

## **“The Great Evangelical Recession”**

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The outside host culture is quietly but quickly turning antagonistic and hostile toward evangelicals. As George Friedman writes in his forecast, *The Next 100 Years*, “It is simply that the things that appear to be so permanent and dominant at any given moment in history can change with stunning rapidity. Eras come and go.” Twenty-three of twenty-five major evangelical denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, are experiencing declining attendance patterns. People are either strategic thinkers or they are not. It can’t be trained.

“Am I more committed to evangelicalism as we know it, or to Jesus Christ, His kingdom, and His message?” Wise leaders must be aware of what is changing, why it’s changing, and how to prepare. Research can open our eyes to the true state of the church, but God alone through Scripture can inform our hearts as to how we must correct course.

**Here are the and issues and some solutions:**

### **Inflated**

The evangelical church in the United States is not nearly as large as we’ve been told. The fastest growing subcultures in the United States express a militant antagonism against Christians who take the Bible seriously. Total attendance at all evangelical churches is declining in almost every state, according to researchers who track combined attendance across all churches in the United States. More people are leaving smaller churches to attend larger ones—even as the total number of folks attending any evangelical church slowly declines. For the sake of focus, accuracy, and consistency, we’re only examining evangelicals in our research.

Michael Hyatt, a 21st-century thinker and Christian publishing executive, put it well when he observed, “The problem is that insiders are often the ones least capable of seeing things from an outside perspective.” By multiple accounts, evangelical believers are between 7 and 9 percent of the United States population. Of America’s 316 million residents we evangelicals only account for about 22 to 28 million. Of two thousand United States church leaders recently surveyed, some 82 percent said that we are already losing influence as a movement. Their share of the population is not 25 percent, but at most 7 percent of the country and falling. All these numbers come from the churches themselves. Separately, evangelical researchers Thom and Sam Rainer concluded, “Most churches are dwindling. Most denominations are not growing. The population in the United States is exploding . . . the church is losing ground. We are in a steep state of decline.” *Independent Experts Conclude Evangelicalism Is About One-Fourth the Size Often Claimed.*

We're going to see a massive discrepancy between the number of Americans who claim to be born again and the experts' count of evangelicals. A lot of Americans say they're born again, but when prodded, they do not believe what evangelical Christians believe.

Let's now look at four nationally recognized specialists, each with differing credentials, differing motivations, and differing research methodologies. To protect the flow of thought, I won't dissect their research strategies here. However, these experts explain their methodologies in their footnoted works. Separately, all four researchers have found that evangelicals account for 7 to 8.9 percent of the United States population. That is, not even one in ten Americans. In reality the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis.

Ed Stetzer, president of the Southern Baptist research arm, LifeWay, put it this way: "This is not a blip. This is a trend. And the trend is one of decline." Wicker concluded that, using evangelical's own figures, about 7 percent of Americans are evangelicals.

One conclusion: The actual number of evangelical Christians is far less than we've been told, accounting for 7 to 8.9 percent of the United States population, not 40 percent and certainly not 70 percent. According to the specialists, the total number of evangelicals is about 22 million of America's 316 million residents. The point here is simply that, according to a growing host of specialists, our size is dramatically smaller than we have been told. Now, we have seen that in reality, the population of evangelical Christians in the United States is much smaller. It's actually about the population of New York State, around 22 million. So now make New York State the "evangelical" color, and change every other state to the color of nonbelievers. Picture all forty-nine of the other states as nonbelieving. That's the reality of our size in the United States.

## **Hated**

Evangelicalism in the United States has stood strong through centuries of difficulties and setbacks. She has not seen anything quite like what she will see in the next fifty years.

1. The "host" culture is changing faster than most of us (inside and out of the church) realize. New technology does not change a culture's direction. It simply accelerates the change.

2. The direction of accelerating change includes anti-Christian reactionism and pro-homosexuality. Future America is reactionary against Bible-believing christianity

In 2007, the Atlantic reported that Berkley sociologists had documented a sudden and radical antagonism toward organized Christianity, particularly among younger Americans. Unfortunately for evangelicals, the majority of "Christian" and "conservative" Americans will die off in the next thirty years—even prejudice against Bible-believing Christians is not a future thing. It is a present cultural direction that will amplify in the coming decades.

This prejudice against Bible-believing Christians will continue accelerating as it seeps from professors to impressionable students and then into the mainstream culture during the coming decades. History has taught us, from Cambridge and Oxford in England to Harvard and Princeton in the early United States, that the mainstream thought in the university becomes, in time, the mainstream thought in the broader culture.

Future America of 2020–2050 is aggressively pro-homosexual that homosexuality is not a choice, and that it's a right to be protected just as race and gender should be. The gay issue has become the “big one,” the negative image most likely to be intertwined with Christianity's reputation. Now, increasingly, anyone who is not an “ally” and fighting alongside the LGBT community is seen as a hateful bigot. To understand the Bible literally, to believe that homosexual sex is a sin, is political and career-suicide in 21st-century America.

