THE GREAT EVANGELICAL RECESSION

6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church ...and How to Prepare

BY JOHN S. DICKERSON

Summary by Curt Swindoll
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INTRODUCTION

The American evangelical Christian experience today is unrecognizable compared to a generation ago. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the “Moral Majority” arose in reaction to the cultural upheaval and apparent desertion of traditional American values of the 1960s and 70s. Evangelical Christians rallied around figures like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who argued for the centrality of the Gospel above doctrinal disputes, and aligned their religious values with the conservative politics of the Republican Party. This elision of religion and politics unfortunately presented the false perception that the party’s prominence equated to evangelical influence over all aspects of American life.

As the 21st century dawned and Republicans’ dominance over public discourse waned, evangelicals were met with a rude awakening. Today’s cultural milieu has seen a resurgence in issues that notably defined the 1960s — race, sexism, sexual freedom and disillusionment with institutions — intensified by a growing hatred of evangelical mores, especially as they relate to issues of homosexuality and marriage.

On top of that, today’s young people are increasingly apathetic to spiritual life, and studies show they are leaving the church in droves, never to return. Compounding matters are the fact that those who remain donate fewer funds to support ministry programs and missions, with young Christians giving much less compared to their elders. The combined effect of these stresses and strains upon the evangelical church amounts to what journalist and pastor John S. Dickerson has coined “The Great Evangelical Recession” of the 21st century.

Will the evangelical church respond to today’s “culture wars” by throwing up a wall of opposition, as it did in bygone days, or will it choose to engage an antagonistic mainstream society through love? After all, these are no longer social issues. They are Church issues.

I created this summary because you may not have time to dive into the entire book but I wanted to share with you this great tool you can use to measure the health of your constituency relative to the movement as a whole. In The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church… and How to Prepare, Dickerson offers leaders in churches and faith-based organizations a state of the evangelical union. His work also offers strategies to begin to mend the wounds currently crippling the evangelical church, and a plan for an increasingly uncertain future.

The information codified within The Great Evangelical Recession serves as an honest wake-up call to anyone concerned about the future of evangelical Christianity in America. However, in humble acknowledgement that we serve a God far greater than the threat these issues collectively pose, the book also provides hope in its unwavering confidence in His power to transform any situation — no matter how seemingly difficult or dismal — as evidence for His abundant glory. We may be surprised by these times, but God is not.

Curt Swindoll
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SUMMARY

We [the evangelical church] can reinvent ourselves ten years from now, in desperate reaction. Or we can reinvent ourselves now, in thoughtful proactive planning.

Dickerson shows us “where the bodies are” in the current state of American evangelical Christianity with journalistic candor. While Part 1, “Six Trends of Decline,” presents a sobering picture of the present state of affairs, Part 2, “Six Solutions for Recovery,” provides practical tips for altering trenchant problems, as well as a fresh and biblical approach to discipleship.

In Chapter 1, “Inflated,” Dickerson presents the true story about the population of American evangelical Christians. Contrary to popular belief, evangelicals constitute far fewer than the oft-touted 40 percent of Americans who self-identify as “born again.” Through the research of four independent institutions and scholars, the author finds the actual percentage of United States evangelicals hovers between 7 and 9 percent.

Moreover, the rise of the megachurch has obscured the fact that church membership is declining while most “growth” at larger churches can actually be attributed to member transfer from smaller, dying congregations. This slump in population has resulted in an overall loss of evangelical influence over our host culture, compounded by the reality that while the general American population is booming, evangelical numbers are shrinking.

Chapter 2, “Hated,” outlines that just as evangelical numbers are shrinking while the total American population is growing, so too has the schism between evangelical and mainstream moral values. This divide has increased to the point that traditional Christian beliefs — especially as they relate to marriage, sexuality and family — have become outright despised.

Because modern technology has enabled values and beliefs to be communicated at near-instantaneous rates, the widespread acceptance of these values has also proliferated.

Dickerson posits the following four signposts of disregard for an evangelical worldview that are currently gaining momentum in our culture:

“Groupthink and overexposure to our own movement can blind us to the reality of how we fit into the larger, rapidly changing culture.”
1. The advent of discriminatory policies from information technology companies actively trying to scrub Christian messages from communication channels.

2. A rise in hostile attitudes toward evangelical Christianity in academic circles, especially the sciences.

3. As the two oldest generations pass away, the shift toward anti-evangelical policies and attitudes will further accelerate.

4. These changes will eventually directly affect how churches are able to operate within society, dramatically altering church and life as a Christian as we know it today.

