

THE  
**VANISHING**  
EVANGELICAL

SAVING THE CHURCH FROM ITS OWN SUCCESS  
BY RESTORING WHAT **REALLY MATTERS**

CALVIN MILLER



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Calvin Miller, *The Vanishing Evangelical*  
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# Preface

I want to deal with only two questions as I begin this book. The first is an issue of basic definitions as I try to answer the question: Who are evangelicals? The second question is: Who are my sources?

## Who Are Evangelicals?

At the outset of our time together in the following pages, I want to spend a few paragraphs on this most basic definition. I do it because almost everyone who is an evangelical uses the term with a bit of pride and confidence, but almost no two of them have exactly the same definition. A most casual but none-too-defining definition is this one from Got Questions Ministries:

Evangelicalism is a somewhat broad term used to describe a movement within Protestantism that is characterized by an emphasis on having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship begins when a person receives Christ's forgiveness and is spiritually reborn. Those who ascribe to this belief are called evangelicals.<sup>1</sup>

This is a most minimal definition, and even so is not totally correct since many who are *born again* do not consider themselves *evangelicals*.

Being an evangelical is really a kind of mystique bound up in conservative theology. The term seems to exist on two levels. On the *mystique* level it suggests a whole set of attitudes and faith practices that are not bound up in traditional church covenants or doctrines. The word is also *activistic*. Those who call themselves evangelicals tend to hold to traditional views of morality, creation, and miracles as well as the view of God in history. Further, evangelicals tend to believe in the consummation of the ages with at least some of its biblical and apocalyptic imagery.

On the other hand, it generally carries with it a doctrinal sub-base that grew out of American fundamentalism in the early to midyears of the nineteenth century. For further reading on this subject, I recommend George Marsden's book *Reforming Fundamentalism*.<sup>2</sup> In 1948 during the formation of the *new evangelicalism*, as it came to be called in the late 1950s, Carl F. H. Henry said, "Evangelical Christianity is once again, as in the early days of church history, a minority movement in a universally antagonistic environment."<sup>3</sup>

In 1947 Fuller Theological Seminary was founded by evangelicals who felt it was time to deal with the liberal voices of the denominational scholars of that time. Carl F. H. Henry further asked, "Is evangelicalism's only message today the proclamation of individual rescue? . . . Or has this evangel implications also for the most pressing social problems of our day?"<sup>4</sup>

The doctrines upon which Fuller was founded were very much the same as the fundamentals of the faith that defined fundamentalism:

So the fundamental doctrines for which they fought included the virgin birth of Christ, his miracles, his bodily resurrection, his substitutionary atonement for sin, his second coming. Of particular

importance was the nature of the authority of Scripture. Modernists . . . emphasized the Bible's human origins; fundamentalists countered by affirming its inerrancy in history and science as well as in faith and doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Inasmuch as there is a written list of the tenets of evangelical faith, this is at least where it all began. In the formation of the term *evangelical*, there were huge arguments whether it should include *antimodernism*, *dispensationalism*, and *separatism* from other denominations that did not profess these things. Some thought so and some thought not. So this is the basic belief list of evangelicals. However, in a later chapter I mention that when modern evangelicals were polled, only a fraction agreed that they believed in all of these doctrines.

So I agree almost entirely with the shorter definition quoted from “Got Questions” above. Using this looser definition, I have tried to widen the concurrence to speak of evangelicals as those who self-identify as such. Generally speaking, the definition used in this book includes those who have personal faith in Jesus Christ and believe in his atoning sacrifices, miracles, virgin birth, resurrection, and second coming, as well as the all-important doctrine of redemption. Even on these more unitive definitions, there are differences in beliefs on how salvation occurs, the manner of his resurrection, and certainly on the nature of his second coming.

But given our togetherness on these more general and specific issues, you are evangelical the moment you agree to the label. I do agree, and I like the label.

## Who Are My Sources?

While this book has relied on a vast amount of sources to support the content, I want to specifically acknowledge a few people who have done more than most to inform my understanding.

First of all, Jacques Barzun, whose magnificent work on culture, *From Dawn to Decadence*, was published in the year 2000 when he was ninety-three years of age. The subtitle of his book

Look at the youth walking the streets with ears plugged to a portable radio: he is tied to the lives of Marconi and of the composer being broadcast.

Such a youth is a bundle of three tragedies: First, he doesn't care about either Marconi or the composer. Second, he's never heard of them, and third, he could possibly be enrolling in seminary, spreading his ignorance and apathy far and wide, proving that Evangelicalism dies even faster when it is apathetic and uninformed. It is almost impossible to fit Jesus into a world we neither know nor care about.

Jacques Barzun<sup>6</sup>

is *500 Years of Western Cultural Life from 1500 to the Present*. One reason Barzun can be trusted for a Christian understanding in the West is that he begins his evaluation of our current cultures with the Reformation.

Barzun's exploration of culture is the premise on which I have proceeded to write. He writes that *decadence is adapting to culture; revolution is forcing the culture to adapt*. More simply put, revolution is an issue of power; decadence is an evidence of powerlessness. Decline always occurs when movements decide to adapt rather than force adaptation on the culture around them. American evangelicalism in every sense is adapting. We look around at secular culture and

ask ourselves, "How can we get people to come to church?" The answer is, "Don't ask anything much of them, and rewrite the Christian way of life to look as much like the secular way of life as possible so they can move from one to the other without even flinching." Barzun says, "It takes only a look at the numbers to see that the twentieth century is coming to an end. A wider and deeper scrutiny is needed to see that in the West the culture of the last 500 years is ending at the same time."<sup>7</sup> Naturally, if American evangelicalism is decadent, it becomes further obvious that it is exerting increasingly less change within the culture to which it is

accommodating itself. The new form it is taking is too borrowed to be either unique or transformational.

