

“The Coming Evangelical Collapse”

A Summary and Response

by Rick Clough

(March 15, 2023)

We have three articles before us. First, let’s define “evangelical” and “church”. In the same period of time that Michael Spencer wrote “The Coming Evangelical Collapse,” the pollster George Barna reported a much lower percentage of “evangelicals” in America than Spencer did – probably because of a difference in how the two define the term “evangelical”. Barna used a more exacting definition than the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and LifeWay Research did. LifeWay Research is the Southern Baptist Church’s (SBC) research organization. With Spencer having been a Southern Baptist, it could reasonably be assumed that he would most likely have used their numbers when writing his article.

Definition of “evangelical” (see <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>)

The NAE/LifeWay Research method includes four statements to which respondents must strongly agree to be categorized as evangelical:

- (1) The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- (2) It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- (3) Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- (4) Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.

For all intents and purposes, I’m assuming that the author is defining “church” as a “group of individuals legally incorporated and governmentally recognized for the purpose of conducting religious practices which may or may not be in concert with other similar groups”. We know such organizations in our society to typically associate with each other along commonly held core beliefs and practices.

“The Coming Evangelical Collapse: An Anti-Christian Chapter in Western History Is About to Begin”

Michael Spencer

(March 10, 2009)

While the major “collapse” stated to occur in ten years (2019) has not yet occurred, the prediction of a post-Christian West, a secular society along with an antagonism toward Christianity has grown since Spencer’s original blog was written now fourteen years ago.

Some of his reasons for the forecasted collapse still exist:

- Hope in a political savior to change the course and direction of the country.
- Failure of the church and church families to educate their children with a Christian worldview and why we believe this way.

- The emphasis of “social ministries” without a distinctive Christian component that addresses ministry to the “person” who creating the need for the social ministries themselves needs a change.
- The desire to be “relevant” so as to garner public acceptance and approval over the challenging of the congregation to be in a living “relationship” with Jesus who calls us to “take up your cross and follow Me”.
- The emergent church of the last part of the twentieth century will identify its true home in the Progressive religious community.

“Fundamental” churches will decline. Though here I suspect that this would probably be more to how they choose to conduct their corporate worship services and to a message which includes rules for living that the greater culture no longer intends to follow and those inside their ranks are not told how the power of God’s Spirit enables them to live them.

The Coming Evangelical Collapse?

Kevin DeYoung

(March 10, 2009)

Kevin DeYoung is currently the Senior Pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, NC. He is also an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC. At the time of this article, he was he Senior Pastor of University Reformed Church in East Lansing, MI.

In his reply, Kevin acknowledges that he does not know Michael Spencer; but, has been asked repeatedly for his reply and so he offers it.

While not embracing several of Spencer’s dire predictions, he does agree with the following:

- Asia and Africa will send missionaries to America.
- The American church has become too therapeutic self-help oriented and numbers driven as the marker of a “successful” church.
- This shallowness and misguided direction of the current church in a considerable degree accounts for its inability to retain its youth – be they “emergent left or reformed right”.

DeYoung affirms that church attendance is down and the percentage of Americans identifying as Christians is declining. However, in counter to this he also sees that “there are signs of theological renewal in the American church too, a renewed interest in doctrine, God-centered worship, and mercy ministries, especially among the young.”

He also contends that these declines are almost all coming from the “Catholic and more liberal Protestant churches” due to:

- Loss of their young to either evangelical churches or no church;
- Declining birth rate of the attendees;
- Death of older members.

The Coming Evangelical Collapse: Eleven Years In Internet Monk

While the major collapse within 10 years had yet to occur, Michael Spencer’s second statement that within “two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half of its occupants” also bears review.

Determining two generations to be between 40-50 years, data from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), of which Spencer was a member, was analyzed by the writer with attention to membership and baptisms.

Membership: Having written 10 years earlier that for Spencer's prediction to become reality, membership in the SBC would have to decline by 10% in ten years. The numbers showed that membership had declined by 10.1% and attendance, which this writer believes to be a better indicator, by 15.5% over the same period.

Baptisms: This is a sacred cow for Baptist. The numbers showed that baptisms at the time of this article were down 32.6% since 2009.

The sobering conclusion was that within the Southern Baptist Convention, Spencer's predictions were holding up.

Comments

From these articles, the statistical basis for a growing concern of a "collapse" is the lack of church attendance and involvement by Millennials (Gen Y born between 1981 and 1994/6) and the Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012).

<https://www.kasasa.com/exchange/articles/generations/gen-x-gen-y-gen-z>

When up to or near 90% of church attendees' children are being educated in the government schools, there is a sense in which this should be no surprise to us.

