

FACING THE PROBLEM

*If we really want a Christian society
we must teach Christianity.¹*

DOROTHY SAYERS

PEER BEHIND THE CURTAIN OF SOME “HIP” OR “PROGRESSIVE” evangelical churches, past the savvy technology and secular music, and you will find more than just a contemporary worship service. You’ll find faith leaders encouraging young evangelicals to trade in their Christian convictions for a gospel filled with compromise. They’re slowly attempting to give evangelicalism an “update”—and the change is not for the good.

It’s painful for me to admit, but we can no longer rest carefree in our evangelical identity—because it is changing. No doubt you have seen the headlines declaring that evangelicalism is doomed because evangelical kids are leaving the faith. It is no secret that there is an expanding gulf between traditional Christian teachings and contemporary moral values. But the sad truth is that the ideological gulf between America’s evangelical grown-ups and their kids, aka the “Millennials,” seems to be widening too.

Somehow the blame for this chasm is being heaped on

traditional churches, or those that espouse a classic Christian orthodoxy. They are accused of having too many rules and being homophobic and bigoted. Yes, we've heard those false claims from popular culture in its desperate attempt to keep Christianity imprisoned within the sanctuary walls. But now popular culture is being aided by Christ-professing bedfellows whose message to "coexist," "tolerate," and "keep out of it" is more marketable to the rising generation of evangelicals.

The seasoned Christian soldiers are noticing these distortions of the gospel (which, by the way, has always been countercultural). But for young evangelicals the spiritual haze is harder to wade through. Desperate for acceptance in a fallen world, many young evangelicals (and some older ones) choose not to take Christ out of the chapel, and so they are unwittingly killing the church's public witness. In this uphill cultural battle, mired by scare tactics and fear, three types of evangelical Christians are emerging:

- **Couch-potato Christians:** These Christians adapt to the culture by staying silent on the tough culture and faith discussions. Typically this group will downplay God's absolute truths by promoting the illusion that neutrality was Jesus's preferred method of evangelism.
- **Cafeteria-style Christians:** This group picks and chooses which Scripture passages to live by, opting for the ones that best seem to jive with culture. Typically they focus solely on the "nice" parts of the gospel while simultaneously and intentionally minimizing sin, hell, repentance, and transformation.
- **Convictional Christians:** In the face of the culture's harsh admonitions, these evangelicals refuse

to be silent. Mimicking Jesus, they compassionately talk about love and grace while also sharing with their neighbors the need to recognize and turn from sin.

I know about these three types of Christians because at one time or another I have fallen into each of these three categories. My parents will tell you that even though I was raised in church, I morphed into a full-fledged feminist, told my parents they were ignorant for not endorsing homosexuality, and bought into the distorted social justice rhetoric that confuses caring for the poor with advancing socialist or big government systems and demonizing the United States for its free market system.

I'm not ashamed to share my story for two reasons. First, I pray that it will help you better understand the cultural challenges stifling the evangelical community's social and political witness. Second, and most important, my experiences and those of my fellow bold evangelicals are a testimony of God's awesome, transforming power at work in classrooms, pews, and the nation.

Being countercultural for Christ isn't easy. Trust me, I've felt awkward and uncomfortable talking about politics and religion in big groups too. But it's not a choice we have. What does the Great Commission say? Jesus commanded us to go, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20, NIV). Jesus said for us to share "everything," not just what is convenient.

If the church—and by that I mean Christ-professing parents, teachers, mentors, pastors, and friends, all entrusted with equipping young disciples in biblical knowledge—does not talk about the tough moral issues and examine what the Bible says at home, in class, and around church, then I can promise you the world will.

Kissing Evangelicalism Good-Bye?

I see so many parents (including my own at one time) scratching their heads trying to figure out where they went wrong with young evangelicals. Following the instructions of Proverbs 22:6—“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (NKJV)—many evangelical parents took their children to church and prayed with them every night before bed. Yet the values those children now hold dear do not reflect the traditional teachings of Jesus.

