

Maintaining an Evangelical Faith in the Face of a Decadent Culture of Democracy

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Abstract

Evangelicals living in a democracy are faced with the pressures of constitutionalism and the influence of secularism. These two forces unsettle God from the public spaces and enhance decadent culture. This article addresses the current challenges Evangelicals face in the decadent culture of democracy in South Africa. The essence of the proposal is how South African Evangelicals should maintain their confession, while surrounded by unethical practices of corruption and greed. An interdisciplinary approach is followed, so literature from the disciplines of Church History, Systematic Theology, Ethics, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, and Political Studies are reviewed to address the problem. The history of the Evangelical faith and the rationale behind Evangelical

awakenings open the discussion into the presentation. The Evangelical dogma is highlighted, followed by the definition of democracy with its entrenched decadent culture. Church, government, and the family are identified as places of contestation, where Evangelicals sense the threat to their doctrinal tenets. The challenge faced by Evangelicals can be addressed by remaining evangelically rooted and by holding unswervingly to three major doctrinal tenets, which are the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of human depravity, and in the belief that the Bible is the measure of faith and conduct.

Conspectus

Keywords

Evangelical, culture, democracy, constitution, secularism

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introduction

The article starts with the identification and history of the Evangelical faith and then proceeds to give the rationale behind Evangelical awakenings. The Evangelical dogma is highlighted, followed by the definition of democracy with its entrenched decadent¹ culture. This article is an interdisciplinary approach to the subject of how to maintain the Evangelical faith in a decadent culture of democracy. Through a literature review in the disciplines of Church History, Systematic Theology, Ethics, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, and Political Studies, an analysis is undertaken to elaborate on the history, identity, and beliefs of Evangelicals. The objective of this review is to garner an understanding of Evangelicalism and the challenges it faces in South Africa. The focus is on South Africa, though reference is made to some international events to validate the findings about the South African situation. The historical sketch and overview of what Evangelicals believe, and how they should behave is the focus of the article. Evangelicals in South Africa live in a democratic, post-apartheid dispensation with the pressure of constitutionalism and the influence of secularism. The article points out that these two forces unsettle God from the public spaces and enhance decadence in the culture. The church, the government, and the family are identified as places of contestation for Evangelicals. To maintain their faith, the article concludes by recommending that to remain evangelically rooted they should hold unswervingly to the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of human depravity, and the Bible as the measure of faith and conduct.

¹ In this article, the word *decadent* is used to refer to the process of a decay of morals. This encapsulates corruption, degeneration, and self-seeking ambitions where ethics is disregarded in social interactions.

2. History and Identity of Evangelicals

Internationally, Evangelicals emerged out of the Evangelical Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The awakenings evolved out of the three movements in different regions. In Germany it came out of Pietism, in the British Isles it came out of the revivalist Methodists, and in the American colonies it came out of the Great Awakening Movement. “All church historians trace the origins of the Evangelical Movement to 1783. It sprang out of different roots or foundations; hence no charismatic founder can be pointed out or identified” (Resane 2022a, 46). In some church historical studies, one discovers the roots of Evangelicalism from groups such as the Pietists, Puritans, Quakers, Moravians, and Presbyterians.

The emergence of Evangelicalism in South Africa is connected with the arrival of colonialists and missionaries. Although the Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians came to Africa with Evangelical zeal, this was dampened by the comradeship between the colonialists and missionaries. The arrival of the Huguenot settlers in 1820, of which the majority were the Baptists, injected Evangelical fervor into South African Christianity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The movement was enhanced by the Pentecostal revivals of the early twentieth century. Since the arrival of Christianity in South Africa Evangelicals lived and operated within a decadent culture of colonialism and apartheid. Corruption and decadence trickled down the socio-political landscape through oppressive systems such as slavery, racism, land occupation injustices, to name a few. The sad situation is when the demon of white supremacy and racism took root on South African soil, many Evangelicals opted for docility and silence. Their prophetic role retreated into the dark corner of silence and invisibility. Socio-cultural evils increased over many years until the apartheid regime ended, but then South Africa ended up with a democratic dispensation that sidelines God through secularism. Currently, Evangelicals in South Africa

are the citizens of a country filled with corruption and various other evils. This decadent culture of corruption in South Africa can be described as follows:

Throughout history, there have been varying forms of corruption, including bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, parochialism, patronage, influence peddling, graft, and embezzlement. Corruption may facilitate criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and human trafficking. (Resane 2020, 253)

This was clearly revealed by the testimonies given before the state capture commission led by Chief Justice Zondo. The commission lifted the lid and brought the deep and wide extent of corruption in South Africa to the attention of the public.

