

THE SELF-RELIANT CONSCIENCE OF EVANGELICAL STOICISM

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At the outbreak of World War II with the imminent threat of German attack felt by many Londoners, the British government sought to inspire and instruct their citizens in their plight of endurance. To avoid paralysis of daily activity or mass hysteria caused by an avalanche of anxiety, the leaders propagated a sloganeering campaign. Colorful posters were placed in well trafficked areas and reminded the faithful that “Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution, Will Bring Us Victory.” Perhaps the most popular slogan, however, was “Keep Calm and Carry On” as it resonated well with the stiff-upper-lip constitution of many Britons.¹ The idea of self-reinforced statements to bolster courage and focus energy, especially in the face of danger, is noble and proven effective for wartime morale or even sporting arena triumph. However, for the Christian, the temptation to anchor one’s daily faith to self-reinforcement tactics can prove dangerous.

Thus, as contemporary culture continues to morph and decline, is it time merely to practice our

1. “So What is this ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ Thing All About Then?” *Keep Calm and Carry On*, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.keepcalmandcarryon.com/history/>.

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stiff-upper-lip and “Keep Calm and Carry On”? Should we circle the wagons of paranoia and fear to bolster strength to ride out a storm of moral change while saying nothing?

In his 1947 classic, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, Carl F. H. Henry called for “contemporary evangelicalism to reawaken to the relevance of its redemptive message to the global predicament.” He believed that the truth was stronger than fiction and that evangelicals had a message for the world. He said, “The message for a decadent modern civilization must ring with the present tense. We must confront the world now with an ethics to make it tremble, and with a dynamic to give it hope.”² So, if in any sense, we have shirked from this kind of optimism, Henry would no doubt be disappointed.

The “Uneasy Conscience” of which Henry spoke was the tendency of 1940s fundamentalists to grow uneasy with how to interact with a changing culture and retreat instead of engage. The fundamentalists were not uneasy about the truths of the Bible but rather with how to apply them well to the modern situation. I think for the growing evangelical minority today, the same temptation is present and, not knowing how to withstand the cultural pressures, the easiest thing to do appears to be to worry and retreat. But as Henry said, this mentality leaves no voice “speaking today as Paul would, either at the United Nations sessions, or at labor-management disputes, or in strategic university classrooms whether in Japan or Germany or America.”³ So there is a great need today for instructing evangelicals in how to engage the culture.

The idea of hunkering down in the face of shifting morality is something Martyn Lloyd-Jones likened to the Stoicism referenced in Acts 17. Lloyd-Jones, the medical doctor turned preacher explained that in ancient times,

The Stoic was a serious and thoughtful man, an honest one who believed in facing the facts of life. Having done so he had come to the conclusion that life is a difficult business and a hard task, and that there is only one way of going through with it and that is that you must exercise firm discipline upon yourself. Life, said the Stoic, will come and attack you, it will batter and beat you, and the great art of living, he said, is to remain standing on your feet. And the only way to do it is to brace back your shoulders, to set a firm upper lip, to go in for the philosophy of courage, and say, ‘I am going to be a man!’ You just decide that you are not going to give in, you are not going to be defeated; whatever may happen to you, you are still standing, you are going on and you will stick it to the end. The philosophy of grit, the philosophy of courage, the philosophy of the stiff upper lip.⁴

This kind of Stoicism that is high on morality, asceticism, and indifference, plays well in our day of mutual challenges to “Just grind it out” to such a degree that there is a version of it we might call Evangelical Stoicism. Here, we self-philosophize when we counsel to “Remind yourself at all times what you can control and what you can’t.” Evangelical Stoicism is philosophy of coping that says, “We cannot control the weather or the economy, but we can control our thoughts and actions.” From dieting, to keeping up with technology, to pursuing academic studies, to dealing with trials, to enduring family gatherings or tensions, we easily drift into Stoicism whether we know it or not.

We are quick to medicate, conflict-avoid, exaggerate, miscommunicate, deflect, blame, and hide.

2. Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, [1947], 2003), 53–55.

3. *Ibid.*, 25.

4. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *I Am Not Ashamed: Advice to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 15.