To be perfectly clear, I want to let you know upfront that this book isn't a parenting how-to guide that, if followed, will lead your loved ones to salvation. Salvation is easily attainable but found only through Jesus Christ. Instead, what I can offer you is a glimpse into the world of a twentysomething who sees thousands of young evangelicals being spiritually and emotionally targeted on Christian university campuses, in college ministries, and at churches nationwide by a growing liberal movement cloaked in Christianity. Within these evangelical institutions, and even in some sanctuaries, truth has been made relative. Scripture verses that reference anything considered offensive are skipped over, and God's supremacy is diminished in order to market the church to as wide an audience as possible.

Evidence for this moral and spiritual decline is staring us straight in the eye. Research tells us that evangelicals are drifting further away from the orthodox truths their parents and grandparents held dear. Baptists, the country's largest Protestant group, are departing from their religious traditions faster than other evangelicals. According to a 2008 Pew Research study, of all the Protestant groups, Baptists had the largest percentage of children who chose not to affiliate with them as adults, experiencing a net change of 3.7 percent.² The only other church tradition with a greater loss was the Catholic Church with a loss of 7.5 percent.³

In addition, LifeWay Research found the number of members affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) declined by more than one hundred thousand in one year.⁴ A comparison between 1980 and 2005 found that the number of yearly young adult baptisms decreased by forty thousand people.⁵

It gets worse. During his remarks to the SBC's 2001 Executive Committee, T. C. Pinckney, the denomination's vice president at the time, made an astonishing admission. He said research revealed that approximately 70 percent of youth were leaving the church within two years of their high school graduations.⁶ Many young Baptists have also admitted that they are starting to view the church as irrelevant to their lives.⁷

Our churches have rarely—if ever—faced the exodus we are seeing today. This will have a direct effect on the spiritual and moral values that will shape the nation in the coming years. That is why it is urgent that concerned Christians start acting now before the situation gets worse.

Conviction, Corruption, and Bad Theology

Faith and culture will continue to collide in America. However, it is the nation's faith convictions that will ultimately determine the direction of not only culture but also the economy and government. The culture wars, the growth of family, the success of missions, the prosperity of our great nation—the future rests on Millennial evangelicals' worldview. And that is cause for concern, because something has gone terribly wrong with young evangelicals' theology.

The Millennial generation's susceptibility to "feel-good" doctrine is playing a big part in America's moral decline. Millennials' religious practices depend largely on how the actions make us and others *feel*, whether the activities are biblical or not. For example, we only attend churches that leave us feeling good about our lifestyle choices, even if those choices conflict with

God's clear commandments. We dismiss old hymns that focus on God's transforming salvation, love, and mercy and opt for "Jesus is your boyfriend" songs. Or we contribute to non-profits that exploit and misuse terms such as *justice*, *oppressed*, and *inequality* because tweaking the language makes us feel more neutral, less confrontational.

The truth is that following Christ is not *merely* about endorsing grace and love, but it also about obeying a set of commandments established by our Creator. That is why Jesus said: "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23, NIV).

Popular culture often gets "truth" wrong, especially when it comes to religion. Even in the twenty-first century the apostle John's warning still applies: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward" (2 John 1:7–8, NKJV).

Popular liberal evangelical writers and preachers tell young evangelicals that if they accept abortion and same-sex marriage, then the media, academia, and Hollywood will finally accept Christians. Out of fear of being falsely dubbed "intolerant" or "uncompassionate," many young Christians are buying into theological falsehoods. Instead of standing up as a voice for the innocent unborn or marriage as God intended, Millennials are forgoing the authority of Scripture and embracing a couch-potato, cafeteria-style Christianity all in the name of tolerance.

This contemporary mind-set is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian whose Christian convictions put him at odds with the Nazis and cost him his life, called "cheap grace." In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.⁸

Waving the white flag of defeat in the culture wars is not an option for today's evangelicals because to do so would be to give up on the next generation's walk with Christ. Right now cheap grace theology is proliferating around evangelical Bible colleges, seminaries, and Christian ministries and dictating young people's convictions. It is important for culture-warrior Christians to speak out, as Bonhoeffer did, against the popular trends and act as role models for the next generation.

