

THE GREAT EVANGELICAL RECESSION

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

JOHN S. DICKERSON



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To my bride, who loves me despite my flaws.
And to Christ, who loves His bride despite hers.

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Introduction

The Great Recession

“Banks Ignored Signs of Trouble”

New York Times headline,
October 13, 2010

Be sure you know the condition of your flocks,
give careful attention to your herds;
for riches do not endure forever,
and a crown is not secure for all generations.

Proverbs 27:23–24

What if somebody had warned us ten years ago that a “Great Recession” would throw the world’s largest banks into bankruptcy? That the U.S. stock market would lose half its value? That one in six Americans would be on food stamps while 100,000 homes foreclose each month? In the glory years of the early 2000s, as homes were gaining tens of thousands in value each year, would anyone have believed such predictions?

What if, in the 1980s, after the launch of the wildly successful *USA Today*, somebody had predicted that leading newspapers

and magazines would be insolvent within three presidencies? That the *Chicago Tribune* would file Chapter 11, the *Rocky Mountain News* would close its doors, or that *Newsweek* would sell its operations for \$1?

The reality is that in each of these great collapses, there were isolated observers who did see the writing on the wall—and did attempt to warn the key players.

In 2005, when housing prices were climbing with apparent invincibility, I interviewed one such doomsday prophet for *The Scottsdale Times*. Michael Pollack, an Arizona real estate investor worth about \$1 billion, told me that within years the real estate industry would flip upside down. Even as home values were increasing monthly, he said to sell soon, before the market turned.

The problem with the Great Recession wasn't that nobody saw it coming. The problem was that the people who needed to listen, to put on the brakes, to adjust course, never got the message. Or else they ignored it.

The American church stands today in a similar position, on the precipice of a great evangelical recession. While we focus on a few large churches and dynamic national leaders, the church's overall numbers are shrinking. Its primary fuel—donations—is drying up and disappearing. And its political fervor is dividing the movement from within. In addition to these internal crises, the outside host culture is quietly but quickly turning antagonistic and hostile toward evangelicals.

The signposts are obvious, but many of the leaders who most need to see and plan for these trends are too busy to notice the broad cultural shifts. Others are too deceived by current success to believe that industries and ministries, like governments, can topple almost overnight in the fast-paced 21st century.

Around the globe, cultures are changing faster and with more complexity than ever before. Just as the printing press accelerated cultural change during the Reformation and Renaissance, personal 24/7 web access is now accelerating cultural change beyond what even the cable television generation expects. Trends that would have taken years to evolve in the 20th century can now affect the culture and its industries in days or hours.

International revolutions during the Arab Spring of 2011 toppled decades-old governments. These revolts of thousands were organized via technologies that did not even exist six years earlier—Twitter and Facebook, among others.

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.”¹

Whether in ministry or in industry, those who observe and embrace this new, rapid speed of change become survivors and innovators. Those who ignore the change—and the speed of it—become its victims.

Strategic Thinkers Needed

A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

Proverbs 22:3

In 2005, New York University economics professor Nouriel Roubini warned that home prices were riding a speculative wave that would soon sink the economy.²

One year later, while home prices were still skyrocketing, he told world finance leaders at the International Monetary Fund that the “United States was likely to face a once-in-a-lifetime housing bust, an oil shock, sharply declining consumer confidence, and, ultimately, a deep recession. He laid out a bleak sequence of events: homeowners defaulting on mortgages, trillions of dollars of mortgage-backed securities unraveling worldwide and the global financial system shuddering to a halt.”³

Some laughed at Roubini’s warning. Some shrugged. Most ignored him altogether. His dire forecasts earned him the nickname Dr. Doom, a slight that nearly sank his career until his predictions started manifesting live on CNN, Fox News, and, before long, in our own home values, investment portfolios, and businesses.

Had Roubini's warning been taken to heart, thousands of jobs, homes, and companies could have been saved—even though the broader economic recession was unstoppable at that point.

Similarly, the Great Evangelical Recession is, in some ways, unstoppable today. But ministries and leaders who adjust course now can prepare to survive the coming decades—and even thrive in a changing future. Leaders who prepare now can better steward the resources, staff, and souls God has entrusted to them. The church *as we know it* will face great upheaval, but Christ's kingdom will continue advancing. Leaders who do not position themselves as part of the advance will be victims of the evangelical recession.