The second primary influence on my reasons for writing this book is Philip Jenkins. His book *The Next Christendom* challenges evangelicals to take a long look at the success we supposed ourselves to be having. Like Barzun, his reflections run back and forth over the past five hundred years. His assessment is:

We are currently living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religions worldwide. Over the past five centuries or so, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America. Until recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in White nations, allowing theorists to speak smugly, arrogantly, of “European Christian” civilization. Conversely, radical writers have seen Christianity as an ideological arm of Western imperialism. . . . Over the past century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America.<sup>8</sup>

In most ways Barzun comments on the Christian culture more as one of the factors of Western (and therefore evangelical) decline. Jenkins, on the other hand, writes directly to the issue of missiology and its ebbing influence in the West. But Western evangelicals in many ways seem to be deluded by their own cultural prominence. They are so dominant in America that they have convinced themselves they have all the vitality.

Secular values, both ethical and medical (not that they are entirely separate), have come to replace Christian

I consider this to be Philip Jenkins's most dismal prophecy:

The stereotype holds that Christians are un-black, un-poor and un-young. If this is true, then the growing secularization can only mean that Christianity is in its dying days. Globally the faith of the future must be Islam.<sup>9</sup>



values in every corner of culture. Sexual cohabitation has overwhelmed our former understanding of committed monogamy. Political correctness and libertinism has replaced every understanding of propriety and cultural modesty. The reasons we put forth to prove we are still a force have to do somewhat with the *emergent church* and even more so the *megachurch*. But size alone cannot give a dying movement vitality. That can only occur through life inherent in real growth by conversions and a thriving missionary conscience. In these areas, as Philip Jenkins denotes, we are woefully lacking.

The final major influence on my thinking has been Thomas Friedman and his weighty volume *The World Is Flat*. I didn't arrive at the importance of his book in one step. I have followed

On December 16, 2005, *The New York Times* carried a story reporting that the average American college graduate's literacy in English had declined significantly over the past decade. . . . Only 31% of graduates demonstrated those high level skills. . . . The literacy of college graduates had dropped because a rising number of young Americans had spent their time watching television and surfing the Internet.

Thomas Friedman<sup>10</sup>

Neil Postman for years, and his book *Technopoly* was for me a stepping-stone into Friedman. But both of them pushed me to the understanding that while technology is the new god of our age, it has brought about a certain *flatness* to all of culture that it touches. Unfortunately, as Friedman confesses, it has not led us to be really creative; instead we are only copycat inventors.

Michael Arguello, a systems architect living in San Antonio, confessed to Friedman, "I taught at a local university. It was disheartening to see the poor work ethic of many of my students. Of the students I've taught over six semesters, I'd only consider hiring two of them. The rest lacked the creativity, problem solving abilities and passion for learning."<sup>11</sup>

One would think the computer revolution would have given evangelicals a new creative force that would have allowed them to

conquer the world in better time. Alas, it allowed them only to copy each other's methodologies in worship and even in scholarship. Evangelicals who still had enough faith to want to win people to Christ sublimated their zeal into *computertronics* that led them all to want to write, whether they had anything to say or not, and to imbed their souls in churchy videos that they discarded after only a week or two, moving on to copying someone else's brainchild. Meanwhile, in less techie cultures, a real zeal the American Christians could not imitate was born. Hence in an odd way, serving Friedman's technological philosophy, young evangelicals seem to have taken two wives: the first concubine was Barzun's secular decadence and the second was Friedman's flat earth. Too bad our decline seems to be rooted in such low soil.

After writing her brilliant book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, Nancy Pearcey published *Saving Leonardo*, which she subtitled *A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals and Meaning*. This latter book was insightful as to why contemporary Christianity is succumbing to the secularizing and dehumanizing culture in which Christianity is struggling to hold on to the uniqueness of its voice. I have quoted far less from Robert Bork's *Slouching towards Gomorrah*, probably because it is a slightly older source but nonetheless a hugely insightful work on the moral decay in the West. The same may be said for Neil Postman's *Technopoly*. There are many more books and authors who have influenced me: Christopher Lasch, Dave Tomlinson, Leonard Sweet, and both the Barna Group and the Schaeffer Institute.

For these and the innumerable other pundits I have leaned on, I am most grateful. A purely original book written with no help from the wider world would be mainly worthless. I have also opined and quoted from my own observations as a long-term pastor and professor. My views often come from the frustration of seeing evangelicalism's weak reply to the secular cannonade leveled at it by the current culture.

I am an evangelical. I love all that we are: our heritage, our institutions, our scholars. I adore our free worship, our vehement creativity, our freedom from restrictive traditions, our passion for missions, our courage in the face of debilitating doctrinal attacks. I love our left wing, our right wing, our constantly shifting center. I love the passion we own when we try to speak for God. I love the way we speak for God, when we are sure of ourselves and when we are not. I love the fact that secular politicians have to pay attention to us because it is dangerous to ignore us. I pledge allegiance to our future. I want to stay on this planet as long as I can, just to get a glimpse of what that future will look like. And if the vision is good, I want to help with it. But if we don't do everything right, then this book is written in the hope that we can sometimes do things well. At least we may all endeavor to do them better.