In Chapter 3, “Dividing,” the aforementioned alignment of evangelical Christian values with conservative Republican politics has had the adverse effect of dividing an already doctrinally diverse constituency further along political lines.

This split will intensify over the coming decades, as Christians’ political views continue to be divide along generational, geographic and educational lines, with younger Christians tending to skew left to moderate politically, and to see the conflation of religion and politics as problematic. Worse, a substantial portion of the United States’ current population boom — Hispanics — have been alienated by right-wing, anti-immigration political agendas, thus making evangelical association with such views counter-intuitive in our efforts to reach them.

Dickerson neither hopes or expects that evangelicals will abandon their respective political views, rather that a sea change in how Christians prioritize politics and religion is vital to our cooperation as the body of Christ and our survival in this new century.

Chapter 4, “Bankrupt,” articulates the multifaceted issues contributing to the decline in funds given to evangelical churches. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008-2009, churches saw their donations fall by as much as 20 to 30 percent. While the economy has recovered, however, churches have not seen an equivocal restoration in rates of giving.

“Evangelicals who disagree on politics often fall into combative roles, rather than complementary ones.”

“Unless giving trends change significantly, evangelical giving across the board may drop by about 70 percent during the next twenty-five to thirty years.”
Essentially, what amounts to a class divide between “goers” and “senders” has created an unsustainable model for Christian fundraising. “Professional” Christians such as ministers, missionaries and paid staff possess all the evangelistic training, while laypersons — who hold the purse strings — are ill equipped to meet the challenge that true discipleship poses to all. This trend has been snowballing for several generations, with older Christians accounting for 19 percent of church populations but giving 46 percent of its donations.

In Chapter 5, “Bleeding,” Dickerson tackles a subject currently preoccupying many church leaders and spilling ink in countless mainstream and Christian publications: Millennials. Specifically, he examines what the young adult population’s overall characteristics and tendencies mean for the future of the church. Just as giving could be expected to drop by as much as 70 percent over the next few decades, the same portion of evangelicals currently in their teens and twenties may leave the faith.

“Somewhere along the way, our focus on programs and techniques, dollars, ministry size, and perhaps even powerful worship distracted us from the basics. Jesus did not tell Peter to build a building, a program, a production, or an organization.”

While previous generations saw a general drop-off in church attendance for twenty somethings that reversed when those individuals reached middle age, the same cannot be expected of the current crop of young adults. The dual forces of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and a failure to create a compelling case for following Christ have created a perfect storm for the resulting religious apathy (and antipathy) in today’s young Americans.

In Chapter 6, “Sputtering,” the author leverages the analogy of a car running out of gas to express the sum effect the previous five trends have had on Christian discipleship. To put it simply: if the church is neither retaining its current members nor making new ones, the gas in the evangelical tank will eventually, inevitably run out. Dickerson writes, “Scripture and history both argue that the engine of evangelicalism is new conversions.”

Putting down the journalist’s pen and taking up the pastor’s pulpit, in Part 2, “Six Solutions for Recovery,” Dickerson presents a biblical and strategic response to each of the challenges posed in the first six chapters.

Echoing the call to action in the Introduction, Chapter 7, “Re-Valuing,” seeks to answer the question: What does a successful evangelicalism look like in the 21st century? While the first half of the book may paint a bleak picture of the many
ways in which the evangelical church is broken, Dickerson acknowledges that we serve a God whose specialty is using the weaknesses of broken people to transform the world.

If leaders desire to effect lasting change within their ministries, congregations and organizations, they must first put their full trust and confidence in Jesus, who conquered the epitome of human weakness — death — on humans’ behalf.

Chapter 8, “Good,” confronts the challenges presented in Chapter 2, “Hated,” in addressing the specific hurdle of ministering to the LGBT community. While it can be easy to view our current culture as uniquely hostile to the Gospel message, Dickerson points out that the 1st-century church operated in an equally (if not more so) anti-Christian atmosphere. Just as believers brought Christ’s love to foreign tribes by meeting those people at the level of their own culture, modern Christians cannot expect that homosexual individuals and their “allies” will understand or tolerate their message.

To reach those who believe and think differently, Dickerson asserts that we must “suspend judgment, demonstrate unconditional acceptance, and anticipate that we’ll be misunderstood.” If the mainstream culture in America increasingly does not understand Christians’ lexicon, they must adopt a language that is easier to grasp: that of good deeds. To best demonstrate Christ’s love in a hostile culture, Dickerson offers the following points:

1. Take God’s goodness directly to the homosexual tribe in your life and community. Don’t wait for them to come to you.

2. Refuse to classify the homosexual tribe as some worse class of sinners. This is unbiblical and showcases poor theology.