The findings in this book are based on fact, not hunch. Still, I write them knowing that some will laugh. Some will shrug, and others will ignore them. It won't be the first time that bad news gets ignored in the church. In his article "A Wakeup Call for Evangelicals," Tom Sine writes that thirty years ago he warned mainline denominational leaders about frightening statistics in their movement, to no avail. He now sees the same trends hitting evangelicalism.

When I attempted to make leaders in mainline denominations aware of emerging patterns of decline in attendance in the 1980s, they were largely in denial. Denominational leaders today are faced with the continuing crisis of numbers of attendance and giving that are declining every year. Now evangelical denominations are also beginning to experience decline. Twenty-three of twenty-five major evangelical denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, are experiencing declining attendance patterns.⁴

Tom Sine's warnings, like Roubini's, were not ignored because his facts were incomplete. Nor were they brushed aside for lack of credentials. Roubini and Sine were ignored because we do not like to hear bad news, especially when it affects us personally. That same fear will blind some to the findings in this book. Fear will cause them to ignore or discount the facts.

On one hand, present success clouds our judgment about what could be happening beyond our line of sight. On the other hand, even in times of success, most of us are overwhelmed. We struggle

daily with our own finances, calendars, families, and in-boxes. Who wants to hear about *more* problems? Who wants to hear that things may get worse? I once pitched the content in one of these chapters to a national evangelical magazine. A senior editor replied that the findings, while serious and true, are not the kind of bad news his customers want to read.

Roubini was also overlooked because his conclusion contradicted dozens, no, hundreds of other economists and “experts.” How could all those experts have missed what Roubini saw so clearly? Answer: They were too close to the data, too much in the action, and too vested in the conclusions.

Distance often brings perspective. When I worked full-time as a secular journalist—active in the evangelical church but not employed by it—these observations came with ease and clarity. The deeper I move into the movement, now serving as a senior pastor and working from the inside, the less I want to believe that these trends are in play. Unfortunately, while my emotions have changed, the facts have not. If anything, being embedded in the movement has only confirmed the urgency for making these findings known.

In a day of specialists and complexity, very few observers have the ability—like Roubini—to see the big picture in any industry. The same is true in ministry. One specialist can speak on this dynamic or that factor, this report or that statistic. But very few are trained or gifted or bold enough to look and see the whole monster.

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton of the Gallup organization call thinkers like Roubini “strategic.” They identify this inherent ability in their research-based book *Now, Discover Your Strengths*.

The Strategic theme enables you to sort through the clutter and find the best route. It is not a skill that can be taught. It is a distinct way of thinking, a special perspective on the world at large. This perspective allows you to see patterns where others simply see complexity.⁵

People are either strategic thinkers or they are not. It can't be trained. Roubini was and is a strategic thinker. Where other

economists saw complexity, he saw patterns. From those patterns he reached conclusions. Disturbing conclusions that seemed implausible at the time.

The authors add, “Mindful of these patterns, [the Strategic Thinker will] play out alternative scenarios, always asking, ‘What if this happened?’”⁶

This book is essentially the playing out of one such scenario: “What if the course of the evangelical mainstream does *not* make a radical change in the next fifteen years? What if the patterns of fewer new believers, more quitters, decreasing giving, political infighting, and a growing hostility from the host culture all continue?” And secondly, “If those factors do continue, how does a successful leader position her or his ministry to survive and thrive?”

Together we will examine these trends through studies and reports from dozens of researchers and specialists—some within the church and some without. We will investigate the factors that are challenging the church *as we know it*, and then we will attempt to foresee where an unchanged evangelical church might be in fifteen or twenty-five years. As George Barna predicts,

The church landscape will continue to evolve into something that would have been unrecognizable a quarter century ago. . . . The mainline churches and even some of the evangelical and fundamentalist groups that were solid at the end of the last millennium and the beginning of this one will lose altitude unless they substantially reinvent themselves.⁷

We can reinvent ourselves ten years from now, in desperate reaction. Or we can reinvent ourselves now, in thoughtful proactive planning. Prepared ministry leaders *can* thrive in the 21st century by adjusting course and applying God’s truth to these trends.