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Birmingham, Alabama  
2012



**PART 1**

# The Current State of an Inexplicit Gospel

After attending a Christmas Eve service, Larry Crabb wrote:

The sermon, carefully scripted, but engagingly delivered, also declared a clear message: we can see the face of God in all God's children, in all people, Christian, Jew, Muslim, skeptic, whoever. Conversion isn't necessary. Acceptance is the route to peace. At least that's how I heard it.

The pastor went on. We live in the darkness of exclusivism that brings loneliness and judgment. But the light of Jesus has dawned. And we live in His light when we love all people as they are and open ourselves to being loved in return. I heard nothing to suggest that conversion from something wrong to something right, from lies to truth, from Satan to Jesus, was necessary. If it was, it has already happened, to everyone. The money is already in the bank. All that's left to do is spend it. Don't hate; love. Don't exclude or judge; include, accept. That was the message. . . .

I felt a momentary urge to rip the clip-on microphone off the pastor's robes and shout to the crowd, "Are you saved? Do you realize that the child born in Bethlehem was the man who went to Calvary to die for your sins and mine? Do you really believe that you're nice people enjoyed by a nice God as you live nice lives?"

I suppressed the urge. . . .

Church as I know it usually leaves deep parts of me dormant, unawakened, and untouched.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. THE EDGE OF RELEVANCE

Every year, 2.7 million church members fall into inactive status. This translates into the realization that people are leaving the church. From our research, we have found that they are leaving as hurting and wounded victims of some kind of abuse, disillusionment, or just plain neglect.

From 1990 to 2000, the combined membership of all Protestant denominations in the United States declined by almost 5 million members (9.5 percent), while the US population increased by 24 million (11 percent).

At the turn of the last century (1900), there was a ratio of 27 churches per 10,000 people, as compared to the close of this century (2000) where we have 11 churches per 10,000 people in America. What has happened?

Given the declining numbers and closures of churches as compared to new church starts, there should have been over 38,000 new churches commissioned to keep up with the population growth.

Richard Krejcir<sup>2</sup>

## 2. WHEN BIG ISN'T GREAT

At its most basic descriptive level, a megachurch is a congregation that has two thousand or more worship attenders in a week. However, size alone is an insufficient characterization of this distinctive religious reality. The megachurch is a new structural and spiritual organization unlike any other. In order to understand fully the dynamics of megachurches, they must be seen as a collective social phenomenon rather than as individual anomalous moments of spectacular growth or uniquely successful spiritual entrepreneurial ventures.

Scott Thumma<sup>3</sup>

# 1

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## The Edge of Relevance

In short, the New Testament writers were completely consumed with Christ. He was their message, their teaching, their proclamation, their very life. And everything else flowed out of intimate fellowship with him.

Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola<sup>1</sup>

Futurists sometimes make a decent living by being dour. Optimists are not as well paid, but they own a rosy talent to see every half-empty glass as half full. In this book I have tried to live halfway between these extremes. Why? Because I believe the midpoint between futurism and optimism is realism. Realism is unsettling because it is that uneasy place where we choose to live and sometimes agree to feel bad because we don't feel altogether good. I volunteered to live in this mental state as I wrote this book.

There is a general agreement about the downward spiral of evangelical vitality and church growth statistics. I suppose there has been a strong sense of lament amongst all of us who have held

high hopes for all the vitality that once encompassed the movement. One thing seems certain though: there seems no corporate way to save the whole movement. Like most evangelicals, I have hoped and prayed for a grand movement that would stop the bleeding. But I have found not much reward for the hoping. I am reminded of an old bumper sticker I once read: “I’m having a better time since I’ve given up all hope.”

This gloomy forecast I suspect is widespread. George Barna, on whom we all rely a great deal, confessed at the front of the book *Futurecast* that even he has come to believe there will be no grand respite. Since there are no grand highways to resurrection, I feel we must return to the most vital of all possibilities—reformation that begins with the birth of a new individualism that in time may pave a broad way back to our corporate vitality. This is the way people become Christians in the first place: one at a time. Perhaps this one-at-a-time process is the most logical way to return to all we have lost. More about this in the closing chapters.

For now, let me take a strong stand in favor of American evangelicalism. I am an evangelical and love being one, so I have written this book with some reluctance. After all, who wants to criticize his family? I am often asked, “Are you a prophet?” Like Amos of Tekoa, my only answer to the question is, “I [am] neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet” (Amos 7:14). But I have always been good at trend extension, and I am very good at realism. As far as I can see down that road where all evangelicals must soon travel, I am honest. I don’t see myself as a change agent of the future, only a reporter of our current milieu. Even so, having examined the trends, my first question is: Where is this slow-down movement called evangelicalism really going? The trend lines do not look good. It’s not just the slow-down that bothers me but the rate of the slow-down that is so troubling. Generally I have noticed that the events of any movement that has been moving in one direction continue to move in that direction until they reach a conclusion.



Great movements like American evangelicalism rarely come to a complete and final stop. They end in a reduced state of trickled-down vitality. There will always be evangelicals, of course; the question is how many and for how long?

