

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

Michael Spencer

(March 10, 2009)

<https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/0310/p09s01-coop.html>

We are on the verge – within 10 years – of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity. This breakdown will follow the deterioration of the mainline Protestant world and it will fundamentally alter the religious and cultural environment in the West.

Within two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants. (Between 25 and 35 percent of Americans today are Evangelicals.) In the “Protestant” 20th century, Evangelicals flourished. But we will soon be living in a very secular and religiously antagonistic 21st century.

This collapse will herald the arrival of an anti-Christian chapter of the post-Christian West. Intolerance of Christianity will rise to levels many of us have not believed possible in our lifetimes, and public policy will become hostile toward evangelical Christianity, seeing it as the opponent of the common good.

Millions of Evangelicals will quit. Thousands of ministries will end. Christian media will be reduced, if not eliminated. Many Christian schools will go into rapid decline. I’m convinced the grace and mission of God will reach to the ends of the earth. But the end of evangelicalism as we know it is close.

Why Is This Going to Happen?

1. Evangelicals have identified their movement with the culture war and with political conservatism. This will prove to be a very costly mistake. Evangelicals will increasingly be seen as a threat to cultural progress. Public leaders will

consider us bad for America, bad for education, bad for children, and bad for society.

The evangelical investment in moral, social, and political issues has depleted our resources and exposed our weaknesses. Being against gay marriage and being rhetorically pro-life will not make up for the fact that **massive majorities of Evangelicals can’t articulate the Gospel with any coherence.** We fell for the trap of believing in a cause more than a faith.

2. We Evangelicals have failed to pass on to our young people an orthodox form of faith that can take root and survive the secular onslaught. Ironically, the billions of dollars we’ve spent on youth ministers, Christian music, publishing, and media has produced a culture of young Christians who know next to nothing about their own faith except how they feel about it. Our young people have deep beliefs about the culture war, but do not know why they should obey scripture, the essentials of theology, or the experience of spiritual discipline and community. Coming generations of Christians are going to be monumentally ignorant and unprepared for culture-wide pressures.

3. There are three kinds of evangelical churches today: consumer-driven megachurches, dying churches, and new churches whose future is

fragile. Denominations will shrink, even vanish, while fewer and fewer evangelical churches will survive and thrive.

4. Despite some very successful developments in the past 25 years, **Christian education has not produced a product that can withstand the rising tide of secularism.** Evangelicalism has used its educational system primarily to staff its own needs and talk to itself.

5. The confrontation between cultural secularism and the faith at the core of evangelical efforts to “do good” is rapidly approaching. We will soon see that the good Evangelicals want to do will be viewed as bad by so many, and much of that work will not be done. Look for ministries to take on a less and less distinctively Christian face in order to survive.

6. Even in areas where Evangelicals imagine themselves strong (like the Bible Belt), we will find a great inability to pass on to our children a vital evangelical confidence in the Bible and the importance of the faith.

7. The money will dry up.

What Will be Left?

Expect evangelicalism to look more like the pragmatic, therapeutic, church-growth oriented megachurches that have defined success. Emphasis will shift from doctrine to relevance, motivation, and personal success – resulting in churches further compromised and weakened in their ability to pass on the faith.

Two of the beneficiaries will be the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions. Evangelicals have been entering these churches in recent decades and that trend will continue, with more efforts aimed at the “conversion” of Evangelicals to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

A small band will work hard to rescue the movement from its demise through theological renewal. This is an attractive, innovative, and tireless community with outstanding media, publishing, and leadership development. Nonetheless, I believe the coming evangelical

collapse will not result in a second reformation, though it may result in benefits for many churches and the beginnings of new churches.

The emerging church will largely vanish from the evangelical landscape, becoming part of the small segment of progressive mainline Protestants that remain true to the liberal vision.

Aggressively evangelistic fundamentalist churches will begin to disappear.

Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity will become the majority report in evangelicalism. Can this community withstand heresy, relativism, and confusion? To do so, it must make a priority of biblical authority, responsible leadership, and a reemergence of orthodoxy.

Evangelicalism needs a “rescue mission” from the world Christian community. It is time for missionaries to come to America from Asia and Africa. Will they come? Will they be able to bring to our culture a more vital form of Christianity?