What Went Wrong?

It is not that Millennial evangelicals were not taken to church by their parents or taught about Jesus in Sunday school. It is that their training has been hijacked by ineffective, inaccurate, and, sometimes, intentionally distorted doctrine.

An army of evangelicals is being raised up on Christian campuses, and we pray that their theology remains founded on the authority of God's Word and not the lips of nice-sounding strangers. For those young evangelicals who attend public undergraduate schools like I did, well, we just have to pray that much more fervently that they do not walk away from their faith.

As constant and pervasive as the attacks on Christianity are at public universities, it is important to remember that Millennials' worldviews do not start taking shape after they move out of their parents' houses and into their dorm rooms. Their understanding of Jesus's teachings and cultural convictions begin to form while they are still at home and under the influence of their local church.

During the summer of 2012, I was sitting in the youth minister's office at my local church. The middle school class was in need of an additional Sunday school teacher, and I was up for the job. The youth minister and I talked about my personal testimony, my family's beliefs, and my criminal record. (Rest assured parents, I don't have one!) Then suddenly the youth minister's expression darkened and his tone turned very serious when he confessed the biggest challenge he was facing. He told me, "I'm watching these kids be raised in church. They memorize scripture. They know who Jesus is and what He taught. But then they move away to college and let go of those teachings. They go wild. We have to figure out what is happening." The ministry director was right, and once I started teaching Sunday school, I quickly figured out why he was seeing this trend.

What I hope and pray evangelical parents and leaders come to realize is that the church has been too trusting. In our jammed-packed lifestyles, parents have treated Sunday school like they do softball or ballet class—drop off the kids for an hour then pick them up and hope they learned something. But Christian teaching once a week by leaders and volunteers, some of whom do not uphold traditional Christian teaching, is not enough to equip young evangelicals.

Early on in my Sunday school teaching days, my co-teacher and I followed the curriculum pretty narrowly, the exception being that my co-teacher had an outstanding knowledge of biblical history that he imparted to the kids. Me? As a pro-family, pro-life advocate, I could have taken the full hour to unload about the pro-abortion movement's racist origins or the emotional impact of being raised by gay parents.

Unfortunately, being new to this particular Sunday school class, I held back my outrages with pop culture. We taught all about Jesus's birth, resurrection, and saving grace. Thinking the fluffy kids' ministry curriculum covered all of the necessary bases,

I felt confident these kids had a firm grasp on their Christian worldview. Boy, was I wrong!

One day my co-teacher and I decided to play “True or False.” We casually went down a list of worldview questions with our class, sure that our little evangelicals would nail every question correctly.

1. **Number one:** Jesus is God. “True.” Great job.
2. **Number two:** Jesus sinned. “False.” Bingo!
3. **Number three:** Jesus is one of many ways to heaven. “True.” What?!

Shocked is the only way to describe how I felt. Hadn't they been listening to us, or their parents, or their youth pastor? When I asked who taught them that, one girl said, “Coexist.” Yes, these young evangelicals had been listening to their Sunday school teachers and their parents, but they had also been listening to their public schoolteachers, non-Christian friends, TV celebrities, and rock stars. It wasn't enough to teach these youngsters the basic tenets of Christianity. Because we never addressed what secular society was teaching them too, they came to accept everything and anything.

Youth ministers, volunteer leaders, and pastors have to start preparing these kids to deal with the very real hostility that faces young evangelicals. In addition to encouraging our kids to memorize scripture and participate in Christmas plays, we must prepare them from an early age to confront the opposition to their beliefs that will come from inside and outside the church realm. We must teach them by speaking boldly and intelligently to serious, controversial cultural issues. Scripture cuts to the point on this very topic.

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.”