3. The rate of the change toward this direction will further accelerate as the oldest two generations die.

4. These changes will reach a point at which they directly affect church as we know it and life for evangelical Christians as we know it.

## Divided

The precise evangelical focus on the gospel has been lost in the muddy waters of politics, culture wars, and progressive theology. The mainstream evangelical agenda has shifted from politics to social justice. Younger evangelicals are also stepping away from the political right. Younger white evangelicals have become increasingly dissatisfied . . . and are moving away from the GOP. The fastest growing group of evangelicals—non-whites—Is also resisting the political right

The religious right is fading but still an inextricable part of United States evangelical DNA. The right, while weakened, remains an influential and faithful force of great power within evangelicalism. There is a trajectory of increasing divisions within United States evangelicalism. The United States church is crippled, declining, bleeding, broke, and despised, and the remaining church is dividing herself over United States politics.

We have seen that our movement is smaller than we thought and that the leading edges of the host culture are turning antagonistic toward us. We will also see that we're losing most of our kids, and that our evangelism efforts are not keeping pace with population growth. Next, we will see that the fuel our national machine runs on—dollars—is drying up and disappearing. In the midst of all this, or actually as a result of all this, the unified evangelicalism of the 20th century is splintering and fraying, turning against itself.

1. The increasing speed of cultural change will amplify these splits, displacing these groups further and further apart. They see the marriage of Jesus and the American flag as a pollution of Christ, as nationalistic static and extra noise that distracts from Jesus and His kingdom.

2. Evangelicalism will continue fraying and splintering for another reason: postmodern influence on individual thought. Everything is up for debate. Nothing can be taken for granted. Truth is up for grabs. Inerrancy will be doubted and written off by some younger evangelicals who will mean well as they lead churches into that deadly error.

D. A. Carson spotted this when he stated, “There are many people today who call themselves evangelical whom no person would call an evangelical 40 years ago.” What we can safely observe is that the somewhat unified movement of the 20th century is on a trajectory of division, dis-unification, and rupture.

## **Bankrupt**

The generation that gives almost half of total donations began passing away about three years ago. The methods will not work because they are 20th-century methods in a 21st-century world. Responsible leaders must embrace this reality now and begin planning accordingly. Unless giving trends change significantly, evangelical giving across the board may drop by about 70 percent during the next twenty-five to thirty years. Somewhere along the way, unofficially and probably with good intentions, our ministry leaders began counting dollars instead of disciples.

Whether intentional or not, dollar dependence in our host culture has led to an assumed dependence on the dollar to fulfill a commission that originally had nothing to do with material wealth. The movement will be left in a precarious position. The “professional” Christians who are best trained to do the works of evangelism and discipleship will be scrambling to make a living. At the same time, the “sending” class of American evangelicals remains largely untrained in serious evangelism and discipleship.

2. There is a trend of overall decreased giving. If we actually lose half of all gifts in the next thirty years, the consequences will be catastrophic. Half of the pastors you know would be unemployed, as well as half of the professors, para-church employees, and so forth. The newest generations, weaned by a consumer culture both inside and outside the church, have little concept of consistent or sacrificial giving.

3. The death of the biggest giving generation by multiple accounts, American evangelical donations are on course to drop by almost half in the next fourteen years and by two-thirds in the next thirty years. The shift away from evangelical values and beliefs grows more radical with each younger generation.

4. The unreliability and unpredictability of ensuing generations. Responsible leaders must begin planning, not only for a decrease in overall donations, but also for instability in donations. Zech reasons that as younger American generations grow increasingly suspicious of institutions, they also grow less likely to donate to any institution, including an evangelical one.

So long as we rely on a dollar-centric ministry model, the health of our church is reduced to a by-product of the economy, the creativity of fundraisers, and the stewardship of incoming generations that have proven to be stingy, indebted, and unreliable; the massive loss of involvement by younger evangelicals.

## **Bleeding**

Scott is one of about 260,000 evangelical young people who walk away from Christianity every year. Research indicates that more than half of those born into evangelicalism are leaving the movement during their twenties. *The Lost Generation: The Statistic Nobody Wants to Face*. I found that in separate studies Josh McDowell, LifeWay Research, the Barna Group, and secular researchers, including at UCLA, have all landed at figures between 69 and 80 percent of evangelicals in their twenties who leave the faith. Josh McDowell reports that 69 percent of evangelical teens leave the church after high school.

LifeWay Research found that 70 percent of Christian church attendees from the millennial generation quit attending church by age twenty-three. Barna estimates that from every five young evangelicals, four will “disengage” from the church by age twenty-nine. “What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?” LifeWay researchers have found that 35 percent of prodigals find their way back into evangelical church attendance, while 65 percent do not.