Incidentally, drawing simple factual conclusions from boxes of data was my specialty as a journalist. In 2008 I summarized the state of Arizona’s oversight of twenty thousand physicians in three investigative stories. Those stories caught the attention of Tom Brokaw, Charles Gibson, and other news industry leaders from *Newsweek*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *New Yorker*.

They named the series winner of the national Livingston Award for Young Journalists, a prize that pits the best journalists from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, Fox News, NPR, and every other news outlet all against each other.

This project is a much taller effort. It aims to summarize and make sense of the evangelical mainstream—again, not from hunch or opinion, but from the research of dozens of experts. It then aims to cradle the findings in prayer and Scripture and present them with the heart of a pastor—all in hopes that evangelical leaders will work together to become more forward thinking and forward praying, for God’s glory and kingdom.

What follows is not depressing. It simply tests our loyalty. While confronting these facts, we will be forced to answer, again and again, “Am I more committed to evangelicalism *as we know it*, or to Jesus Christ, His kingdom, and His message?”

Christ’s church has always faced change. Through it all, He has promised, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). Christianity *as we know it* is receding. The evangelical recession offers us a window of opportunity, during which we can re-center Christ’s church on *His* mission. Wise leaders must be aware of what is changing, why it’s changing, and how to prepare. I take heart in these recent words from a young evangelical leader, Gabe Lyons:

I believe this moment is unlike any other time in history. Its uniqueness demands an original response. If we fail to offer a different way forward, we risk losing entire generations to apathy and cynicism. Our friends will continue to drift away, meeting their need for spiritual transcendence through other forms of worship and communities of faith that may be less true but more authentic and appealing.⁸

The second part of this book, chapters 7–12, cast the vision for a “different way” forward in the American church. These chapters may be this book’s most practical contribution to your ministry. Important as journalistic research about the church is, it does us no good unless it propels us closer to Christ and His Word. And

so, for each trend or “problem” identified in the first six chapters, you will find a correlating “solution” given in the final chapters.

Spiritually, these solutions are the meat of this book. They are, I believe, bold, fresh, and firmly biblical. This book does not point to my own church or any other human model as the solution to our decline. It points to the Head of the church as our only “living hope” in a time of great spiritual conflict.

In that sense, the latter chapters are most important. 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. My prayer is that God uses this book to draw you closer to His heart, “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

A deep love for Christ’s bride in the United States drives this project. May these observations prepare you and thousands of others to better lead, better serve, and better be Christ’s physical presence in this nation and around the world, as 21st-Century Evangelicals.

Gregory Elder tells a story that illustrates my optimistic hope for the church in the face of real and underestimated adversity.

Growing up on the Atlantic Coast, I spent long hours working on intricate sand castles; whole cities would appear beneath my hands. One year, for several days in a row, I was accosted by bullies who smashed my creations. Finally I tried an experiment: I placed cinder blocks, rocks, and chunks of concrete in the base of my castles. Then I built the sand kingdoms on top of the rocks. When the local toughs appeared (and I disappeared), their bare feet suddenly met their match. Many people see the church in grave peril from a variety of dangers: secularism, politics, heresies, or plain old sin. They forget that the church is built upon a Rock, over which the gates of hell itself shall not prevail.⁹

Part One

Six Trends of Decline

1

Inflated

Think of yourself with sober judgment.

Romans 12:3

Here's the first thing we need to understand about the Great Evangelical Recession: The evangelical church in the United States is not nearly as large as we've been told. This might not seem like a big deal, but it's a huge deal.

The economic recession—with all its foreclosed homes, layoffs, bankruptcies, international unrest, and demolished nest eggs—began with one simple, consistent overestimation. A chorus of forces slowly and steadily inflated the prices of homes in the United States.¹ Prices ballooned far beyond the true values of homes.

We've seen what happened as a result. World economies contracted. The U.S. stock market lost half its value. Millions lost their jobs. Millions more lost their life savings. Many still haven't found new jobs, and many who were retiring are now working into their sixties and seventies.

Overestimating the size and “value” of the evangelical church is—much like housing prices—one of the silent triggers, one of the unexamined fault lines under the Great Evangelical Recession.

