

Book Review: *Recovering a Vintage Faith* by Cory Marsh

In *Recovering a Vintage Faith*, Cory Marsh tackles one of evangelicalism's most pressing challenges: the term has become so elastic as to be nearly meaningless. His central thesis – that evangelicalism must be defined theologically rather than sociologically – is the bold corrective our moment requires. Marsh's opening metaphor comparing modern evangelicalism to Jell-O captures the risible state of affairs with memorable precision: when the category stretches to include "evangelical Hindus" and "evangelical atheists," it has ceased to function as a meaningful identifier.

Marsh's critique of contemporary sociological reductionism proves particularly timely and necessary. Authors who define evangelicalism primarily through voting patterns, demographic categories, or cultural preferences commit a fundamental methodological error: assuming self-identified evangelicals are actually evangelical, then concluding evangelicalism isn't about doctrine because these self-identified people don't prioritize doctrine. Marsh rightly exposes this circular reasoning as both intellectually problematic and ecclesially destructive. His insistence on returning to biblical-theological criteria provides the foundation we desperately need.

The book's framework of five fundamentals offers concrete boundaries where confusion has long reigned. Marsh's treatment of Scripture's supremacy is excellent, particularly his emphasis on grammatical-historical hermeneutics and the distinction between verbal assent to biblical authority and genuine submission to it. This "Oriental inheritance" critique of identifying those who affirm inerrancy to maintain positions while lacking actual submission to Scripture's authority addresses a pattern we see repeatedly in academic and ministry contexts. The warning is crucial: orthodox confession can mask contrary loyalties.

Marsh's identification of church fellowship as the "X-factor" effectively counters the individualistic "Jesus and me" spirituality that has crippled contemporary evangelicalism. Making visible church association and accountability a requirement for evangelical identity pushes back against the privatized faith that disconnects profession from practice. This emphasis on the corporate, covenantal nature of genuine Christianity deserves widespread adoption.

The book demonstrates real courage in several ways. Marsh's willingness to reclaim "biblical fundamentalism" as positive identifier shows intellectual honesty in a climate where the term functions almost exclusively as pejorative. His careful interaction with competing definitions reveals genuine scholarship. Most significantly, his insistence that evangelicalism be grounded in theology rather than sociology provides clarity where we've had only confusion.

The chapter on theological education, while perhaps historically debatable as a "fundamental" in the strict sense, addresses real problems. Marsh's critique of anti-intellectualism and his emphasis on biblical literacy strike at trends that have undermined evangelical vitality. D.L. Moody as an example helpfully demonstrates that championing education need not require formal academic credentials – the point is serious engagement with Scripture and theological truth, not merely institutional credentialing.

Marsh's "rants" on evangelical politics and celebrityism, though extensive, prove remarkably prescient given recent developments. His warnings about conflating political agendas with biblical Christianity and about the dangers of platform-driven ministry disconnected from local church accountability anticipated problems that have become increasingly visible. The book's publication timing makes these critiques particularly valuable.

Recovering a Vintage Faith succeeds in its primary aim: demonstrating that evangelicalism must be defined theologically or not at all. In an era of sociological reductionism, doctrinal confusion, and preening "false flag" distortions of the historic Christian faith by evangelical infiltrators like Kristin Kobes Du Mez, this contribution alone makes the work valuable. Marsh provides concrete criteria – Scripture's supremacy, Christ's exclusivity, zealous evangelism, theological formation, and church fellowship – that can guide churches and institutions seeking to maintain biblical fidelity while navigating contemporary challenges.

This is the kind of serious engagement with evangelical identity that institutions like Front Range Bible Institute champion. Marsh's commitment to biblical authority, his emphasis on theological precision, and his concern for the church's health align with confessional Reformed commitments. While readers may engage certain particulars differently – questions about which theological distinctives constitute fundamentals, discussions about the relationship between historical movements and biblical Christianity, or explorations of how evangelism and church planting relate – the book's overall project deserves strong support.

For those wrestling with evangelical identity and boundaries, *Recovering a Vintage Faith* offers a thoughtful, scholarly, and pastorally-minded framework. Marsh has given the church a valuable resource for thinking carefully about what defines authentic biblical Christianity in our cultural moment. The work merits serious engagement from pastors, church leaders, theological students, and anyone concerned with maintaining doctrinal clarity while resisting the "evangelical" oracles of a new generation of Jezebels.

Cory Marsh, *Recovering a Vintage Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023).