Next Christian View of God: “If He Exists, He Exists to Make Me Happy.” In his book *Soul Searching*, Smith writes that the common creed among American evangelical teens is “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” we are failing at discipleship. That is, we are failing at the core command Jesus gave to His followers. Jesus did not call His church to build buildings or websites or worship services. He called His followers to “make disciples.”

“My research suggested that people are simply not being pastored,” Duin writes. The church at large appears to be failing to train and nurture disciples, either through church programs or through one-on-one relationships. We are failing to disciple our people into transformed thinking or living. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.” Somewhere along the way, our focus on programs and techniques, dollars, ministry size, and perhaps even powerful worship distracted us from the basics.

## **Sputtering**

*The Simple Measure of Health: New Disciples*. Are we making disciples? Not just convincing converts, but making disciples? Not just filling the seats in auditoriums, but training the souls of transformed individuals? Are we valuing the quality of our discipleship more than the quantity of our attendance? Jesus’ command focuses on the quality, rather than the quantity of disciples. This is, according to the New Testament, how we respond to an aggressive and hostile host culture—by taking God’s goodness straight into the darkness.

As documented in chapter 2 (Hated), evangelicals are on a crash course with the homosexual people group—due to tectonic shifts in cultural assumptions and values. Time and again, God repeats His strategy: Live “good” lives among pagans. Meeting the Lost Where They Are; it’s What Christ Did.

1. Take God’s goodness directly to the homosexual tribe in your life and community. Don’t wait for them to come to you. We have, in many cases, treated the souls in our mission field as if they were the spiritual enemy—rather than hostages we are called to liberate from the enemy.

2. Refuse to classify the homosexual tribe as some worse class. This is unbiblical and showcases poor theology. In Jesus’ view, all humans who are not yet reconciled to God fall into the same category—regardless of human labels. The most egregious sins in our religious system are, conveniently, the ones that we are less attracted to ourselves. Scripture never speaks of any one sin separating us from God less than other sins. Incidentally, if we were to argue scripturally that any single sin is the “worst,” it would be either religious hypocrisy or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

3. As with any tribe, don’t focus on changing behavior. Focus on changing relationship to God through Christ.

4. Don’t be surprised when you are hated and misunderstood about this issue. You will be.

5. When you are hated or misunderstood, don’t defend yourself or other evangelicals. Instead, let your quiet good actions eclipse any accusations. Successful 21st-Century Evangelicals will put less stock in words and more stock in actions

6. Keep on demonstrating God’s goodness and unconditional love—to the spiritual foreigners closest to you.

## **Uniting**

“In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Christ.”

This is The Simple Formula for Evangelical Unity. In an age of pluralism and postmodern approaches to truth, we need clarity and boldness about the evangelical essentials. Some who claim to be evangelical are suggesting we can emphasize Jesus’ love, while doubting the accuracy or authority of Jesus’ Word.

We evangelicals believe Scripture is authoritative, true, understandable, and infallible. This is an essential. And it’s one that we must fearlessly fortify, in order to protect the coherence, unity, and purpose of the movement. Other teachers are painting over scriptural authority, accepting Scripture as a narrative but not as objective truth. Now many evangelicals take delight in defining themselves over and against one of these formerly cardinal doctrines, while insisting on the right to be called evangelicals.”

We can also be clear that teachers who do not hold to Scripture's authority are not historically or theologically evangelical. I'm calling evangelical leaders across the United States to put a flag in the ground, to graciously proclaim in unity that the movement away from scriptural authority is not the direction of 21st-Century Evangelicalism.

### “In Non-Essentials, Charity”

It was the balance of tenacious outer boundaries and gracious inner disagreements that made United States evangelicalism so globally powerful and unique. True evangelicalism is uncompromising on the essentials and unconditionally gracious on the non-essentials. Safe within the protection of the essentials, we can increasingly agree to disagree on peripheral matters. It means we no longer have the luxury of dividing ourselves internally.

Unifying Politically Divided Evangelicals. Intentionally avoiding associating Christ's message with any one political party or politician, is what to expect politically in the 21st-Century Evangelical Church. When folks ask your ministry to endorse a specific political candidate or position, you might let them know that their position is respected, but that there is room in your ministry to respectfully disagree on earthly politics. To make any earthly political position a litmus of orthodoxy is not scripturally, historically, or philosophically evangelical. Both the hyper-separatism of fundamentalism and the open boundaries of theological liberalism proved to destroy churches and denominations during the last eighty years.

### **Solvent**

Unless generational patterns change radically, many ministries will see revenue decrease by 50 to 70 percent in the next ten to thirty years. Ultimately, they will depend less on dollars and more on disciples.