For the past century, one question raging within Protestant circles is what the definition of Evangelicalism is. It is a well-known fact that one's identity determines what one says or does. Dogma and ethics (or behavior) are linked. The strain of pinning down an Evangelical identity was shared by some Evangelical scholars. Carl F. H. Henry's monograph, *Evangelicals in Search of Identity* (1976) is one such example. J. I. Packer (2000, 183) notes that "evangelicalism is an identifiable form of Protestant Christianity." He emphasizes that Evangelicalism is "the true mainstream Christianity." John Stott (1999, 15) further identifies Evangelical Christianity as the original, apostolic New Testament Christianity. It is not a deviation from orthodoxy and cannot be equated with fundamentalism either. In a nutshell, "evangelicalism is that facet of Christianity which underscores the gospel of Jesus Christ, ... heralded as an invitation to whoever believes and receives it into a personal encounter with God through Christ that leads to the transformation and

renewal of the lives of its recipients" (Balcomb 2016, 118). This citation befits South Africa's understanding of Evangelical identity, which is as complex as it is in any part of the world. Their historical roots are different both denominationally and geographically, therefore exerting different epistemological understandings in the different mission fields, resulting in different understandings of what it means to be Evangelical. Nkansah-Obrempong (2016, 425) asserts that "these evangelical churches are linked with missionary activities of western mission agencies which came to Africa from the seventeenth century onward to evangelize Africa." Resane (2017, 154–157) gives a panoramic view of how Evangelicalism evolved in South Africa. Generally, South African Evangelicals are those of Baptist communions, Classical Pentecostals (Assemblies of God, Full Gospel, Apostolic Faith Mission), Holiness Movement (Church of the Nazarene, Wesleyans, Salvation Army, Free Methodists), some charismatic groupings, and small church formations springing out of parachurch missionary agencies such as churches planted by the Africa Evangelical Fellowship. These churches include the likes of Africa Evangelical Church, Evangelical Bible Church, Evangelical Church of South Africa, Mahon Mission, Alliance Church, and Holiness Union. There are Evangelicals from what is always referred to as mainline churches such as Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, and Lutherans. Although Evangelicals harbor some reservations about mainline Christianity due to its liberal tendencies, some of them are found as members of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). The umbrella body for Evangelicals is The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA). Some Evangelical groupings such as the Apostolic Faith Mission and some charismatic groups maintain dual membership within these two ecumenical formations.

Evangelicals in South Africa have a long and diverse history that cannot be discussed in greater detail in this article. However, from the identity

discussed above, I propose how to remain evangelically rooted in the decadent culture, since Christ's high priestly prayer asked that Christians are not taken out of the world but that they be protected from the evil one (John 17:15).

3. Reasons for Evangelical Awakening

The Enlightenment era was characterized by a lack of religious fervor, thus creating a need for revival. Religion was shoved from the center of life to the periphery. "The order of the day was moderation in all things" (Shelley 1982, 351). It was a careless living that "gave way to personal piety, to faith in Christ and to philanthropic and social activity" (Cairns 1978, 431). The ritualism and liberalism of the nineteenth century created a thirst for revivalism accompanied by desired social transformation. Shelley (1982, 351–352) captures it well:

An English sermon ... was a "solid but sometimes dry dissertation which a man reads to the people without gesture and without particular exaltation of the voice." Ministers blandly ignored the traditional Christian doctrine of man's sinfulness. Instead, men approached God with gentle awe and cheerfulness.

Social ills were rampant, but during and through the awakenings, God was doing something new. Changes, both ecclesiastically and socially, were inevitable. Two streams of thought surfaced when these cultural shifts ensued, especially in America. One stream regarded the changes as divine blessings. In other words, they went public with their faith, hence, Martin Marty (1970, 179) called them Public Protestants. These were associated with terms such as Social Christianity, Social Gospel, or Social Service. They were distressed by human miseries and were of strong

conviction that the Bible, especially the prophets and Jesus himself would be emotionally moved by human distress and do something about it. The incarnational love of Christ as demonstrated in the Good Samaritan narrative was regarded as a biblical blueprint of the gospel. For them, eschatological hope and its attainment should be preceded with and realized now in the "transformation of the world in this life" (Shelley 1982, 413).