In a moment, I'll explain just how much we have overestimated our size. But first, a word on why it matters. In the coming chapters, we're going to see irrefutable data. We'll see that . . .

- the fuel of American evangelicalism—dollars—is disappearing and will dwindle over the next three decades.
- we're losing millions of our own people—about 2.6 million per decade, just from one generation studied.
- the evangelical church is not winning new believers fast enough to keep pace with rapid population growth in the United States.
- while these forces eat at the church internally, the external climate is turning against evangelicals. The fastest growing subcultures in the United States express a militant antagonism against Christians who take the Bible seriously.
- what's left of a smaller, shrinking, strapped church is also splintering and splitting itself over politics and postmodern views of God and the Bible.

We are piecing these massive, moving trends together, into one megatrend. The megatrend reveals a trajectory of massive regression—far larger than the simple sum of the parts. The decline of evangelical Christianity is not *just* that we're failing at evangelism or *just* that we're failing to keep our own kids or *just* that we'll lose 70 percent of our funding in the next thirty years. It's all those factors (and more) combined and gaining speed simultaneously.

Here's why knowing the size of the evangelical church is so important. The question is not, is United States evangelicalism gaining altitude or losing it? The question is, since all these trends are downward, how much altitude can we lose before crashing?

If evangelicals make up half of the United States population—as many of us have been told—these trends might not cost us any sleep. If half the United States is evangelical, the 2.6 million people we lost last decade account for about 2 percent of the church.

On the other hand, if the evangelical church is only about 22 million Americans, as a growing crowd of respected sociologists estimate—well, if that's the case, then we lost more than 10 percent

of our people in the last ten years. That's worth losing sleep over. It's worth noticing. If this size and loss are accurate, then we must rethink what we're doing, why we're doing it, and how we're going about it.

So, the crass bumper sticker is right: "Size matters."

Whether it's this book or the next church study to land a *USA Today* headline, we can't make sense of new data if we don't know how big or small the national church actually is. We need a baseline—a rough estimate of where we're starting from, so we can gauge and interpret new trends.

Let me illustrate how a big-picture, foundational understanding helps us make sense of new information. You've probably seen a headline like this one: "America's 100 Largest Churches Doubled in Size During the Decade!"²

We might read a headline like that and assume that evangelicism is doubling, or at least increasing, according to the latest study. But, an understanding of larger trends tells us that at least three in four of those "new" attendees left another church to attend the growing megachurch.³ In other words, the majority of that "growth" is not growth but transfer of existing evangelicals. More importantly, an understanding of the grand scheme informs us that 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.

So, aware of those foundational facts, we interpret the same exclamatory headline to mean that more people are leaving smaller churches to attend larger ones—even as the total number of folks attending any evangelical church slowly declines.

The great news of the report becomes unremarkable and expected, because we zoomed out to the broader landscape of foundational facts. The opposite is true, too. Armed with an understanding of the grand scheme, some studies will be unexpected and remarkable.

So we begin our exploration by establishing a broad understanding. In this case, we determine the approximate size of the evangelical church in the United States. Chalking this plumb line will help us make sense of dozens of other studies and statistics.

What We're Measuring and Why It Matters

What exactly are we measuring? In this book we are examining “evangelical” Christians and the national evangelical church. By national church, I do not mean a denomination but the informal total of evangelical believers in the United States. Most evangelicals would say these folks are the true church of Christ’s followers in the United States, or at least the bulk of it, based on our understanding of the New Testament.

We’re talking about churches and individuals who believe a salvation-by-faith-alone “gospel.” We’re talking about American Christians who believe the Bible is God’s Word, that it is without error, and that Jesus is the only way to salvation and to God. This broad group includes a wide variety: Pentecostals, Baptists, charismatics, fundamentalists, those who believe you can lose your salvation, those who believe you can’t, Calvinistic, non-Calvinistic, and so forth. But all of these churches believe Jesus is the only way to God, and that Scripture is God’s authoritative Word.

Some books assessing the United States church wander from “Protestants” (a huge category that includes millions who don’t often believe Jesus is the only way or that the Bible is without error) to “born agains” (millions more who claim to be “born again” but don’t exhibit any measurable difference from other Americans in religious activity) to “evangelicals” (the group that this book addresses). Mixing these labels can result in a lot of confusion and misunderstanding, because these groups are radically different in their sizes and habits.