Hybrid Ministry: Learn and launch ministry models that do not depend solely on paid staff. Unpaid or alternative staff can greatly reduce the need for donation fuel, while also moving us toward a more biblical gift-based and disciple-based model. Hybrid ministry compels us to use every gift in the body—not just the ones that fit a full-time salaried position in a 20th-century model. In short, the solution is disciples. Not dollars. This alternative energy source was the primary engine of the early church. It is, to this day, the engine of radically growing churches on other continents. Will we spend the next decade working harder and harder at fundraising—or working harder and harder at disciple making?

Conservation: Avoid debt obligations beyond the next ten years. Preparation: Teach mature givers about the recession. Create legacy vehicles, such as bequeathals or ministry trusts, so their gifts can outlive them. United States evangelicals now account for less than 20 percent of the global evangelical church. And yet, we hold 80 percent of the worldwide wealth of evangelicals.

Abandon: Disciple the church in life surrender and biblical tithing.

The Barna Group has found that 17 percent of evangelicals claim to tithe 10 percent of their income to the church, while fewer than 6 percent actually do. One Christian giving expert estimates, “If members of historically Christian churches in the United States had raised their giving the Old Testament’s minimum standard of giving (10 percent of income) in 2000, an additional \$139 billion a year would become available.” The financial crisis is not a shortage of funds. It is a shortage of commitment. We have so few disciples because we have a shortage of disciple-making leaders in our ministries. Successful ministries will survive the donation crisis by discipling their people into biblical living and giving.

## Healing

The body is bleeding out because its leaders, its servants, and its people have forgotten how to make disciples as Jesus described and modeled. What we are failing at is real ministry. Not commercial or mass-marketed events, but real ministry in real lives. We need to put pressure on the bleeding wounds of the body by resurrecting and rediscovering biblical discipleship, which requires a shift in mindset—a shift away from 20th-century, number-driven models into 21st-century, individual-focused models. Disciples cannot be mass-produced. Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time.”

Healing the loss of our people—young and old—will require a shift in how we measure health. George Barna has found that most United States churches measure their success or failure by attendance: Our research discovered that when Protestant churches attempt to evaluate their success one of the primary elements they gauge is attendance.

Rather than evaluate spiritual growth, most churches settle for measuring numerical growth, even though a variety of studies have shown there is little correlation between those two metrics. We are shouldering the business and programs of a late-20th-century church model, wondering when we or anyone else will have time to do some discipleship or shepherding.

The Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development has learned the following from multiple surveys of evangelical and reformed pastors. These quotes have been edited for brevity: 90 percent are frequently fatigued, and worn out on a weekly and even daily basis. 71 percent are burned out and battle depression beyond fatigue on a weekly and even a daily basis.

81 percent said there was no regular discipleship program or effective effort of mentoring their people or teaching them to deepen their Christian formation at their church. 26 percent regularly had personal devotions and felt they were adequately fed spirituality. 23 percent felt happy and content on a regular basis with who they are in Christ, in their church, and in their home.

Discipleship is not an option or a theory. How heated and passionate we become when defending our complacency, our apathy toward Christ's discipleship mandate. We have abandoned the work He modeled for three years because we have been too busy with remarkable, demanding, measurable efforts. Releasing Leaders From Human Expectations "Energy Flows Where Attention Goes." We have focused on so many other good things that we have not focused on genuine relational discipleship.

If we want to disciple as Christ disciplined, and if we want to rediscover the Chief Shepherd's love for His sheep, we must release expectations that aren't from Him. Often, we ourselves have invited these expectations into our hearts, likely from insecurity, pride, or emotional need. Give yourself permission to abandon some 20th-century expectations, in order to recapture your calling, your passion, and your shepherd's heart.

Loving God's People. The American church has traded shepherding—the highest call of a pastor—for management. In the worst cases, we have traded it for showmanship and social engineering. In other contexts, one committed shepherd-pastor is attempting to do all the shepherding in a large flock, without time or space to reproduce other leaders through discipleship. My calling is to proclaim that if we do not resurrect discipleship and shepherding across United States evangelical churches, our body will continue bleeding out.

That is, we love more of them by focusing on a few of the faithful. We train the few to love others, who will in turn love and train others. We love the multitudes by training the few. In our late-20th-century model, many of our pastors are most gifted in administration and/or teaching, not shepherding. Some of our strongest teachers and leaders are the weakest at relationships. Leaders need not be personally discipling hundreds of people, but they had better be training a small team of future leaders, as Jesus and Paul did.

## **Re-Igniting**

Our greatest potential for reaching the lost is not a celebrity leader, but millions of less-known everyday believers. When it comes to sustained numeric growth across generations, institutional stability, financial viability, and cultural influence, our best insurance is not deep pockets or corporate planning but individual disciple-making.