The other stream was resistant to these changes, regarding them as a threat to the purity of the biblical message. This was later called Private Protestants. These also called themselves Evangelicals and they stressed the need for individual salvation. Evangelistic crusades focusing on revivals and individual conversions were the direction and center of their energy. They were insistent that "if a man's heart was right with God, then economic and social problems would take care of themselves" (Shelley 1982, 413). These evolved into various streams, the most significant one being the fundamentalists, who became the militant right-wing movement that vehemently opposed contemporary culture. With fundamentalists, Pentecostals emerged Pentecostals out of the famous Azusa Street revival of 1906. Through a *born-again* experience these claimed to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit, with *glossolalia* as the evidence of Spirit baptism (Acts 2:4). Though new within Evangelicalism, they also embraced promises of happiness in life to come. The mark of all the Evangelical-Pentecostal believers was asceticism, meaning disassociation from worldly practices such as dancing, cinema, consumption of alcohol, and smoking.

4. What do Evangelicals Believe?

Like any movement in the world, Evangelicalism is diverse in doctrine, confessions, and praxis. This leaves South African Evangelicals in some flux of identity and dogmatic crisis. Christian and Soal (2022, 1) note that

“the South African Protestant evangelical church finds itself in the midst of an identity crisis. Many Christians seem to have blurred the line between being in the world but not of the world.” However, from their evolving history Evangelicals hold staunchly to the “authority of the Bible and the orthodox Christian doctrines” (Shelley 1982, 451). They have an unwavering belief in the need to make a conscious decision to follow Christ and stay personally committed to him. This is broadly known as a *born-again* experience. Because of their Puritan background, they hold to the belief in the sinfulness of humanity, the atoning death of Christ, the unmerited grace of God, and the salvation of the true believer (Shelley 1982, 351; Erickson 1993, 13). Nkansah-Obrempong (2016, 425–426) also states that Evangelicals are pursuant to personal conversion that leads to freedom from sin, and this simply by faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16, 36; Eph 2:8–9; Rom 10:8–17). They uphold the authority of Scripture as God’s revelation to humanity and see Scripture as the primary authority for faith and practice (Rom 1:16). The Bible is God’s inspired Word, and it is infallible and inerrant (2 Tim 3:16–17). For Evangelicals, God is Triune and exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each member of the Trinity is distinctively divine and is involved in human redemption and creation (1 Cor 8:6, 2 Cor 1:21–22, 3:17, 13:14, 1 Pet 1:1–2, 1 John 5:7–8). Some of these salient beliefs are being scrutinized and challenged. This article is an attempt to inform Evangelicals of their roots and to encourage them to remain steadfast in their faith.

Structure, dogmatism, and hierarchy were not a high priority for Evangelicals at the start. According to Cairns (1978, 432) “The Evangelicals were not so much interested in polity and doctrine as in the practical piety that gained its inspiration from Bible study and prayer.” In his *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797) William Wilberforce lays out the interests of Evangelicals as, the atonement as the only regenerating force,

justification by faith, Bible reading under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and practical piety that would result in real service to society.

Historically, Evangelicals are known for being anti-politics, as they consider friendship with the world to be enmity with God (Jas 4:4), even though in their early years they were instrumental in fighting injustices such as the slave trade. The champion of that fight was William Wilberforce (1759–1833). Another example is that of the protection of the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa called the Hottentots of the Cape Colony, led by a Congregationalist, John Philip. He played a major role in the passing of Ordinance Fifty of 1828, which granted the Hottentots and other indigenous people legal equality (Roy 2017, 42; Hofmeyr and Pillay 1994, 55). Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885) is also a noteworthy Evangelical. He dedicated himself to the service of the poor and oppressed as a teenager. He asked the House of Commons for reforms regarding social issues. Examples included barring the practice of allowing boys to do the tedious work of sweeping the chimneys, facilitating the law that barred women and boys under the age of ten from working in the mines, and facilitating the law to bar the public from watching the mentally deranged people in asylums as an entertainment paid for. He refused offers for higher political offices as he wanted to serve the poor (Cairns 1978, 432). Another Evangelical influence in the political landscape of the time was John Howard, a Methodist, who devoted his life and fortune to prison reforms. Through his influence, “prison sentences were emphasized as a corrective rather than as a punishment for crimes against society” (Cairns 1978, 433). There are many more examples of Evangelicals’ passion for the transformation of the heart through cultural changes and spiritual revival. Not to forget their strong support for the missionary movement of the eighteenth century. “They united the

messages of personal regeneration and societal reformation” (Erickson 1993, 19). This approach gradually changed as mentioned above and the movement split into two streams.