Of course, evangelicals also report being born again, which adds to the confusion. But many Americans who self-report as “born again” are not actually evangelical Christians. We know this because we’ve seen study after study finding that many born agains believe that Allah is the same God as Jesus and other shocking findings. Clearly, the “born again” group is not equal to the evangelical group (though it overlaps with it). For the sake of focus, accuracy, and consistency, we’re only examining evangelicals in our research. For a fuller definition of “evangelical,” see appendix C.

I should warn you now that it's not easy wrapping our arms around the size of the evangelical church in the United States. This chapter's findings are challenging, and you may find yourself thinking, *That can't be right*. If your gut disagrees with the facts, keep this in mind. Your gut, like mine, is probably the gut of an ingrown evangelical. Many of us live in subcultural evangelical worlds. Everywhere we look we see believers—at home, in our social circles, possibly even at work. We read and listen to media that are primarily evangelical. Our Facebook newsfeeds are clogged with other evangelicals, as are our podcasts, our bookshelves, and our calendars.

Our most strategic leaders are further insulated, spending their days in evangelical institutions. And many of our national leaders are triple insulated, living in evangelically saturated areas like Grand Rapids, Colorado Springs, Texas, and Bible-Belt metropolises.

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. It's difficult to get outside of our own paradigms. But it's imperative if our industry is going to be ready for the brave new world.”⁴ Hyatt is right. Groupthink and overexposure to our own movement can blind us to the reality of how we fit into the larger, rapidly changing culture.

So, with such an awareness of our own limitations, let us pull off the wrappings and answer the question, Just how big is the evangelical church in the United States?

Maybe you've heard that 70 to 80 percent of Americans are Christian. Or, chances are, you've heard the claim that 40 percent of Americans are born again. Many evangelicals assume we are a supermajority in the United States, because we've heard these figures recycled and recited by leaders we trust.

But could it really be that if you took a random sampling of ten Americans from movie theaters and Walmarts between New York and Los Angeles, eight would be Bible-believing evangelical Christians? Does it seem realistic that four of the ten, or two in every five Americans, would be evangelicals?

Nope. You don't have to talk, work, or study outside evangelical circles for long to realize that we are not possibly that much of the United States population in the 21st century. No matter how you stack it, evangelicals do not account for eight in every ten Americans. We don't account for four in ten either. At best, according to the most optimistic reports, we are two in every ten Americans. And now, a consensus of the most dedicated researchers pins the number at *less than* one in ten.

By multiple accounts, evangelical believers are between 7 and 9 percent of the United States population.

If these findings are correct (and they've been confirmed by a handful of separate researchers), then the actual number of evangelicals in the United States is not the 128 million we've been told.⁵ No, of America's 316 million residents, we evangelicals only account for about 22 to 28 million. As mentioned before, we lose about 2.6 million of those each decade. And the number of our new converts does not hold our position with population growth.

In the next decades we will see a massive decrease in evangelical influence politically, economically, culturally, and financially. Ministry managers at the leading edge of evangelicalism already sense these losses. Of two thousand United States church leaders recently surveyed, some 82 percent said that we are already losing influence as a movement.⁶ Around the world, no other church leaders from any other continent or country reported such a loss of influence in their home country.

- We are losing influence because we are shrinking.
- We are losing influence because the host culture is changing so much faster than we (or even it) can understand.
- We are losing influence because the United States population is booming faster than it was during the Baby Boom, and our movement is not keeping up with the growth.
- We are also losing influence because culture at large is realizing, formally or informally, that evangelicals are not as big or significant as we have claimed. Whether by percent of population, power of vote, or simple cultural influence, we are no longer as mighty as we once were.

Our naïve overestimation shows in embarrassing ways. Take for example the fruitless eight-year evangelical boycott of Disney. Together, the Southern Baptists and other evangelical groups claimed that tens of millions of evangelicals would stop buying Disney products. The culture at large and Disney shareholders watched the company's profits and stock value nearly double during the boycott years.