## How Do We Define Evangelicals?

The word *evangelical* is hard to define. Thirty-eight percent of those who refer to themselves as *born again* do not want to refer to themselves as evangelicals. Also, of those adults who say they are evangelicals, 40 percent do not base their salvation on Jesus Christ and his forgiveness. The categories are as hard to pin down as it would be to number Democrats in a US census. These evangelicals or would-be evangelicals move like ghosts in and out of these elusive categories.

What do evangelicals really believe? This is another elusive category.

Robert Bellah, in *Habits of the Heart*, spoke of Sheila, who said she believed in *Sheilaism*.<sup>2</sup> Sheilaism has become the standard doctrine of these days. Among evangelicals, Bill believes in *Billism* and Cindy believes in *Cindyism*.

The Jacques Derrida school of thought is now the rubber-stamp definition of political correctness. The Derrida philosophy states that no truth is true for everyone. Each truth must first be deconstructed and then reconstructed within the worldview of each individual believer. The Nicene Creed (and for that matter the Apostles' Creed) has been replaced by Sheila's creed. We have so altered theology and doctrine

One thing must be said of *Sheilaism*: it is a doctrine born in suburban sociology and not among the scholars. In the past century as cities sprawled, theology bubbled out across the widening spaces and the new latitudes traded personal permissiveness for theological depth. All constants disappeared.

Robert Bellah<sup>3</sup>

that our creeds must have room to be individualized. The content of those creeds is not based on a religious category—certainly not Sheilism. On the other hand, when you individualize every creed, is there any real creed left, since creeds themselves are meant to collect individuals into groups of common doctrines? The United Church of God has simplified the Bible and all denominational quarrels by saying that all creeds and confessions boil down to two things, and those two things are a clear focus on God and humankind.

Everything God requires of his people, and every tenet of right living in the Bible, is founded on two basic principles—loving God and loving our fellow man.

United Church of God<sup>4</sup>

But what do things look like for the state of the church these days? Pastor Rick Warren has taught us to focus on church health, but what is the real outlook for evangelical health? In a *USA Today* article entitled “More Americans Tailoring Religion to Fit Their Needs,” Cathy Lynn Grossman says:

If World War II-era warbler Kate Smith sang today, her anthem could be “*Gods Bless America*.” That’s one of the key findings in newly released research that reveals America’s drift from clearly defined religious denominations to faiths cut to fit personal preferences and [that] are invalid in any corporate sense. . . . George Barna says, with a wry bit of exaggeration, America is headed for “310 million people with 310 million religions.” . . . Barna laments, “People say, ‘I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want.’”<sup>5</sup>

Here’s the rub. If it is true that only through individuals can we begin a reformation, can we among our highly individualized sea of believers ever hope for enough unity to pull together any corporate statement of faith that can harmonize the differences? It’s a fair question. But without having some tolerance among the eclectic Christian groups, can we ever arrive at the kind of unity it takes to promote missions or ministries of any size or force?

This much we do know: the constants are gone. The Apostles' Creed has changed to: "I believe in God the Father Almighty who, along with the big bang, created the heavens and the earth, and in Jesus Christ his Son, born in the normal x-y chromosomes way." This way, Bible reading always confirms our prejudice and leaves us with that warm fuzzy feeling that God agrees with us on every major point of our privatized doctrine.

The statement about believing the Bible in the quotation above is grossly overestimated. Nearly every evangelical I know, beginning with myself, is quick to say, "I believe the Bible," and most of us read it quite often, yet we never seem to come out at the same place. I have a few pro-choice friends who actually read the Bible and believe it confirms their biases on abortion. The problem is that the Bible is no longer the agreed-upon centerpiece of evangelical thought. Nobody anywhere reads the Bible and comes to anyone else's common agreement. That's because we all read it through a series of filters. Pentecostals read it through Pentecostal filters, reading and seeing mostly what they agree with. So do Baptists and Presbyterians. Baptists who don't believe in women in ministry leadership read quite fast over passages that don't seem to support their views. Episcopalians read the miracle passages more rapidly than do political conservatives in my own denomination.

Lifeway Research took a survey of nine hundred pastors, 62 percent of whom said that over the next ten years the importance of denominations would diminish greatly. Even now most people have

While we conservatives were decrying the modern liberal bias, we didn't realize we had developed our own modern conservative bias. We put the Bible through a different colander. The result? Hardly any conservative churches actually encounter the Bible any more. Instead we read edited versions, annotated with commentary, sliced and diced and strained through a number of conservative filters—Dispensational, charismatic, Reformed, whatever.

Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo<sup>6</sup>

no significant need to be labeled with a denominational tag. Dave Tomlinson and his wife testified that at the Greenbelt Arts Festival in the U.K. they met many attendees who treated the festival as their private church, even though the Greenbelt gathering is only a once-a-year festival.<sup>7</sup>

## Corrupting the Evangelical Mission

We have some precedents to guide us through the coming loss of our vitality. As we live through the wake of our decline, in all likelihood we will move in exactly the same downward spiral as other

*Christian* nations who have preceded us in their own history of decay.

These people are just the tip of the iceberg. Tens of thousands of people continue to practice their faith privately while finding no real relevance for the church in their lives.