We minimize public embarrassment, overcompensate for errors, redouble our efforts, and study how better to manage our public profile. We are experts at “toughing it out.” We read leadership and self-help books about how to succeed, how to press farther. We have gotten very good at being proficient, and we know how to get by. In the face of the decline of cultural morality or in the wake of the redefinition of marriage, we hunker down and huddle up. Yet, simple joy, faith, hope, or thankfulness are missing as we “Keep Calm and Carry On.” This is not to say there isn’t any value in perseverance or endurance. Indeed, in the Christian life, these are important stabilizers for living in the Spirit. But, often we live as if we are to do much on our own strength, and doing these things apart from the Spirit isn’t the Gospel way. This is not what Christ meant for us when he said his burden was light (Matt 11:29–30).

How then are we to endure suffering that may come as a result of holding fast to biblical truth? How do you thrive in the workplace, in conversations with coworkers or at the family dinner table, or in the public square? What is more, how should Christians prepare to live and suffer for truth in a world where the standards of truth have changed? While now some may regularly endure hardship for the Gospel, few of us are facing regular persecution. But how do we prepare for that day should it come? For prison cells, tough callings, ridicule, persecution, or days worse than we can imagine?

Well, the Evangelical Stoicism on which we often stand will not do. As Lloyd-Jones said of Stoicism, “It may be very noble, I will grant you that, but it is noble paganism.”⁵ In short, “Keep Calm and Carry On” is not the Gospel way. The better way is rooted in something far deeper and supernatural than what is found in our shallow pockets of grit and determination.

When thinking further about how the Christian should live in our world of rapid moral change, we are helped by Paul’s second statement of advice to Timothy. After pleading with him, Paul now shares his conviction that serves as another foundation for his endurance and joy regardless of the circumstances. Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:12, “But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” Here he begins verse 12 with a statement referring back to 1:8 when he says essentially to Timothy, “I told you not to be ashamed of the Gospel because I am not ashamed.”

Even though he is in prison for faithfulness to the Gospel, he is not ashamed of the Gospel. He begins his explanation with the contrasting word, “But, ” and in just those three letters there lies an ocean filled with the fruit of the Spirit. In essence, Paul is saying, “Even though I suffer, even though I am in prison unjustly, even though many have abandoned me, even though this was not my plan . . . *But* I am not ashamed.”

In this one word there exists enough joy to fill a jail cell. This one word is broad enough and strong enough on which to build a house of faith and a life of trust. For with this word, Paul is showing how he is, in the words of 1 Peter 4:19, “entrusting his soul to a faithful Creator.” No matter what change comes, or what standards of truth fall, Paul is not wringing his hands nor attempting to stir up his own internal strength. For as Paul states, “for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced.”

Paul knows Jesus Christ (Phil 3:10). He believes in him and trusts him and this is the model for how the Christian should live. In times of testing and opposition, what you know is important, but even the Evangelical Stoic knows much. More than what is known is who is known. Do you know Jesus?

We meet him in his word and there we are reminded that he is good. He does not lie and he is

5. *Ibid.*, 33.

gracious to his children. In his word we find truth and strength to resist temptation and fight the evil one. Even when we feel like we are going to break in two, when we come to his word, we are reminded by him that “a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench” (Matt 12:20). That even if you “are so utterly burdened beyond strength and despair of life itself ... that is to make you rely not on yourself but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:8–9).

The core of Paul’s conviction is that God is able. Here there is this further source of related strength that is diametrically opposite the Evangelical Stoicism and the philosophy of “toughing it out.” For Paul knows what the Bible affirms over and over again, that we are not able. We are finite creatures, weighed down with the fragilities brought by sin, staring straight into the truth of Jesus’ words in John 15:5 “Apart from me you can do *nothing*.”

Likewise, the Bible affirms that God is able. For example, when Daniel’s three friends refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s gods and were threatened by him with the furnace of fire, they said, “If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan 3:17–18). The God of the Bible is the God who is able “to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think” (Eph 3:20).

Specifically, Paul is convinced that God is able “to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” Here he is telling Timothy that the reason he can rejoice and endure is because he knows God is able to protect the most important thing, his eternal life. When Paul uses the words “guard” and “entrusted” he conveys the idea of protecting his deposit against robbery. We know from verse 9 that the deposit is namely the Gospel of grace given to Paul, that is, his salvation. Paul is certain that God is able to protect his salvation “until that Day,” the day of Jesus’ return. God secured all of this before time began, and thus will guard it until time ends. Thus, all other matters are temporary in comparison.