If the boycott proved anything, it proved that we evangelicals overestimate our size and influence as a movement. This point was further emphasized when the leaders who withdrew the boycott warned Disney that they would be keeping an eye on them.⁷

Just as housing values plummeted with the “burst real estate bubble” of the financial recession, evangelical influence will plummet during the Great Evangelical Recession. The broad-shouldered claims and threats of evangelical leaders will be increasingly comical and laughable to outsiders in the know.

The realization that homes weren't worth nearly their sales prices was one factor in a larger economic recession. The dawning realization that evangelicalism is smaller than she has claimed will be a triggering factor in the Great Evangelical Recession of the next decades.

When society at large understands that evangelicals are no longer the juggernaut we claimed to be in the 1980s and 1990s, there will be repercussions. Here's how one outsider, a religion journalist, put it when she realized the actual size of evangelicalism in the United States:

A small and declining group of people has been portrayed as tremendously powerful and growing so rapidly that they might take over the country—when in fact the number of converts among this group is down and dropping. They are rarely able to convert an adult, middle-class American. 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.⁸

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.”⁹

Independent Experts Conclude Evangelicalism Is About One-Fourth the Size Often Claimed

So why do we commonly hear that we're a larger movement? Well, for starters, it's easy to misinterpret numbers. Also, high figures are tossed about with well-intentioned ignorance, because we do not understand that "Christians," "Protestants," "born agains," and "evangelicals" are radically different groups.

Here's the sort of technically accurate but confusing statistic we often hear. In the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey, 76 percent of Americans self-identified as "Christian."¹⁰ If we're not careful, we might think the majority of the country understands Christ, the Bible, and Christianity the way we evangelicals do. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

Sociologists have long known that Americans who self-identify as "Christian" rarely attend any church, let alone an evangelical one. Of the minority who do attend church, large segments are Catholic, non-Bible-believing, non-Christ-believing, or even Mormon. In short, the vast majority are not Christians by the evangelical definition of trusting in Christ alone for eternal salvation and valuing God's Word as the true standard for belief and practice.

This is why Gallup asks respondents if they are "born again." Gallup surveys indicate that perhaps one-third, possibly as high as 45 percent, of Americans claim to be born again.¹¹ That would be almost one-in-two Americans.

For a long time, influential evangelicals assumed that the folks who claimed to be born again were all evangelicals. This figure is the reason why we often hear that about 40 percent of Americans are evangelical Christians. But specialists have learned recently that, as with the term "Christian," the term "born again" means different things to different people in postmodern, pluralistic America.

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. The reason for the discrepancy is simple: A lot of Americans *say* they're born again, but when prodded, they do not believe what evangelical Christians believe.¹²

For this reason, a growing host of sociologists, journalists, and academics believe that the “born again” figure does not represent the actual count of evangelical Christians, any more than the “Christian” figure does.

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.

Dr. Christian Smith, Professor of Sociology at Notre Dame: Evangelicals Are 7 Percent of the United States

Respected sociologist Dr. Christian Smith employed academically rigorous methodology to reach his conclusion that about 20 million Americans “identify themselves with the evangelical movement.”¹³

Dr. Smith is professor of sociology and director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame. Not only is he a highly esteemed sociologist at a leading religious university, he is also a specialist in studying religious groups.

Dr. Smith is not a theologian or church leader giving an opinion on the size of evangelicalism. He is an uncontested and proven academic who undertook a formal survey. Smith’s sociology education includes both a masters and PhD from Harvard. Smith is also a Christian, with no motivation to minimize the size of evangelicalism. According to Dr. Smith’s rigorous sociological survey methods, we evangelicals make up about 7 percent of the United States population.

David T. Olson, American Church Research Project: Evangelicals Are 8.9 Percent of the United States

David T. Olson is a different kind of researcher—not an academic, but a specialist in the practical. He directs the American Church Research Project, which maintains a database of more than 200,000

United States churches. Like many academics, Olson thinks the “born again” question is a simplistic and flawed way of calculating belief.

Olson is among a growing number who don’t trust Americans to understand the religious lingo in phone surveys or to be honest about their church attendance. Olson and a handful of sociologists have proven that Americans round up and outright inflate their answers about church attendance, Bible reading, and other religious activities. For Olson, actions speak louder than words. He writes:

The Gallup Organization reports that more than 40 percent of Americans say that in the last week they attended a house of worship. . . . If these poll numbers reflected reality, between 120 and 129 million Americans should be in a worship service on any given weekend. However, these numbers do not reflect reality. When you start to do the math, the vision of a booming American church unravels. . . .