Expect a fragmented response to the culture war. Some Evangelicals will work to create their own countercultures, rather than try to change the culture at large. Some will continue to see conservatism and Christianity through one lens and will engage the culture war much as before – a status quo the media will be all too happy to perpetuate. A significant number, however, may give up political engagement for a discipleship of deeper impact.

Is All of This a Bad Thing?

Evangelicalism doesn't need a bailout. Much of it needs a funeral. But what about what remains?

Is it a good thing that denominations are going to become largely irrelevant? Only if the networks that replace them are able to marshal resources, training, and vision to the mission field and into the planting and equipping of churches.

Is it a good thing that many marginal believers will depart? Possibly, if churches begin and continue the work of renewing serious church membership. We must change the conversation from the maintenance of traditional churches to

developing new and culturally appropriate ones.

The ascendancy of Charismatic-Pentecostal-influenced worship around the world can be a major positive for the evangelical movement if reformation can reach those churches and if it is joined with the calling, training, and mentoring of leaders. If American churches come under more of the influence of the movement of the Holy Spirit in Africa and Asia, this will be a good thing.

Will the evangelicalizing of Catholic and Orthodox communions be a good development? One can hope for greater unity and appreciation, but the history of these developments seems to be much more about a renewed vigor to “evangelize” Protestantism in the name of unity.

Will the coming collapse get Evangelicals past the pragmatism and shallowness that has brought about the loss of substance and power? Probably not. The purveyors of the evangelical circus will be in fine form, selling their wares as the promised solution to every church's problems. I expect the landscape of megachurch vacuity to be around for a very long time.

Will it shake lose the prosperity Gospel from its parasitical place on the evangelical body of Christ? Evidence from similar periods is not encouraging. American Christians seldom seem to be able to separate their theology from an overall idea of personal affluence and success.

The loss of their political clout may impel many Evangelicals to reconsider the wisdom of trying to create a “godly society.” That doesn’t mean they’ll focus solely on saving souls, but the increasing concern will be how to keep secularism out of church, not stop it altogether. The integrity of the church as a countercultural movement with a message of “empire subversion” will increasingly replace a message of cultural and political entitlement.

Despite all of these challenges, it is impossible not to be hopeful. As one commenter has already said, “Christianity loves a crumbling empire.”

We can rejoice that in the ruins, new forms of Christian vitality and ministry will be born. I

expect to see a vital and growing house church movement. This cannot help but be good for an evangelicalism that has made buildings, numbers, and paid staff its drugs for half a century.

We need new evangelicalism that learns from the past and listens more carefully to what God says about being His people in the midst of a powerful, idolatrous culture.

I’m not a prophet. My view of evangelicalism is not authoritative or infallible. I am certainly wrong in some of these predictions. But is there anyone who is observing evangelicalism in these times who does not sense that the future of our movement holds many dangers and much potential?

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The Coming Evangelical Collapse?

Kevin DeYoung

(March 12, 2009)

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/coming-evangelical-collapse/>

On March 10, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran a piece by **Michael Spencer** (aka “Internet Monk”) entitled “**The Coming Evangelical Collapse: An Anti-Christian Chapter in Western History Is About to Begin....** But out of the ruins, a new vitality and integrity will rise.” The piece started as a blog, then got picked up by the *Monitor*, then showed up on Drudge, and then Christianity Today on-line started talking about. This is what happens when a blog goes viral. I don’t know anything about Michael Spencer or where he’s coming from with this article, but since it’s made quite a stir, and since I’ve had a few people send me the article already and asked my opinion, I thought I would comment on it. Here’s the gist of Spencer’s argument:

We are on the verge – within 10 years – of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity. This breakdown will follow the deterioration of the mainline Protestant world and it will fundamentally alter the religious and cultural environment in the West.

Within two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants. (Between 25 and 35 percent of Americans today are Evangelicals.) In the “Protestant” 20th century, Evangelicals flourished. But they will soon be living in a very secular and religiously antagonistic 21st century.

This collapse will herald the arrival of an anti-Christian chapter of the post-Christian West. Intolerance of Christianity will rise to levels many of us have not believed possible in our lifetimes, and public policy will become hostile toward evangelical Christianity, seeing it as the opponent of the common good.