Politics were considered dirty and evil, but as the movement progressed over decades, political awareness and involvement also grew within it. “Consequently, evangelicals seldom engaged in political activity other than voting ... many others have become involved in the political process” (Erickson 1993, 28–29). Today, their political involvement has made them a powerful force in democratic societies around the world.

The indisputable reality is that Evangelicals “have found it particularly difficult to navigate the tempestuous political waters of the sub-continent” (Balcomb 2016, 127). However, there are unquestionable historical strides made as they were and continue to be part of Christendom with a legacy that includes

organizations, legal and judicial principles, voluntary agencies, charitable activities, cultural expressions, social and political developments and much else that can be celebrated as Christian contributions to human flourishing. None of these should be undervalued. (Murray 2008, 240)

One can see that Evangelicals promoted social reforms driven by the fact that humans are spiritual beings who are either the potential or the actual children of God. On top of that, Evangelicals today are Bible-driven and are zealous for missionary endeavors as they are convinced that it is primarily through the gospel that societies can be transformed. There is no doubt that the “evangelical movement has already had a profound impact on the history of Christianity and its self-understanding” (Beaton 2003, 222). In our democratic world Evangelicalism is at a crossroads. Despite the docile

and silent approach during the difficult times of colonialism and apartheid, Evangelical churches remain a voice to be reckoned with. Nkansah-Obrempong (2016, 426) emphasizes that:

Evangelical churches provide a prophetic voice and challenge the status quo: they are relevant and speak to the issues and challenges facing them and are strongly committed to evangelism and social action by addressing the socio-political and economic life of people in their countries.

This commitment cannot be carried out if dogma and ethics are compromised or exist under socio-political and cultural oppression where the constitution is designed and allowed to undermine these metanarratives. Constitutionalism, which supports secularism, poses a threat to the Evangelical faith, pushing it to compromise its beliefs.

5. Evangelicals in Democracy

Democracy is a familiar term worldwide and is known as the most representative government of the people by the people. South African democracy encompasses liberal democratic values such as rationality, equality, freedom, tolerance, and respect, where “representatives are chosen by majority vote according to the formal procedures for free and fair elections” (Smit and Oosthuizen 2011, 17). The electorate is guaranteed freedom of expression and choices that are compatible with nation-building. In this article, I argue that Evangelicals living in a democracy face two forces that are aggressively and vigorously operational. These forces are secularism and constitutionalism. The two shape and influence democracy in such a way that they determine the type and direction that democracy should take. One should note that especially during the French Revolution,

“evangelicals believed in neither democracy nor in trade unions” (Hennell 1977, 512).

South Africa is justifiably proud of its three decades of constitutional democracy, safeguarded by the Bill of Rights. In an ideal democracy, there must be an independent judiciary, a free press, some system of equality before the law (usually with an enshrined constitution and disciplined police force), structures to ensure that the military is under civilian control, and a system of changing who is in charge without bloodshed. (Carson 2008, 125)

South Africa’s democracy is defined by parliamentary representation in a democratic republic that is headed by the elected President. It is a multi-party system made up of three branches, which are the executive (cabinet), the legislature (parliament), and the judiciary (courts). The citizens are entitled to influence important decisions affecting their lives. The law-making processes bring together the views and interests of all people so that the future of the country can be decided based on all these views. This leads to the majority rule where laws that build the culture take precedence over the minority rule in the parliamentary processes. Many laws that affect South Africa and influence the culture are based on secular ideas dominant in the majority party in parliament.