Dave Tomlinson<sup>8</sup>

*Evangelical* is a powerful category in American politics. At the ballot box it is a word to be reckoned with—like the words *Tea Party*. But let us take care. Almost all of the nations of Europe still have a Christian Democratic party, but the word *Christian* is an adjective that is

more a political modifier than a faith adjective. Could this same destiny await the American adjective *evangelical*? These *God words* remain in our political vocabulary long after they have lost their spiritual force.

The pattern is fixed by precedents. If we accept the trends that have affected others, we will in time also become snared in the whirlpool of our own insipid, privatized faith. Like those we emulate, we will become sluggish, gelid, and comatose. The drift is swift. It was never the intention of British, Canadian, and Australian churches to move so rapidly toward their current lethargic state. After all, it was Britain who in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries burned with zeal toward missions. They could not in that

era of vitality visualize themselves as ever being secularized at such a rapid rate. Canada, in its more rural past, was ablaze with a passion for missions, church growth, and Christian education. Similarly Australia, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was a strong example of missionary passion.

Oddly, our decline may lie in some failures of our missions movement, which sometimes seemed to be as much about exporting Western ideas as it was about taking the gospel to all nations. The problem with the venture was that it was fraught with a traditional mold that rarely stopped to ask whether our traditions and liturgies would really work for the cultures in which we wanted to plant our missionary outposts. As a result, in many of the nations we went to missionize, we only Westernized. And we did that so thoroughly that they often ended up more Western than Christian.

In author Barbara Kingsolver's hugely successful novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, a missionary girl in the Belgian Congo recalls, "We came from Bethlehem, Georgia, bearing Betty Crocker cake mixes into the jungle."<sup>9</sup>

I can remember seeing an article in a particular missions journal that may explain why Americans met with so much resistance in many non-Christian lands. It told of a Young Girls Auxiliary coronation with African children dressed in formal clothes I'm sure they had taken out of a missions barrel. I remember how odd they looked in the American styles of the times, which never were in vogue in Africa. This never seemed to register with those American missionaries who dressed the African girls in such Western garb.

## Beyond Pendulums

Throughout this book I will reiterate this principle: I don't believe in pendulums. I think pendulums themselves are to blame for how I feel about them. I am a mechanical clock lover, and I

have three or four of them all ticking away in my home. But these swinging appendages that tick and tock their way through time don't really go anywhere. They just move back and forth, and in truth they are like the movements they emulate: a bit boring. They don't move time, they only measure it. Pendulums were proved by Galileo to be influenced by the geocosmic forces of the planet. I long ago set them aside to opt for a more biblical view of time.

The Bible specifically, and the book of Hebrews generally, reject all views that fashion time as a helix that spirals its way through the centuries, seeming to repeat itself at every turn. On the con-

Galileo is said to have discovered the theory of pendulums during a boring sermon in the cathedral at Pisa when he was seventeen years old. They seem to swing back to where they were, but not quite to where they were. With each swing their arc is diminished, until they do not swing at all. So perhaps Galileo and I are saying the same thing: there is no real return to our previous state of strength.

trary, the Jews saw time as linear, beginning with God's genesis in creation and moving in a straight line through the law, the prophets, and the gospel to the apocalypse, and then straight ahead to the end of all things. All things? Even American evangelicalism? Yes, even that. No repeats, no returns, no pendulums.

In the wake of current trends, where every church growth guru encourages us to be discouraged, evangelists who are trying to be upbeat often say, "Don't you think the pendulum will

soon swing back?" And I answer their cliché with one of my own: "I don't believe in pendulums!" This usually stops all conversations except from the hyperspiritual, who often quote Matthew 16:18 and say that Jesus promises he is going to build his church on a rock and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He did say that, and it is true. But this book is not out to refute Jesus. I do, of course, agree with Jesus! There will always be a church, and that church will always grow and show vitality—somewhere.

This book is about American evangelicalism. Jesus didn't found that. It was a subsidiary movement, founded and made in America. The church founded outside of Jerusalem a couple of millennia ago is still in good shape.

In his outstanding book *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins helps us explain ourselves to ourselves. We can read and take some comfort in the fact that while the evangelical church is fading in North America, the church of Jesus Christ is thriving in great numbers in the *global South*.<sup>10</sup> It is there to the south of us where the Lord seems to be adding to the church daily people who are being saved (Acts 2:47). It seems he is no longer adding many new believers on the topside of the globe—up in North America. It makes us sad to have to accede that the good stuff is

happening somewhere else in the world. We feel bad that we are the anemic *global North*. We are weary of trying to pump up a sliding cause. Why? Because the lost up where we live can no longer find Christ in the spongy fields of our privatized beliefs.

The situation is so dire that missiologists now place the United States as the third largest unreached people group (after China and India). What is so unusual about this is that it doesn't look that way. Most of the evangelical cable channels are still intact, just as they were in the 1980s. The Christian book market, while not in full force, is still here. Most major newspapers (which are about the only things doing culturally worse than evangelicalism) still have large religion pages. And ever and anon (every four years at least) most evangelicals vote as a bloc, vastly influencing elections.

Because the Republican Party understands the role of faith in changing society . . . it not only appeals to evangelicals, but it's openly solicitous of their ideas and their opinions. The Democratic Party just does not do that. I do not get any phone calls from Democratic Party leaders, nor their candidates, to inquire as to what evangelicals think. . . . Evangelicals aren't—myths notwithstanding—the GOP of prayer. I mean, we're not. But the Democrats don't even reach out.