What if you could see into the future and know all the outcomes of your circumstances? Would it change your perspective on any present sufferings? Would it change how you endured if you knew how everything was going to turn out?

Paul has seen into the future, and has conviction that is sure. He is convinced God is able. Through the reading of God’s word with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can have the same conviction of hope as Paul. Regardless of the changing moral landscape, the Christian should live with the perspective of rest and contentment in the fact that God is able.

While the specific steps forward in response to our culture might be varied or driven by context, overall the Christian has a choice to engage or retreat. The temptation to retreat either in silence or in indifference will come. Here Paul’s counsel to Timothy not to be ashamed should ring loud and fan in to flame courage. But even for those who nobly stand, even here the temptation will come toward Evangelical Stoicism, with hand-wringing and digging in, seeking to endure in a “Keep Calm and Carry On” fashion. But, as we have seen, this too, is not the Gospel way. For even though the Evangelical Stoic may stand for Gospel truth, standing for any issue in state self-reliance is a form of Gospel abandonment.

In the last quarter of his life, Carl F. H. Henry observed that, “The evangelical movement looks stronger than in fact it is But no earthly movement holds the Lion of the Tribe of Judah by the tail. We may need for a season ... to be engaged in the Lion’s den until we recover an apostolic awe of the Risen Christ, the invincible Head of a dependent body sustained by his supernatural power. Apart from life

in and by the Spirit we are all pseudo-evangelicals.”⁶

Indeed, instead of “The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism” in Henry’s day, we wrestle with “The Self-Reliant Conscience of Evangelical Stoicism.” Yet, as Paul pleads and reminds, the way to live in a sea of social change is to remember that God is able.

In this hopeful spirit of cultural engagement, this issue of *JBMW* begins with five essays. First, Jonathan Akin, pastor of Fairview Church in Lebanon, Tennessee, seeks to answer “Is Proverbs 22:6 a Promise for Parents?” Rachel Jankovic, mother and writer in Moscow, Idaho, gives “A Reminder that Children are Gifts, Blessings, and Arrows.” Greg Gibson, family ministries pastor at Foothills Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, gives counsel to “Let Boys Be Non-Medicated Boys.” And Ben Montoya, a doctoral candidate in New Testament at McMaster Divinity College, offers a rebuttle to a recent allegation that complementarians are similar to ISIS in “Oranges to Hand-grenades.” The final essay by our own Executive Director, Grant Castleberry, “Missing the Target” reflects on gender identity in a world without limits.

This issue also contains three in-depth studies. Andrew Naselli, assistant professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Bethlehem College & Seminary, Minneapolis, Minnesota, illuminates an overlooked reality in “When You Indulge in Pornography, You Participate in Sex Slavery.” Next, Brandon Smith, adjunct professor at Criswell College and brand manager of the Holman Christian Standard Bible, deftly engages “William Webb’s Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic.” Last, Jim Brooks, doctoral candidate in biblical counseling at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, concludes this section with a timely look at “Satan’s War on Marriage.”

Following the essays and studies, this issue contains a sermon on Psalm 139:13-16, “Children are a Divine Blessing Not a Human Right: Biblical Clarity and Gospel Comfort for those Contemplating In Vitro Fertilization (IVF),” by Jason Meyer, pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The *Journal* concludes, finally, with several reviews by Derek Brown, Colin Smothers, Tim Challies, Cody McNutt, Scott Corbin, Trent Hunter, Kimberly Campbell, and Jonathon Woodyard.

For the sporting arena or wartime morale, the Stoicism of “Keep Calm and Carry On” may be a fitting remedy for winning. But for working through how to respond well to changing social standards around the world, we should be singing the P. P. Bliss hymn, “It is Well.”⁷ Indeed, the “It is Well, He is Able” slogan might be more revolutionary for instructing Christians on how they should live in these days of cultural confusion. May this issue of *JBMW* contribute to that end.⁸

6. Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 390.

7. P. P. Bliss, “It is Well with My Soul,” in Ira David Sankey and P. P. Bliss, *Gospel Hymns*, No. 2 (Cincinnati: John Church, 1895), 412. See also Lloyd-Jones’ use of this in *I Am Not Ashamed*, 20.

8. The majority of this editorial is adapted from the author’s forthcoming chapter, “How Should the Christian Live?” in Russell D. Moore and Andrew T. Walker, eds., *The Gospel and Same-Sex Marriage* (Nashville: B&H, 2016).