Democratic politics, “with its grassroots representative structure and its majority rule, provides freedom and allows room for the dissenter to compete with alternative views” (Halteman 1995, 151). It is in the same vein that Moltmann (2019, 74) states that “the basis of democracy is the sovereignty of the people, which is the foundation of the modern constitutional state.” As a democratic state with a proportional representative parliament, democratic South Africa

does not possess the capacity to deal with crime, salient racism, social injustices, manipulative populism, and embarrassing economic mistakes perpetuated through state capture and corruption in the higher echelons of society. It is a democracy rooted in reasonable fairness with the majority of supporters of the liberation movement turned into a political party. Its democratic ideals of equality, non-racism, and non-sexism are plagued by inconsistencies in all three tiers of government. The mechanism for removing democratically elected leaders through motions of no confidence does not work. These motions of no confidence are not used to remove those who do not deliver services to the electorate, and so greedy politicians who do not deliver on promises are not removed from their positions. Democracy and constitutionalism work in synergy. Constitutionalism is based on a constitution,

[which] is the supreme law of the state, stating the character, conception, and principles to shape the nationhood and the statehood of the country. It is the foundational set of rules, built or established embodying the rights of people in the state. (Resane 2022b, 4)

When constitutionalism is in force, citizens are assured of protection by the state and freedom of expression, whether on religion or politics. Democratic South Africa enshrined its democracy by adopting the new constitution in 1996. This constitution was written with the intent to recognize the tragic past of repression, oligarchy, inequality, and secrecy. Annuling the white supremacy which involved racial discrimination, oppression, and segregation was a leading motivation in the formulation of this new constitution. It was built on the foundation of a peaceful transition from oligarchy to democracy (Paul 2009, 155). The democratic

project as enshrined in the constitution protects people's religions, cultures, and languages.

There was a pendulum swing in 1994 when the apartheid Christian state had to become a secular state with constitutional rights guaranteeing freedom of religion, and gender equity, among others. Christian citizens felt disempowered as religion was removed from public spheres, especially in the centers of learning where Christian religious education was previously used as a tool for the moral formation of learners. Political centers were not left unscathed. Parliaments, mayoral chambers, and political events were devoid of any religious ceremonies such as opening devotions or benedictions. All the national symbols were de-religionized, except the national anthem which remains a prayerful plea to the Lord to protect the nation. School curricula removed all religious or biblical education. All of this was done due to the new secular constitution. South African constitutionalism unsettled the moral fabric of society by dislodging God from civil affairs. This created a huge challenge, especially for Evangelical Christians, who subscribe to both private and public religion. Don Carson (2008, 116) highlights this challenge: "To preserve Christian faith even in one's private life is viewed by many as a mark of weakness. If 'God has any place at all, it is not outside human consciousness.'"

Secularism is embedded within a democracy and has often caused trouble for the Evangelical faith. Its mystery lies in the fact that it can guarantee freedom of religious expression, while at the same time, hampering the practice of Evangelical freedom. Carson (2008, 116) speaks of it as "usually understood to be the social reality that fosters nonreligious or even anti-religious consciousness." It is noted for squeezing religion into the periphery of life. Enhanced by constitutionalism, it unsettles God from the public space and ushers in a godless culture where decadence reigns

supreme. Whenever religion raises its voice regarding policies in public spaces, it is considered to be intolerant and a threat to human rights.

When the national constitution ushers in and enhances secularism, people's culture is affected—negatively or positively. Although there is a plethora of definitions of culture in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and religion, I agree with Geertz's (1973, 89) definition of culture:

It denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.

Geertz here emphasizes the fact that culture is portrayed as a structure of giving meanings through symbols. Humans use these symbols to interpret their experiences. Culture is a web of significance, which is a spiritual frame on which the meaning of life is built. These frames are the metanarratives not to be tempered with, they cannot be shifted or re-designed, as this may create some chaotic episodes in cultural practices. This leads one to the conclusion that indeed culture is acquired, not innate, as Moltmann (2009, 5) also points out, by noting that "man is a biologically defective creature and, at the same time, a culture-making creature." Human culture is habitual rather than instinctive. It depends on the human capacity to form habits that are influenced by the human's social environment (Lee 1992, 17). The fact of the matter is that culture, regardless of the innate spiritual frame, is porous and pliable to be twisted, can be re-shaped, or in some extreme situations, re-engineered. Cultural shifts are inevitable, as culture is dynamic and to some degree unpredictable. That is why there are fads and fashions in cultural practices and expressions limited to a certain period.