In reality the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Americans are absent from church. Even more troublesome, as the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind.¹⁴

Ultimately, Olson concludes that 8.9 percent of Americans attend evangelical church services.¹⁵ And that may be slightly high, for the following reason.

Olson’s numbers don’t rely on individuals to self-report their church involvement, but they do rely on churches to self-report their attendance. As an evangelical “senior pastor,” I’ve seen some churches round up or outright inflate their own numbers. If that’s a widespread reality, then Olson’s conclusion that 8.9 percent of Americans regularly attend evangelical churches may be slightly higher than reality.

It is exactly 1.9 percent higher than the Barna Group’s recent finding.

Barna Group, Most Experienced Evangelical Pollsters: Evangelicals Are 7 Percent of the United States

The Barna Group has been tracking the evangelical church for about three decades. They are probably the most sophisticated

and experienced auditors of United States evangelicalism in the world.

In George Barna's 2011 book, *Futurecast*, he reports the findings of a Barna Group survey, which found that "about 7 percent of the public can be considered evangelical Christians." Barna's methodology is related to Gallup's—surveys of a statistically accurate sample group. But the Barna Group puts intentional thought into the wording of their questions. They work harder than anyone else to craft a custom net that will catch only evangelical Christians (while leaving great space for evangelical diversity including fundamentalists, charismatics, non-charismatics, and so forth).

Their figure of 7 percent is down from a 2007 Barna finding of 8 percent,¹⁶ which was down about one-third from Barna's count in 1991. We should note that George Barna has received recent criticism for the fine net he casts to draw out only evangelicals. This criticism is often based on opinion, not data. The corroborating conclusions of the three other independent researchers identified here indicate that the Barna Group, which has been measuring exclusively evangelicals for decades now, does indeed know how to measure evangelicals.

From everything I can see, the Barna Group's figure, like the figures of the other experts here, is accurate. Let's not shoot the messenger.

Christine Wicker, Award-Winning Religion Reporter: Evangelicals Are 7 Percent of the United States

Christine Wicker, a mainstream journalist, is not an evangelical. As such, she brings a fresh objectivity to our national headcount. Wicker has spent years reporting on and measuring the size of the evangelical church. Her methods and motives differ from Smith's, Olson's, or Barna's. Her conclusion, however, is identical.

Wicker started with in-house numbers from the Southern Baptists—the largest organized group of evangelicals—to demonstrate how inflated our count is. The Southern Baptists reported their membership at 16 million Americans, but by their own records they only had about 6.1 million attending their services on any given Sunday in 2007, she found.¹⁷

In the years since Wicker's investigation, Southern Baptist leaders have publicly stated that the group is struggling. A 2011 report confirmed a continuing trend of decreasing attendance, membership, giving, and conversions among Southern Baptist churches. 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."¹⁸

The Southern Baptists may be the best microcosm of evangelicalism in the United States. Their values and methods are largely in line with the broad mainstream movement. Where the majority of evangelicalism is scattered and difficult to track, the Southern Baptists do an excellent job tracking the trends in their large chunk of the national evangelical church.

And here's their recent trajectory. This largest group in evangelicalism, the group that produced Rick Warren and of which Saddleback remains a part, is not maintaining its size with population growth.

Wicker also examined the National Association of Evangelicals' claim to represent "thirty million" evangelicals. After adding up the total number of attendees in each of the sixty-one represented denominations and estimating the attendance of the other NAE churches, Wicker could only account for 7.6 million evangelicals represented by the NAE.¹⁹ When she confronted the NAE with these findings, they did not refute her conclusion and removed the claim of representing thirty million evangelicals from their website, according to her book.

Wicker concluded that, using evangelical's own figures, about 7 percent of Americans are evangelicals. That's exactly the same as Barna's 2011 figure. It's within spitting distance of Olson's figure, and it's the same as the esteemed academic Dr. Christian Smith's.

Four specialized researchers. Four independent methods of thorough calculation. Four unique motivations. 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.