Richard Cizik, 2003<sup>11</sup>

Presidential candidates pray! Most of them are openly Christian, and a few of them even have a nice word to say about Jesus.

But there is a certain mustiness about our contrived optimism. And deep down we feel it. Most seminaries wish they were graduating more pastors. Most pastors wish they were seeing more converts. Most denominationalists are troubled by the explosion of house churches. And everyone seems to be stalking that elusive vitality that is so elusive it can terrify us. In our hunger for awakening, we keep hearing Jesus ask, “When the Son of man comes will he find faith on the earth?”



# 2

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## When Big Isn't Great

Although the “mega-churches” and “super-churches” bask in the media spotlight, the reality is that most churches in America have fewer than 100 people in attendance on any single day of worship.

George Barna<sup>1</sup>

*Big* is big news in our time. Big churches, big movements, and a lot of big talk are the companions of our churchy way of life. *Big*, however, is an idea that doesn't mesh well with the decline of evangelicalism. The more we use the word, the smaller we seem to get. There are two big factors that seem to be making us *little*. First, the megachurch—the big church movement—and second, the big ideas that have taken root in our midst. There are three of these big ideologies that affect us: (1) the power of new reformation theology, (2) the tendency of the right to move left, (3) and the new atheism. These big ideas have joined the big church movement to hasten our decline.

## The Megachurch and Evangelical Decline

The biggest life sign for evangelicalism is, of course, the megachurch. There are a lot of them, though not compared to other churches (only 1,500 of the nearly 400,000 churches). But they are flashy competitors. When you shoehorn 60,000 evangelicals into the Rose Bowl for an Easter celebration, the media is impressed enough to report the event, which makes all evangelicals proud. But following Easter, we have the odd feeling that we haven't told the whole truth. The whole truth is that we haven't licked the other fifty-one weeks of the year when megachurch attendance, along with that of our not-so-megachurches, is seriously down.

Can we call the growing number of megachurches a real hope for a dynamic revival for all evangelicals? I think not. For one thing there is no unified front among those churches. There is a huge divide, for instance, between the megachurch of John MacArthur and that founded by Rob Bell as well as between those of Rick

Megachurch pastors are a visible and exotic breed of leaders. While they represent 0.3 percent of North America's churches, they attract about 10 percent of America's weekly evangelical attendees. Most of these churches are high-visibility congregations with national influence and reputation.

Warren and Joel Osteen. Not only is their emphasis on doctrine quite different but their worship mystiques are not comparable at all. Most megachurches have so little in common with each other that it seems unlikely there could ever be a sense of corporate vitality among them or their pastors.

The truth is that we have not yet drawn the bottom line on the megachurch. Their histories are all so recent it is not possible to measure their outcome. It was supposedly General Booth who, seeing what complexity and growth had done to the Salvation Army during his lifetime, lamented to his daughter Evangeline, "Why is it that God cannot seem to keep an organization pure above a generation or so?" It is that kind of evaluation

that takes some history to observe, and it is precisely that kind of record the megachurch has yet to measure. We evangelicals have had our fads and have often depended on the interest these nuances create to bolster our life signs.

But in previous decades we have moved from glossolalia, to exorcisms, to pyramidal schemes like some sort of *Jesus-Amway* movement. Although the megachurch is too substantial to be labeled a fad, we are still too much at the front of it to really measure whether it will long endure.

What are its weaknesses? First, it is so rooted in the rock-concert deportment of our age that it looks a bit shaky. The danger with tying yourself too closely to contemporary culture is that all culture is transient and too unstable to form a foundation for any movement that is to endure.

Second, its strongest attraction is that it affords mostly anonymity, not community. In a culture where every novel and sitcom is about the search for community, the megachurches provide too little. These churches often brag that they promote anonymity. “People want to go to church and be left alone.” It sounded so good. But in the end, turning away from “Will every visitor please stand up,” and “Come to the altar and get right with God,” asks so little of the seekers they quit seeking! Perhaps this is why megachurches experience such a large turnover of visitors with so many first-time attendees merely looking around before they move on.

Finally, they are underfunded, with too few giving too little to provide enough real supporters of the church. The megachurch doesn't understand this short truth: what doesn't cost people in the end doesn't hold people.

Some years ago one of our finest church members, who was a single businessman, moved to Chicago. He soon became involved in the church of *what's happening now*. Before long he met a young woman and became engaged. After they had set the date for their marriage, he called me—his former pastor—and asked if I would

come to Chicago to tie the knot. “Of course,” I said. “But what about your senior pastor?”

“Well,” he said, “I don’t really know him.”

“Well then, what about your assistant pastor?”

“Well, I don’t know him either.”

“Okay,” I said. “Will you be married in the church’s chapel?”

“Well . . . no,” he said. “It’s booked for the next year. We’ve rented a little Lutheran church down the street. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” I said. “So are you telling me that you love your church, but it is not of real help when you really need it?”

“I guess so.”

I flew to Chicago and married them in a Lutheran church. They were married there but have long since joined another church.

So why am I bringing up the megachurch as a factor in evangelical decline? Surely it should not be written off as a fad. Although evangelicals may deny being influenced by the large-church trend and postdenominational detente, these basic cultural laws really seem to be the force behind most of the church growth vision statements I have read. Megachurches offer a contribution of contemporary music and

Contemporary worship music is a loosely defined genre of Christian music used in contemporary worship. It has developed over the past sixty years and is stylistically similar to pop music. The songs are frequently referred to as “praise songs” or “worship songs” and are typically led by a “worship band” or “praise team,” with either a guitarist or pianist leading. It is a common genre of music sung in Western churches, particularly in Pentecostal churches, both denominational and non-denominational.