What was known as the moral pillars of the nation were shaken as secularism started to question the validity of the metanarratives. The creeds are exposed to scrutiny and theological epistemologies are critiqued. The Evangelical dogma of holiness, purity and sanctity of life, and family values including sexuality and sanctity of marriage, are viewed negatively and in many ways laid aside as they are regarded as intolerant and rob people of their freedom of choice. As can be expected, this goes against the universal principles of Natural Law whereby, according to Moltmann (2009, 73), the laws of the state should derive their justness from the fact that they correspond to the law of the world and the law of human nature. In other words, the moral order should correspond to the divine order of being. When secularistic culture dominates, ethics decline and religious fervency wanes, and the church suffers. In a secular state, “non-attendance at church is the first stage in the process of secularization and religious indifferentism” (Shorter and Onyancha 1997, 29).

6. Evangelicals in a Decadent Culture

Evangelical faith was rocked to the core when the constitution started to enshrine ethical menaces such as abortion, same-sex romantic relationships, civil union marriages, polygamy, and children’s rights independent from parental authority. Faith continues to grapple with the biblical instructions on these issues because constitutionalism challenges Evangelical rootedness. This continues to open wide doors to cultural decadence. The notion that democracy is secure as long as individual rights are guaranteed is a fallacy, because as one Evangelical teacher, Carl F. H. Henry (1986, 31) asserts, “without shared values, democracy is on the move to anarchy.” A decadent culture is a cultural environment where human tendencies are preferred over shared values. Moltmann (2009,

24) states that “man’s environment has often been understood as a mere stage on which the practical, moral and religious drama of man has been played out.” This human-made environment has created a problematic culture built on egoistic ideals. Individualism at the expense of others’ liberty becomes a norm. Relativism is the order of the day, the god of ego, Me, Myself, and I, is the divinity at the center of life. “What is bad for you may be good for me, so don’t judge me for my preferences and proclivities, whether morally or in practice” some might say. This happens when the voice of the church (theology) is dislodged from its place as a guide to moral conduct. There is no doubt that “Theology shapes both the content and function of the church’s proclamation and societal ministry” (Delotavo 2012, 10).

6.1 Decadent culture in the church

In the past century, the Evangelical faith has been rocked to the foundations. In our time as well, news headlines regularly report on moral corruption in churches such as marital infidelities, sexual abuses, financial mismanagements, and church constitutional distortions. Within the Evangelical circles, the New Prophetic Churches, aligned with the Pentecostal Movement, occupy some media columns. Not for the right reasons, though, but for sex scandals, commercialization of the gospel, and celebrity cultism. The Evangelical house is not a clean house to be a haven for victims of cultural assaults. In some communities, the Evangelical church has ceased to be an academy of justice and is no longer a place of education and renewal of convictions about harmonious relationships (Schweiker 2000, 27).

6.2 Decadent culture in government

Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, South Africa has become a corrupt state. The leaders became the embodiment of Setswana proverbs that *Bana ba tadi ba bonwa ka mereto* (The followers' behavior resemble those of their predecessors or leaders). In our modern language, it is said that politicians became members of the same WhatsApp group. They used their liberation credentials as tickets to access the national treasury. Politicians took advantage of porous systems of civil accountability structures to enrich themselves. The climax of corruption was epitomized by the so-called *nine wasted years* during Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009–2018) when South Africa was politically marketed as “up for sale,” especially to the Gupta family that captured the state and had an influence over executive government decisions behind the scenes. The *brown envelope* syndrome robbed the country's economic viability as *go ja ka lesika* (nepotism) became the gateway into the government treasury. Those in charge opened the till and looted as much as possible and the spoils were shared amongst the *di ya thoteng di bapile* (comrades in arms). Any attempt to expose corruption was met with the attitude, *di sa itsaneng di a welana* (Those who fail or refuse to cooperate will pay the blood price), meaning I will deal with you accordingly. In other words, “you don't know me, should you dare to expose me I will deal with you accordingly.” This is not just a threat, it is always followed by a hit, when someone's life is eliminated, or by marginalizing someone politically through shame.

6.3 Decadent culture in the family

The family is regarded as a basic unit of society. It is the inner circle where culture is formed. All social scientists agree that the family is the most

profound of all influences on who we are and what we do. It is in the family home where children are expected to hear, “the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4). As a social institution, according to Charles M. Sell (1995, 15), it serves various social functions such as reproduction, sexual expression, socialization, status, economic cooperation, emotional satisfaction, and social control.