Millions of Evangelicals will quit. Thousands of ministries will end. Christian media will be reduced, if not eliminated. Many Christian schools will go into rapid decline. I’m convinced the grace and mission of God will reach to the ends of the

earth. But the end of evangelicalism as we know it is close.

Like most predictions, and you’ll have to read the whole article to get all of them, I find Spencer’s to be a mixed bag.

There are some parts of his analysis I agree with: evangelicals are not doing a good job of passing on the faith to the next generation; we are bedeviled by false gospels from the therapeutic and prosperity wheeler-dealers; we have been too invested in causes without being able to articulate the faith; the emerging church will become a small part of progressive mainline protestantism; it could be a very good thing for nominal, marginal believers to stop pretending they are Christian and inflating our numbers.

Then there are the parts of his evaluation that border on truisms, like, if we come under the influence of the Holy Spirit that will be a good thing. Roger that. There are also “predictions” that are already coming true, as in Spencer’s plea for missionaries to come to America from Asia and Africa. And there are places where Spencer hedges his bets: some evangelicals, he says, will create countercultures; some will stay conservative; and

some will check out. Well, yes, I imagine all three will happen.

On the whole, I agree with most of his Spencer’s complaints about the evangelical church. But I am not so pessimistic about its future. I doubt seriously that evangelicalism in the future will “look more like the pragmatic, therapeutic, church-growth oriented megachurches that have defined success.” These churches certainly exist in large numbers, but I think they’ve reached their zenith. Pragmatic, therapeutic churches are not the wave of the future. Younger Christians—both on the emergent left and reformed right—think they’re bogus. And while I think lots of people will talk about house churches in America and some will try them, I don’t imagine actual involvement will account for a significant piece of the church pie in this country. I also doubt that “aggressively evangelistic fundamentalist churches will begin to disappear” if for no other reason than that the Lord tends to bless churches that actually do evangelism.

Evangelicalism is not dead. Not by a long shot. It’s curious to me that while secularists have written best-selling books based on their fear of some sort of theocratic evangelical takeover, evangelicals themselves have never cried louder that the sky is falling. I suspect that both of these shrill voices are mistaken.

It’s true that church attendance is down. The percentage of Americans calling themselves Christian is declining. But 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.

Plus, the numbers are not as bad as we might think. According to the latest statistics from researcher David T. Olson (who admittedly is on the pessimistic side of things), the percentage of Americans in church on any given weekend (and this is half the percentage of those who said they were in church) fell from 20.4% in 1990 to 17.5%

in 2005. This is not good. But a closer look at the numbers is revealing. During the same time period the percentage of those attending the establishment Mainline churches fell from 3.9 to 3.0 while those attending a Roman Catholic church declined from 7.2% to 5.3%. But the percentage in evangelical churches was almost identical, going from 9.2% in 1990 to 9.1% in 2005.

Keep in mind these are percentages of the total population. This means the actual number of people attending an evangelical church on any weekend rose by several million over the last decade and a half. Almost all of the net loss in percentage of church attendance came from Catholic and more liberal Protestant churches. For example, in raw numbers, the Mainline churches declined 21% in membership (from 29 million to 22 million) from 1960 to 2000, while at the same time overall church membership in the United States rose by 33%. So the story of declining church attendance percentage is not the story of a new found dissatisfaction with the church at large, as much as it is the continuing story of Catholics and Mainline Protestants losing their young (to evangelical churches or to no church), parents in mainline and Catholic pews not having as many children as evangelicals, and the old (who are found disproportionately among mainline churches) dying off.

All that to say, warnings like Spencer’s can help wake up the pollyannish among us who haven’t noticed that our neighbors don’t all listen to Focus on the Family. But I’d encourage evangelicals (myself included) to find ways to self-criticize that aren’t so quick to rush to the worst doom-and-gloom scenarios. We have a tendency to exaggerate our achievements and our failures. We lionize our past and demonize the future. If evangelical Christianity collapses within 10 years I will be very sad. And very surprised.

And, I guess, then I’ll have to admit that Michael Spencer was right and I was wrong.

The Coming Evangelical Collapse – Eleven Years In The Internet Monk Archives

On March 10, 2009, Michael Spencer penned these words in an opinion piece in the *Christian Science Monitor*: “We are on the verge – within 10 years – of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity.... Within two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants.” With that, a firestorm erupted. The story was picked up around the world. And with it came the accompanying criticism. How could Michael have written such words? His denomination was having record setting attendances, year after year after year. And what a denomination it was: One in twenty Americans was a member of the Southern Baptist Convention!