In 1930, Charles Potter (an American Unitarian minister, theologian and author) and his wife Clara published a book titled, *Humanism: A New Religion*. The previous year Potter had founded the First Humanist Society of New York. In the book, he clearly states the goal of education:

"Education is thus a most powerful ally of humanism, and every American school is a school of humanism. What can a theistic Sunday school meeting for an hour once a week and teaching only a fraction of the children do to stem the tide of the five-day program of humanistic teaching." – Charles F. Potter, *Humanism: A New Religion* (1930).

Fifty-three years later in a 1983 article for the Humanist magazine entitled "A Religion for a New Age" John Dunphy would expand on the role the public education establishment should play to bring about the goals described in the *Humanist Manifesto II*:

"[A] viable alternative to [Christianity] must be sought. That alternative is humanism. I am convinced that the battle for humankind's future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers that correctly perceive their role as proselytizers of a new faith: a religion of humanity that recognizes and respects the spark of what theologians call divinity in every human being.... The classroom must and will become an arena of conflict between the old and new – the rotting corpse of Christianity, together with all its adjacent evils and misery, and the new faith of humanism, resplendent with the promise of a world in which the never-realized Christian ideal of 'love thy neighbor', will finally be achieved." – John Dunphy, *Religion for a New Age. The Humanist* (January–February 1983).

Our children have been going to church:

Their desk in the classroom is the pew

The lectern the pulpit

The preacher their teacher who is the agent of "change".

However, borrowing from Mark Twain's cable from London to the US press, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated" – or the more exact quote, "The report of my death was an exaggeration" – reports of the Church's demise are greatly exaggerated and in complete contrast to the statement of Jesus in Matthew 16:18 – "And I tell you, you are Peter

[Greek, *petros* – a large piece of rock], and on this rock [Greek, *petra* – a huge rock like Gibraltar] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades (the powers of the infernal region) shall not overpower it [or be strong to its detriment or hold out against it].” (AMPC)

The true Church of Jesus Christ will not collapse or fail; but, it will be revealed. Yes, unprecedented and unpredictable days are ahead. Wise pastors are preparing their churches for coming persecution without having to declare what exact forms it will take for each individual or at what time it may occur.

Is the present structure in conservative, or what is often referred to as “evangelical”, churches in America changing? And, will the pressure of these changes, reduce the evangelical church to a shadow of its former self?

Or, is there a sifting with the pressures of our current state of affairs being used as a symbolic harvesting taking place that like the parable of the wheat and tares is identifying the true church before a watching world.

The Sixties were a turbulent time in America and a time when the foundations were laid for what has become the America we live in today. And, yet in the midst of that there is the belief of some that God’s response was the Jesus Movement. And the dramatic change it produced in the life of the church and the individual lives of those who received it.

The lack of its permanency was twofold:

- the result of the failure to disciple those changed by the Movement, and
- the failure of those changed to assume positions of responsibility and leadership in society while they could.

In 1975 Bill Bright (Campus Crusade) and Loren Cunningham (YWAM – Youth With A Mission) called upon Christian Believers to take positions of influence in what was referred as the “Seven Mountains of Societal Influence”

- Government
- Media
- Education
- Business
- Religion
- Arts and Entertainment
- Family.

The failure to do that has turned out to be to our grave detriment. Later on, **Frances Schaeffer** of L’Abri said that God had also given him the same message (Ref. <https://www.c-n-c.org/article/7mount.htm>).

I have hope.

Whatever you may think about the recent outpouring at Asbury, which is primarily a Gen Z awakening, can we at the least agree that it is evidence that God has not given up or forsaken the next generations who are both the present and the future of the true Church?

The greater problem is not the suspected or forecasted collapsing of the church; but, the current impotence of the Church. The presentation of orthodox truths and facts, as important and necessary as that is and they are, is not adequate in and of itself to stem the tsunami of cultural change that will clear-cut American society. God promised through Isaiah (44:3) that He would “pour out My Spirit” on those returning from the Babylonian Exile. May we in humility and repentance ask God to do that on us before we have to enter what lies ahead. And to empower us to disciple and develop the younger generations.

As Jef Breshears has repeatedly said, in lieu of a spiritual outpouring unlike anything we’ve seen or known, we will likewise enter a spiritual darkness unlike anything we can imagine.

Let us take note of Suzanne Wesley, whose prayer life prepared the men who would lead the Revival in England rescuing it from the darkness that had a grip on the nation.

Daniel Nash and Abel Clary who preceded Charles Finney to every city, rented modest accommodations and prayed the Revivals down.

Peggy and Christine Smith, one 84 years of age and the other 82, on the Isle of Lewis who prayed in the 1949 Hebrides Revival.

Bill McLeod, who after repeated failed attempts to grow his church and motivate his people to witness, lead his church in Saskatoon in the late 1960s to pray weekly and continuously for five years before the 1971 Canadian Revival occurred.

Let us, you and me, be encouraged by their example and prayerfully contend for the Church under our roofs and around our tables – that it will not “collapse”.