Evangelicals feel that the constitution of the republic invades parents' rights to raise their children in biblical ways, especially in the area of discipline and the sanctity of life. Children's rights are entrenched in Section 28 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of South Africa. These rights are in the best interest of all children under the age of 18 years old. The grafters of our constitution have made children's rights a priority over their parents' authority and responsibilities. When it comes to any matter affecting a child's well-being, the constitution states that the best interests of a child are of paramount importance.

The constitutionalists, like children's rights advocates, see “children as vulnerable to social exclusion through class, race, and gender, but also due to their age” (Wells, Quash, and Eklund 2017, 194). Laws and bills promoting various sexual orientations and same-sex marriages are deemed encroaching on the prerogative of Christians to determine their own culture, thus endangering the wellness and function of the family. Evangelicals hold that a variety of abuses (e.g., sexual, children) stem from a dysfunctional family, where the biblical structure of authority is ignored. If it was a well-functioning institution, these abuses would not be the ethical menaces observed in the public domain today. Samuel Wells (2017, 89) captures the positive contribution of a family as follows:

When it works well, the nuclear family can indeed be a refuge from a challenging, frightening, and sometimes damaging world. It can

indeed be a place of learning and growth in manners and morals, in creativity and wonder, in faith and courage. It can indeed be the solid emotional ground where the priceless qualities of trust, confidence, self-acceptance, tolerance, and forgiveness can develop and deepen.

Evangelicals hold on to the family principles of the Judeo-Christian worldview, as stipulated in the Bible. Any legislature that goes against this is deemed as a corrupt culture that has moved from the fundamentals of the faith. This creates an environment that is conducive to a decadent culture that threatens the sanctity of human life and the purity of God-intended institutions such as the church, civil government, and the family. Since these constitutional dictates are entrenched in the culture, Evangelicals seek a way of remaining Evangelically rooted despite these threatening forces.

7. Remaining Evangelically Rooted

The interest of this paper is addressing the moral conundrum that Evangelicals face as they strive to live with integrity amid a decadent culture that has been promoted by democracy through its constitutional dictates and secular approaches that squeeze God to the peripheries of life. This is the creation of a new culture that is godless and makes no room for religion in public spaces. As Rodney Clapp (1996, 69) says: “The life of faith is then primarily an individual, private concern.” This leaves Evangelicals with the need to cry and denounce cultures that are anti-religious. “Only the Christian can cry out fully in indignation against injustice because the Christian has seen the full revelation of human dignity” (Rutler 2020, 96). The situation mandates Evangelical churches to “equip believers to find the answers to their identity in the narrative of Scripture rather than the surrounding society” (Bethancourt 2012, 46). Scripture clearly indicates

that “with God as the head of our spiritual family, we find our identity as his children by new birth and adoption” (Anthony 2019, 396).

For Evangelicals to remain focused on their faith, the following proposals are brought in to address this concern. I acknowledge that all orthodox doctrines are epistemological narratives and that Evangelicals do not entertain any idea of tampering with them. With forever broadening scholarship through the centuries some of these fundamental dogmas were and are scrutinized, critiqued, re-analyzed, and reinterpreted. I suggest the following must remain intact for someone to be Evangelically rooted.

7.1 The triunity of God

The trinitarian nature of God has been debated since the Apostolic Fathers and the Church Fathers concluded it as a cornerstone of Christian confession. Many modern scholars (e.g., O’Murchu 2021, 158; Johnson 2007, 202–225; Tan and Tran 2016, 161–181; Bracken 2014, 138) redefine our understanding of the Trinity more in relational than ontological terms. The Trinity serves as a central spoke of theological epistemology. It is a biblical doctrine that sets the Christian faith apart from other monotheistic or polytheistic religions. John Webster (2012, 145) agrees that “no other doctrinal locus can eclipse the doctrine of the Trinity in its role of shaping theology as a whole.” This doctrine of the Triune God “shapes the entire outlook of theology and serves as the matrix for the placement and treatment of all other doctrinal loci” (Sanders 2014, 37). Evangelicals should remain rooted in this trinitarian epistemology in order not to tamper with the Father’s nature as a Creator. It also keeps the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ intact, and so believers can hope in him, as the mediator, that they can live lives of repentance. Humans’ relationship with Christ reveals humans “as the being accepted and loved by God in the manner of Jesus, and God is revealed through him as this human God” (Moltmann 2009, 19).