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.

“The same Spirit who empowered the 1st-century church waits today to empower the 21st-century church.”
6. Keep on demonstrating God’s goodness and unconditional love — to the homosexuals closest to you.

Chapter 9, “Uniting,” provides a theological toolkit for mending the rifts currently threatening to splinter the evangelical movement. If Chapter 3, “Dividing,” outlined the political forces pulling believers apart, Dickerson advises that the way back to wholeness can be accomplished through two strategies: an ecumenical agreement over core beliefs, and a critical uncoupling of religion with individual political views.

Based on creeds and statements of faith from several respected evangelical institutions, the following five pillars of belief are ones around which the 21st-century evangelical church should be on one accord:

1. The Trinity
2. The depravity of man
3. Substitutionary atonement
4. Christ’s complete humanity and complete deity
5. The sufficiency and exclusivity of Christ’s work
6. The need for a personal relationship with Christ

For today’s evangelicals to unravel the tangle of partisan politics from the fabric of our congregations, it is essential to recognize that one’s political views are secondary to Christ’s call to love and serve one another. Even though younger Christians may likely hold political views which older generations might find contradictory, such as a simultaneous belief in climate change and a conservative theology, and some older Christians may strongly desire to promote Tea Party agendas and candidates during worship settings, finding unity does not require that believers leave their passions, opinions and unique worldviews at the church door. But unity does require a commitment to upholding the Gospel above all other competing views and attitudes.

Chapter 10, “Solvent,” strives to tackle perhaps the most pressing earthly challenge to the church’s future: steep declines in donations. Currently, evangelical ministries only know to cut staff or facilities when giving falters, but Dickerson presents an innovative third way: “Hybrid ministries.”

Hybrid ministries work by substituting paid full-time staff for well-trained, part-time volunteers. The model offers double bang for the ministry’s buck by blurring the lines between professional and layperson Christians, lifting some of the financial burden off “goers” while training and discipling the “senders.” Hybrid ministries also have the potential to dramatically reverse the trend of
younger Christians’ chronically low rates of giving by radically altering the way those young people are stewarded.

This concept of transforming the way evangelicals disciple and steward the body of Christ transitions directly into Chapter 11, “Healing,” in which Dickerson address the root of the issue causing both financial and membership decline in our churches: a knowledge gap in discipleship best practices among our Christian leaders and pastors.

One way that pastors and leaders commonly fall short of effective Christian leadership is they simply are shepherding too many people — Jesus focused His efforts on a core group of 12, with 11 going out to form their own small discipleship groups. While evangelical churches are currently in a state of either decline or consolidation (as seen most visibly in megachurches), pastors and leaders must strive to maintain the intimacy and relational capabilities of smaller groups, surrounding themselves with support staff who can complement their personal weaknesses and who can be trained to mentor others.

Having addressed specific strategies and tactics for Christian leaders, in Chapter 12, “Re-Igniting,” Dickerson zooms out to consider a 10,000-foot view of how to best rekindle the flame of evangelicalism in the hearts of all Christ-followers. Using the example of the business models of companies like Amazon and Netflix, the author explains that a “long tail” approach to reviving the evangelical church is recognizing that small, individual efforts to spread the Gospel to one’s immediate social circle, when viewed as collective, has a sum effect as great or greater than the “best sellers,” the evangelists packing out stadiums and selling millions of copies of books.

When studies from the Institute for American Church Growth indicate that 79 percent of people come to church because a friend or relative invited them, it couldn’t be more clear that the single most effective thing church leadership can do to reverse the current trends of decline within their church is to train their members to “take evangelism seriously, as [Christians] did in the 1st century.”

This is not to say that evangelism and discipleship will look the same for all Christ-followers. However, “the priority itself must become broadly universal in order for evangelicalism to recover its spiritual vibrancy.”
Just as Christians have faced opposition, decline, hostility and attempts to silence the story of Christ for millennia, they will continue to meet these challenges in the future. But if two thousand years of God’s faithfulness is any indication, He is more than sufficient to mend the gaps in proverbial earthly tents. *The Great Evangelical Recession*, while its confrontation of reality may initially seem a bitter pill to swallow, ultimately leads the way forward into this new century in a spirit of full trust and confidence in God’s power for transformation.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Having analyzed the six trends of decline, which one(s) do you observe has impacted your congregation or organization most powerfully?