“Contemporary worship music,” Wikipedia<sup>2</sup>

highly relevant sermons, which often means sermons that outline successful living and even corporate success in the eclectic world of the current, fast-paced culture. For the most part, these sermons do not focus on transcendent themes. Evangelists still call their preaching *expository*, but often, contemporary sermons focus on

sparsely studied biblical texts while the amplifiers talk big and the Bible has laryngitis.

## The Importance of *Big*

While most megachurches may cite their purist views of Scripture and the kingdom of God as the reason for their growth, I am not the first to ask if they are actually more influenced by American corporate theory. We evangelicals sometimes seem to be only the religious arm of the secular, corporate mentality. Big buildings are the way we say to IBM or Ford Motors, “We Christians are big too! Look at our buildings. Come in and succeed in your religious life just as you have in your corporate life. Be big with us. Be Christian in a major way. Succeed on Sunday too.” Our political group dynamics scream from interstate billboards that we are on the rails of success just as Jesus intended.

Decades ago Mircea Eliade said that the sacred and the secular have vastly different sights and sounds.<sup>3</sup> The more the two become indistinguishable, the weaker the sacred becomes, until ultimately it dies out in favor of the secular. What he is trying to say is that when you turn on a radio station, you have to really listen to determine whether you are hearing a Christian Three Dog Night or an evangelical Lady Gaga. Lady Gaga is winning. This means that if you are in a concert hall and it is filled with smoke and strobes and you have to keep asking yourself, “Is this all for Jesus?” it probably isn't really.

And the bigger question that must be asked is: Since evangelicalism is so secular in its deportment, will it survive, and if so, what form will it take in the future? Is the fact that evangelicalism is so customary these days an evidence of cultural strength, or is it more an evidence that we are attending the wedding of the Apostles' Creed and Woodstock? And the more this secular-religious marriage

is celebrated, could it be that the megachurch so much resembles the culture that it is powerless to change it?

*Big* is the all-American adjective. Woodstock and the megachurch both wear it. If New Testament history is any comment, however, the large crowds attracted by the preaching of Peter or the theologically ill-informed Apollos did not have the effect of Paul, who preached to very small crowds when he wasn't in jail. And it has been well said that while Jesus founded the church, Paul defined it. Blot Apollos's name out of Christian history and you have only a big meeting that appears in every age to be more of a rally than worship. But blot Paul's name out of history and half of the New Testament does not exist.

But remember this: huge churches are not the sole property of American evangelicalism. In one of the more dowdy areas of London, far from Piccadilly, lies the near-ruins of the old Spurgeon tabernacle. It has burned down a couple of times and been rebuilt, much smaller each time, until it no longer resembles the nineteenth-century megachurch it used to be. Subtract the fire, and the same could be said of the Billy Sunday tabernacle in Winona Lake, Indiana. These once huge establishments are not entirely dead. They all have bookstores and curio shops (they are always the last things to die), and a comparatively few stragglers still attend there. Spurgeon's old tabernacle has become a haven for Calvinistic Baptists. But Baptists have been unable to make Calvinism take off; they still try to sell it in the rock-and-roll culture they have so reluctantly inherited.

There is one place where the megachurch has ill-defined the importance of *Big*. The key issue of this question is community. To be upfront, the core issue that could most hasten our decline is that fewer and fewer people find the church a place of community. From the twentieth-century church, when families found a way of life, to the twenty-first-century church when the hunger for anonymity brought the desertion of the family, people have

learned that there is no place to plug in to the church to meet all their needs for community.

### Three Emphases That Contribute to Evangelical Decline

Every generation contains within it ideological emphases that will define and determine the ebb and flow of the faith and practice of our families, churches, and ministries within the Christian community. We have looked at the megachurch and its leaders, but there are other tangents of evangelical thought that have enough popularity in their own right to do significant damage to what should be the focus of evangelicalism and its leadership. I wish to examine three which are eroding the “simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” and they are complicating or diluting evangelicalism until we no longer know who we are or what we should be.

#### 1. *Rise of Reformed Scholarship*

Every religious group has had its deterministic wing, which allows people to excuse themselves from responsibility for their faults because they are their destiny. This provides answers to all questions but kills the mystery in which they come wrapped. Also, let's not forget that the New Testament was born in the midst of Greco-Roman religion, which claimed there were no mysteries because every puzzlement was solved in some myth. Then they were replaced by the glorious mysteries—at first called *mystery religions*—that came with ultimate meaning but not many answers.

Paul's view of what is called Reformed theology:

“Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

Romans 8:30

Paul's view of a less-structured, more random mystery of God:

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

Romans 11:33

Jesus is founder and the God-man keeper of all our particular Christian saving mysteries. How can a man be born without genetics or walk out of the tomb alive after three long days? We are redeemed by things too excellent for our understanding.

Many of the new reformation pastors I know do not like to be called the new reformation, and they despise the prefix *neo*, as in *neo-Calvinism*. Most of them still harken back five centuries to John Calvin, saying there is nothing *neo* about them; they are tied firmly to John Calvin himself. But they have willingly adopted a scholarly narrowness that at times keeps their heads buried in the scholarship of the past, and they are not necessarily informed of the arts or the mysteries or our own times.