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit believers can live above the decadence of the culture that surrounds them. The communitarian nature of the trinitarian God ascertains believers that God is directly and intimately involved in their life experiences. Jim Wallis (2006, 3) captures this well: “Central to the Christian faith is the idea that God is not a remote, uncaring, impersonal God, but rather is fully engaged and interactive with creation.” Holding on to the doctrine of the Trinity holds together one’s faith in other doctrines such as creation, as Dembski (2009, 108) confirms that the whole act of creation is the involvement of the entire Trinity: “God the Father forms an intention, God the Son articulates it, and God the Holy Spirit empowers it.” Gabriel Mendy (2013, 32) alludes to this: “Each of the divine persons is, consequently, involved in creation in the sense that if the Father creates through the Son and perfects through the Spirit.”

7.2 The lostness of humanity without God

Moltmann (2009, 5) notes that “man is a biologically defective creature and, at the same time, a culture-making creature.” Humans create cultures that may be detrimental to their well-being, making them believe life is all about themselves. Lee (1992, 17) also attests that “the most productive way to think of human spirituality is in terms of his unique ability to create culture.” Moltmann (2009, 15) continues to point out that “man seeks to find himself, but his life does not succeed in achieving a collected expression in this time of death.” Taking away the fact that humanity can survive without God, especially his soteriological functions, is to empower humanity with a resultant meaningless life. Life achievements cannot satisfy the soul. The true meaning of life is found in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 6:23), for

in Christ we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). However, one needs to acknowledge the fact as stated by Charles Colson (1993, 31): “The law does have a role in moral instruction. But the roots of our moral life go deeper than laws and bills. Government programs can feed the body; they cannot touch the soul. They can punish behavior; they cannot transform hearts.”

Human character and behavior, though shaped by culture, cannot be morally transformed by any civil structure that is devoid of some *godly* element. This is expressed by Maritain (2011, 21): “No doctrine or opinion of merely human origin, no matter how true it may be, but only things revealed by God force themselves upon the faith of the Christian soul.” The sinfulness of humanity (Ps 51:3–5; Rom 1:18–32, 3:23) though redeemable, is a reality that cannot be altered except by the changing power of God.

7.3 The Bible is the measure of faith and conduct

Evangelicals have always remained unwavering that the Bible is the only infallible rule for faith and practice (2 Tim 3:15–17). George Hunsberger (2003, 128) states that “biblical authority is essential to being Evangelical, even if there is no clear consensus about how to define the nature of that authority.” They broadly believe in the literal interpretation of the text and regard the text as a direct communication from God to the reader. Since the category of *Evangelicals* includes progressively a broader spectrum, some are wary of the dangers of literalism, while some seek discernible, deducible principles from the text. For Evangelicals, the Bible reveals the actions, character, and purposes of God and, therefore has the potential to redirect life and the affairs of societies. Within the decadent culture where Evangelicals feel trapped, the centrality of the Bible should be retained to maintain some form of Evangelical sanity.

8. Conclusion

Evangelicals are not antithetical to democracy. They are the champions of African solidarity (Kato 1975, 165). They always intercede for political leaders and they pledge loyalty. However, they expect to be allowed to remain prophetic. They are bound by the Scriptures to obey the government, yet to continue to be the salt and the light in the world. While striving for democracy and Evangelicalism politicians and prophets should work in solidarity for the good of the people. “Democracy should become one of the principal routes along which the Church travels together with the people” (Browne 1996, 79).

Indeed, democracy is not a solution to human problems of social and natural injustices. Through their constitution democratic states empower secularism which dislodges God from public spaces, making religion a private matter rather than a public affair. This creates a culture full of corruption and abuses, and the faith community finds itself inevitably trapped in that decadent culture. Evangelicals are encouraged to “maintain their Christ-centeredness, celebrate the variety of the Spirit’s ministry, and emphasize personal conversion while being a genuine community of the Word” (Husbands and Treier 2005, 18). This quote clearly shows that Evangelicals should maintain their Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and bibliology. To be Evangelically rooted, Evangelicals are encouraged to hold on to the doctrines of the Trinity, human depravity, and the centrality of the Bible in public and private affairs.

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