If you still doubt the experts' findings, examine their methodology for yourself. Or better yet, do a study in your own community.

Add up the average attendance at the evangelical churches in your neighborhood, city, or county. Then compare that figure to the neighborhood, city, or county's population. If you live in a typical community, the combined church attendance will account for 5 to 10 percent of the population. Some Bible Belt and Midwest areas will be higher. Most metropolitan areas will be much lower.

According to the specialists, the total number of evangelicals is about 22 million of America's 316 million residents, rather than the oft-touted figure of 128 million who claim to be born again, but don't actually understand what that means.²⁰ If the generational changes examined in the upcoming chapters persist, evangelicals could drop to about 4 percent of the population within three decades. That is, in just under thirty years, we may only be 16 million of about 400 million Americans.²¹ That's one in every twenty-five Americans.

So, even as many outsiders in the host culture assume that we are a dominant and bigoted majority, Bible-believing evangelicals are becoming, almost overnight, a shrinking minority. In economic terms, it's a market correction—much like the plummeting home prices of the Great (financial) Recession.

Choosing Not to Ignore the Facts

Maybe if I ignore the truth long enough, it won't be the truth.
 Maybe if you don't get the facts, the facts will just go away. . . .
 That approach never leads to anywhere good.

Andy Stanley, in the sermon series *DEFINING MOMENTS*

Experts will continue debating and refining evangelicalism's size and definition. Already, some reputable observers have refuted the findings above, arguing that the true size of evangelicalism is closer to 20 percent. The point here is simply that, according to a growing host of specialists, our size is dramatically smaller than we have been told.

Even if we optimistically triple the 7 percent to 21 percent, the evangelical church is still half the size we've been told. The

repercussions are massive. We are nowhere near half the country—as many have claimed. This is a huge drop in our size and influence.

In Romans 12:3, the apostle Paul tells Christ’s followers, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment. . . .” Here God commands us to measure ourselves accurately—to *not* round up, to be honest.

Whether on purpose or by accident, some evangelicals have overstated the size of our movement. Many of us have repeated the figures, assuming them to be accurate. As with pre-recession home prices, we have seen and heard these figures so repeatedly that we cannot fathom the possibility of these numbers being wrong.

Our value has been inflated, and, like the bubble of home values, the market will correct. Our actual size will show itself. It’s already beginning to—in national elections, television programming, and local school board decisions. After all, if anyone believes that the truth always wins out, it’s us evangelicals.

As I have ricocheted between secular journalism and evangelical Christianity, I’ve noticed a trend in truth telling. Some of my agnostic journalism colleagues don’t believe in absolute moral truth, but when it comes to reporting—even on their own flaws—they are a brutally accurate and honest bunch.

Conversely, we evangelicals build our entire system on a belief in “absolute truth.” We read books about it. We teach absolute truth to our kids. And yet, we prophets of absolute truth sometimes help God out by rounding up—our weekly church attendance and, it seems, our national headcount, too.

If anyone, we should know that lying never pays. In fact, it almost always costs.

Evangelicals Are About the Population of New York State

In this chapter we have built a framework, so that we can interpret the trends in the rest of the book. Let’s finish by visualizing our findings.

If you would, picture a map of this country's fifty states. Most of us have been told and have the impression that about half the country is evangelical. So you can imagine that on your United States map, half of the states are evangelical. You might even pick a color for the evangelical states and another color for the nonbelieving states. These "evangelical" states previously represented between 40 and 70 percent of the population, depending on which figure you had previously 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.

To put it in international terms, there are slightly more evangelicals in the entire United States than there are Muslims in the greater metro area of Cairo, Egypt.²²

You could put it this way. If we asked New York State's 21 million residents to leave, then we could take every evangelical Christian in the United States, and take over New York State. Once all 22 million of us populated New York, there would not be a single evangelical Christian among the 294 million Americans remaining in the other forty-nine states.

This is our actual size, according to the researchers who specialize in counting evangelicals.

In future chapters, we'll see that our smaller size is slowly shrinking—because we're losing our own kids and we're failing to generate significant converts in the midst of a rapid population boom. But there's a more practical and immediate evangelical crisis on the horizon: a culture crisis.