The fastidiousness with which they pursue their dialectic may have displaced the fervor and passion of evangelistic qualities more than they realize—especially in small Reformed churches in which the art of worship and creative planning is not in place. As a point of reference for Calvinism and the arts, we need to go back to the beginning of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Some of the Protestant Reformers, in particular Andreas Karlstadt, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin, encouraged the removal of religious images by invoking the prohibition of idolatry and the manufacture of graven images in the Ten Commandments.

It was a true iconoclasm. Calvinism, it seems, has always had more of an interest in creating dialectic than art. This is unfortunate because cultures define themselves through art, not dialectic. A single piece of Phoenician pottery tells us who the Phoenicians were, how they lived, and what they esteemed. Dialectic, on the other hand, only fills books that in time hold less-usable information.

What about hyperscholarship is hastening our decline? Not much you can put your finger on, but it seems that passion and study do vary immensely. Revivals and awakenings feed on fervor and spontaneity, not intense study. So the rise of neo-Calvinism may be impeding results more than its proponents know. It seems



true at least that the success of Christianity in the global South wins the case in point. These cultures are growing awash in fervor, but perhaps they are not much marked by Reformed scholarship.

I have had the honor of being a teacher during the last couple of decades when the Reformed resurgence has been swelling. These students found excitement in their studies, and so they should have, but in the process they left the world that founded them in faith. What's so bad about that? Well, in many ways the church they left was generally more schooled in making converts than the graduate school they entered. Seminaries—and I have worked in two of them—are places of discourse about evangelism, but sometimes as a whole they don't create the social matrix in which it takes place.

There are many Christians who do not feel his glorious presence as something real, because for them Jesus occurs in their minds and not in their hearts. Only when someone surrenders his heart to Jesus can he find him.<sup>4</sup>

Evangelism and church planting courses are present in seminaries, but it is assumed that what the seminary teaches is for the students' use somewhere out there beyond the degree. Out there in the suburbs, often the megachurch methodologies have a chance to hatch. These sluggish methodologies may unwittingly contribute to the decline of evangelicalism.

## *2. The Trend of the Right to Move Left*

This killing evangelistic entropy is a kind of built-in law of life and death. The odd thing is that almost all evangelical seminaries were founded for the major purpose of evangelism and missions. But once established, they gradually became interested in trusts and endowments, academic certifications, and denominational status. Thus they are all too prone to trade fire for reputation. There is something in the heart of the right that ever moves left, but there is nothing in the heart of the left that ever moves right.

Liberty University<sup>5</sup> longs for status and reputation, and while they would decry their march toward liberalism (and it may take a hundred years or so), it is also moving in that direction. But there are none at Harvard Divinity School who want to move back toward the founding principles. They are quite content to be broader than that, and thus every movement ever marches *brainward* from the heart. It is probably also true that the more a religion moves brainward, the more likely it is to lose *vitality*—a kind of synonym for *life*.

Of course the conservatism that hatched evangelicalism is becoming liberated at a good clip. Rob Bell (and others) have of late jettisoned the concept of hell—something his forebears in 1950 would never have considered. John Piper, who sees Bell's universalism as a heresy (as it is), remarked tersely, "Farewell, Rob Bell!" This new liberalism on the right is killing the passion required to keep evangelicals from declining.

Much of the emergent church movement, which grew out of the church growth mentality, is becoming more liberal, and their liberalism is hastening the decline of vitality. This emergent church liberalism emanated from the conservative end of Christianity rather than the liberal end. But no matter where it came from, it seems to be contributing to evangelical decline.

### 3. *The Face of the New Atheism and Its Influence on Decline*

I don't want to dwell on this long, but my personal convictions forced me to speak of the *new atheists*, who are having such an influence today. Atheism has been around at least since the fourteenth psalm was written: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1 NKJV). But as evangelical influence weakens, it seems to be growing ever more virulent. The late Charles Colson recently wrote:

Surveying the press coverage over the last couple of years makes it clear that Christianity is reeling from a bruising and unprecedented attack by aggressive atheism. . . . In 2006, Richard Dawkins, a clever

and articulate Oxford evolutionary biologist, published *The God Delusion*, which took up a near permanent residence on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Dawkins considers religious instruction a form of child abuse and suggests that governments should put a stop to it.<sup>6</sup>

A similar book to Dawkins's was written by Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*), and a great many more atheists are advancing in an ever-growing army. This is no longer a fringe phenomenon. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, these authors sold close to a million books in one twelve-month period alone. Richard Dawkins, who is responsible for half of those sales, can attest to how lucrative attacking God has become.

Atheistic zealots. Ordinarily I would not consider these voices to have any long-term triumph. But driven by the winds of political correctness and the weakening vitality of evangelicalism, I believe they are a new kind of force that must be reckoned with.

## Conclusion

Perhaps we evangelicals are the victims of our own lust for church growth. The megachurch along with the three movements of the rise of the new reformation, the secular forces that have moved the church even more to the left, and to a lesser extent the secularizing force of the virulent new atheists have all moved us from the simple pursuit of our evangelistic calling. It is odd that we never stopped talking about church growth, only our calling to evangelize. In the end we never quit desiring church growth, but the loss of our evangelistic zeal was the very thing that stole our will to grow. Dying is the natural result of not really caring about life.