? The results of the survey seem to say, "Yes, we have." We need to return to consistent doctrinal instruction in Evangelical pulpits.

Finally, we need to encourage each other to put into practice the changeless truths we receive in our Bibles. When our practices do not agree with our beliefs, we will only have peace of heart by realigning our beliefs and our actions. Unfortunately, too many resolve the tension by changing their beliefs rather than their deeds. If we really believe that God has spoken truly in His Word, we don't have that option. Deeds must adjust to truth, not truths to deeds if we want to remain faithful.

Conclusion: Ephesians 4:11–16 (ESV) - *11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

The wake-up call sounded by this survey is clear. Will we take it seriously?