Mark Galli, the editor of *Christianity Today* wrote: “Some predictions I warm up to because of my own biases, but in the end, they don’t seem to be founded on anything substantive.” I knew in my heart that Michael Spencer was right, and I believed that there were numbers to back him up. Being a numbers guy I offered to write a couple of posts to back him up statistically. Michael agreed, and with that I wrote my first two posts for Internet Monk. Part 1. Part 2.

Michael covered a lot of ground in his essay. I encourage you to stop and read the entire article in the *Christian Science Monitor*. I encourage you to read my responses as well. Feel free to respond in the comments to any of his or my points.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since that time. Michael Spencer passed away just over a year after those original posts were written. Jeff Dunn and Chaplain Mike stepped in to keep the blog going, and I have written another 200 posts.

Today is going to be my very last post before the Internet Monk closes its doors on January 1st. I thought it would be very fitting that I return to the topic of my very first post and see how accurate Michael Spencer and my comments were.

Because this is my final post, and I really am a numbers guy, I want to focus on his first two statements, my original support of them, and how our predictions stand up 11 years later.

“We are on the verge – within 10 years – of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity... Within two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants.” Many people jumped on that first statement, and claimed that Michael believed that Evangelical Christianity would collapse (to nothing) in 10 years. That claim is not born out by his second statement, that within “two generations, evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its occupants.”

In my first analysis, written two days after the *Christian Science Monitor* was published, I did a bunch of number crunching of Southern Baptist attendance figures. I concluded: “[Y]ou will have a net decrease in Baptists over the next ten years of roughly 10%.” So as Michael has said, the next ten years should be the beginning of the collapse, and as was shown earlier in the article, this collapse should continue for several decades until half of the Baptists are gone.

I used Baptist in my analysis because this is the group with which Michael was most familiar and they seemed to be pretty representative of American Evangelicalism. Michael also inferred in his essay that the decline would not be in the Charismatic/Pentecostal sector of Evangelicalism

How long a time period were we talking about? Michael said two generations. I understood this as the Miriam-Webster definition of “the average

span of time between the birth of parents and that of their offspring.” So my interpretation of what Michael wrote was that this collapse would start within 10 years and that we would see it come to complete fruition “within two generations” – between 40 and 50 years from the date of writing.

So what have we seen happen in the Southern Baptists since I first predicted that they would decline 10% in ten years? Well, from 2009 to 2019, a period of 11 years, membership in the Southern Baptists declined 10.1%. Attendance, which I consider to be a much better thermometer, declined 15.5% over the same time period. Baptisms? Because isn't that what Baptists do? They are down an astonishing 32.6% since 2009!

Even though Membership has declined by a smaller percentage than attendance, the membership decline has been accelerating. When do I expect the Southern Baptist “be a house deserted of half its occupants.” Well if attendance decline continue at the same rate as it has over the past 11 years, we can expect that to happen 35.5 years after Michael first predicted it. I believe that we will see a similar time frame for membership as well. His predictions are holding up very well.

While I may receive some criticism for focusing on the Southern Baptists, I believe that Michael's prediction, and my analysis, would hold true for the broader Evangelical tent.

Mark Galli, the editor of *Christianity Today*, who initially showed so much skepticism, had a follow up of his own: “Ten years ago, the late blogger Michael Spencer sparked one of the first social media conversations about the viability of evangelicalism with his essay, ‘The Coming Evangelical Collapse, and Why It Is Going to Happen.’ I was skeptical at the time he wrote this, and said so in print. But today I admit that Spencer was more right than he was wrong. Recent events and surveys bear out many of his predictions. We truly are in a moment of crisis in American evangelicalism.... [C]ontemporary evangelicalism is in serious trouble. Actually, its crisis is the same one that afflicts all Christianity in America....”

I believe that the crisis lies at the heart of what ails large swaths of the American church. Alexander Solzhenitsyn named it in his speech upon receiving the Templeton Prize in Religion in 1968. He was talking about Western culture when he used it. I apply it to the American church, evangelical and not: “*We have forgotten God.*”