2. Can you articulate a time in the past when God used a perceived personal weakness to do something great? How might He use a shortcoming to transform your organization?

3. Dickerson’s idea of the United States as divided by “thought tribes,” rather than by races or classes, is a unique way of examining the situation. Does this viewpoint change your perspective on how to approach engaging with those who believe or think differently than you?

4. How do we determine the essentials of what it means to be a Christ-follower? Why is this so important, and why is it so easy to get distracted by finer points of doctrine? How does unity make room for diversity of opinion and practice?

5. Our world is increasingly data-driven. While we can learn a lot from numbers, what are some concrete ways can we put them aside to focus on building relationships? Conversely, are there ways to harness data in order to inform our discipleship models?

6. Dickerson’s church elevated personal discipleship above other church programs by hiring a pastor of evangelism before other needed ministry positions. What opportunities exist in your church, ministry or organization to dedicate more resources toward developing more effective disciples?
• The actual percentage of United States evangelicals hovers between 7 and 9 percent, or about 22 million individuals (p. 29)

• Most “growth” at larger churches can actually be attributed to member transfer from smaller, dying congregations (p. 23)

• 4 signposts of disregard for an evangelical worldview in our culture:
   1. Discriminatory policies from information technology companies actively trying to scrub Christian messages from communication channels (p. 47)
   2. A rise in hostile attitudes toward evangelical Christianity in academic circles, especially the sciences (p. 49)
   3. As the two oldest generations die, the shift toward anti-evangelical policies and attitudes will accelerate (p. 57)
   4. How churches are able to operate within society will dramatically change, altering church and life as a Christian as we know it today (p. 58)

• The Great Recession of 2008-2009 saw churches donations fall by 20 to 30 percent; while the economy has recovered, churches have not seen an equivocal restoration in rates of giving (p. 82)

• Evangelical giving across the board may drop by about 70% during the next two to three decades (p. 84)

• Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and a failure to create a compelling case for following Christ have created a perfect storm for the resulting religious apathy (and antipathy) in today’s young Americans (p. 105)

• To unite a dividing church we must agree about certain core beliefs and uncouple religion from politics (p. 163)

• Pastors and leaders are shepherding too many people; Jesus focused His efforts on a core group of just 12 (p. 197)

• 79 percent of people come to church because a friend or relative invited them (p. 206)
**FURTHER SUGGESTED READING**

*Bad Religion* by Ross Douthat

*unChristian* by David Kinnaman and Gage Lyons

*Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* by D. Michael Lindsay

*The Search for Christian America* by Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch and George Marsden

*More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History* by Larry Eskridge and Mark Noll

*Good to Great* by Jim Collins

*Lost and Found* by Ed Stetzer

*Generation EX-Christian* by Drew Dyck

*Soul Searching* by Christian Smith

*Quitting Church* by Julia Duin

*The Shape of Faith to Come* by Brad Waggoner

*The Great Evangelical Disaster* by Francis Schaeffer

*Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* by Kenda Creasy Dean

*The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson

*The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever
Check out our *entire list of fundraising resources* for more content papers, fundraising tools, and webinars.

Connect with us on *Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook*.

*Subscribe* to The Digital Drip, our daily blog featuring valuable insights and best practices around today’s most important fundraising topics.

Call us at 214.866.7700.

*Contact us* to discuss your organization’s fundraising needs.
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE GREAT EVANGELICAL RECESSION**

**John S. Dickerson** has written for The New York Times, The Washington Post and CNN, among others. In 2008 Tom Brokaw, Charles Gibson (ABC News) and Anna Quindlen (Newsweek) named his investigative reporting the best in the nation, when they awarded him the Livingston Award for Young Journalists. John is recipient of dozens more national and regional journalism honors.

John also serves as Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church in Prescott, AZ, where he lives with his wife and children.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE GREAT EVANGELICAL RECESSION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Curt Swindoll** is the executive vice president for strategy at Pursuant. His career has spanned six industry sectors (Manufacturing, Technology, Banking, Nonprofit, Professional Services, and Energy), serving in core consulting functional areas as diverse as operations, sales and business development, marketing and branding, IT and software development, fundraising, consulting and board development, strategic planning, finance, client service and support, and P/R and corporate communications.

Curt and his wife, Debbie, have been married for 30 years and reside in Dallas, Texas. They have three grown children: Ryan (Autumn), Chelsea (Andy), and Landon.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

INFOGRAPHIC
Four Alarming Statistics About Church Giving

The Fully-Funded Ministry Field Guide

How to Create a Culture of Generosity