Evangelicalism, which seemed to hold such promise just several decades ago, appears to be losing its political clout and is in a crisis. It is fragmenting, and appears to have lost its doctrinal center also. Evangelicals are engaged in a major conversation today about how the gospel is to be effectively lived out and promoted. David Fitch weighs in on this with *The End of Evangelicalism*. In six short chapters, Fitch reveals the problem Evangelicals face today while he seeks to recover genuine vitality and effectiveness in mission to the secular world.

David Fitch shows that Evangelical subculture operates on the basis of an ideology (25), built around certain “Master Signifiers.” These are slogans around which a culture or community is built, but they have no real substance behind them. They are vague enough that individuals can fill them whatever content they wish. The group unifies around the “Master Signifier” as each person understands it.

Fitch proposes three Master Signifiers that drive Evangelical subculture, rendering it ineffective in influencing the world. Each of these Master signifiers raises a separate problem. The first of these, “The Inerrant Bible;” produces arrogance and exclusion. The second, “The Decision for Christ,” “shapes us for duplicity” (74) in that we replace genuine life-changing faith with simply going through the motions of “walking the aisle” and “professing faith in Christ.” The third, “The Christian Nation,” leads to “dispassion”—that is Evangelicals end up working through secular political systems to achieve justice rather than through the church. Political action replaces evangelism as evangelicals seek to build a moral nation rather than to be a holy church.

Fitch rightly recognizes that these three do often function as meaningless slogans for Evangelicals. And he is correct that they often lead to negative consequences. We’ve all seen (or perhaps been) the arrogant person who quotes the Bible to win an argument. We struggle with the realization that many in our churches have never met the living Christ; and much of the discussion about cultural engagement today centers around the fact that we know that efforts to “restore America’s heritage” have generally failed.

However, Fitch’s prescriptions for correcting these problems are way off the mark. First, he proposes that we abandon biblical inerrancy, in favor of “a high view of Scripture.” His discussion of this proposal often descends to foolishness, as for example when he says that we should move from “possessing Scripture’s authority as our own to embodying it as the source by which we are ever seeking God revealed in the world” (139). Scripture, by this understanding, is no longer God’s revelation, God’s word. It is, instead, a means to look for God somewhere else other than in scripture—in “the world.” The problems here are obvious—Fitch wants Evangelicals to give up faith in the Bible as a place where God reveals himself, because some people arrogantly mis-use the Bible. The problem is not, as Fitch believes, with the Bible being
understood as God’s word, it is with the wrong attitudes of some Christians. However, Evangelicals are “people of the Book”—people who regard the Bible, not just as “authoritative” but as divine revelation itself. Fitch’s proposal would mean giving up something which is foundational to Evangelical identity.

His proposal to replace “inerrancy” with “a high view of Scripture” has other problems as well. For one thing, it replaces a specific term with a vague one. As a vague, content-less term, it is a “Master Signifier” itself, and is thus precisely the kind of “empty slogan” that Fitch decries in the early part of the book. Why substitute one empty Master Signifier for another? The real answer is for Evangelicals to take a fresh look at inerrancy, infusing the term with fuller meaning, and then to live out that meaning. “Inerrancy” is an empty slogan, only because we choose to read our Bibles first thing in the morning and then ignore it for decision-making. The answer is not to give up an important truth, but to begin living it out.

The same might be said for “the decision for Christ.” There are other “empty slogans” that Evangelicals use that have the same meaning—“accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior” and “have a personal relationship with Jesus” are two. Again, the answer is not to abandon these Master Signifiers, but to infuse them with meaning once again. Fitch’s discussion of this one has some merit in that he wants to replace repeating an empty slogan with serious Christian living in the world. That understanding is good and proper, but it can be done without abandoning language that at one time encapsulated that concept.

As to the “Christian Nation” Fitch is on strong ground. In fact, many Christians today are beginning to realize that America has never really been “our” Nation, and that the mission of Christ here, as in other parts of the world is to engage in a “missionary encounter” with our neighbors and co-workers. There are problems, however. He is right that the Church should be the Body of Christ in the world (160-161); this should be shaped by Scripture, not by a theological tradition, nor by the church’s experience. Scripture alone must be the source of truth by which the church judges its beliefs, its actions, ministry strategies, and results.

David Fitch, despite the problems with his solutions, has cogently confronted some serious problems Evangelicals face. Evangelical leaders should read this book more than once, and think through the implications of building a ministry, and a church, around empty Master Signifiers, devoid of meaning, and how this is robbing Christians of the challenge of living out a genuine faith that really lives by the words we claim as foundational to our identity as believers.

C. Fred Smith
Liberty University