—TITUS 2:1–8, ESV

According to Jon Nielson, the college ministry director at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, youth who stay in church through their college years have been “equipped, not entertained.” Nielson explained, “Christ gives us—teachers—to the church, not for entertainment, encouragement, examples, or even friendship primarily. He gives us to the church to ‘equip’ the saints to do gospel ministry, in order that the church of Christ may be built up.”⁹

If we never talk about abortion in church, how can we expect rising evangelical girls to calmly explain the option of adoption to her frightened best friend who just admitted she is pregnant? Do we really expect that fifteen-year-old evangelical boy to not view pornography if we fail to mention that smut lends to the capture and rape of sex trafficking victims, or how it simply is not reality and destroys families?

What will surprise you is how much young evangelicals actually crave honest discussions about abortion, sexuality, sexual exploitation, feminism, and radical Islam. My friend and

Evangelical Action adviser, Richmond Trotter, has two nonnegotiable topics when addressing youth: creation and life. Having volunteered in church youth ministry since 1996, Richmond is not afraid to have serious discussions about what Scripture says about abortion, evolution, and homosexuality. While apprenticing under Richmond, I watched him tie the planned lesson into discussions about the selflessness of adoption, religious persecution at home and abroad, and radical Islam—all in one hour. Now that is what it means to effectively “raise up a child in the way he should go”!

Most importantly, I vividly remember how engaged the students were. Forget raising hands, the kids just boldly asked the questions on their minds. Or they told us what their friends at school were going through and asked us how the Bible would have them help. These kids were already facing the culture and faith issues Richmond brought up and were desperate for answers but were too afraid to ask. That is, until someone initiated the conversation. Then we couldn't get them to stop talking. It was glorious and one of those life lessons I shall never forget.

Make no mistake: the trend away from biblical truth is not concentrated in the hipster city limits. It is unfolding in the crevices of America's plains, hills, mountains, and swamplands. All across this nation, “old-fashioned” conservative evangelicalism is being traded in for a bright and shiny mediocre Christianity. It is up to you, dear reader, to change the trajectory of faith and culture in America. Memorize and mediate on the words of Ephesians 4:11–12, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (NKJV).

If America's evangelicals disengage from the public square and fail to engage the rising generation of Christian leaders, then

we risk losing our public voice, then our religious liberty, then liberty altogether.

Is the Religious Right Lifeless?

The last several decades witnessed tremendous evangelical influence in the United States. Leaders such as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Tim and Beverly LaHaye, Paige and Dorothy Patterson, James Dobson, and James and Betty Robison made a bold impact on America's families, churches, and government. Now that those few leaders are aging or retiring, or have passed away, there are very few traditional evangelical leaders left holding the torch and even fewer candidates to whom they can pass it.

The *Daily Caller's* senior contributor, Matt Lewis, has dubbed Millennials the "post-culture war generation" of Christians. Lewis wrote, "I've written a lot lately about how conservatives lost the culture war. Some of my socially conservative friends were upset when I argued that at least part of the reason for this was that 'pro-family' activist groups aren't as effective as fiscally conservative groups."¹⁰ Sadly, what fiscal conservatives like Lewis have not figured out is that the culture wars are not about partisan politics. They never were. Sure, some high-profile figures on both the Right and the Left have highlighted certain social issues to get elected. But the evangelical grassroots' involvement in the culture wars has always been, and will continue to be, grounded in conviction.

Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, *Forbes* contributor on global strategic issues, agrees that it is not time to write culture warrior's epitaph yet. He explained:

You could argue that these people are old and therefore doomed to going away, but again no dice: though opposition to same-sex marriage is very weak among the young, as

many if not more young people are pro-life than the older cohort (and abortion has always been and will remain, for good or ill, the salient issue of the culture war).¹¹

Let me just say that hundreds of thousands of pro-life Americans do not take time off work, spend money on travel and lodging, and brave Washington DC's frigid January temperatures to march for a political candidate. Thanks to changing hearts and minds, both old and young demonstrate their convictions against the murder of the innocent by participating in the March for Life—and they will not stop until abortion is finally abolished.

Religious convictions in America are not on the verge of disappearance just yet. There is still hope. In the book *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, Gallup Inc. editor-in-chief Frank Newport ensures: "Right now, we don't see any signs of an unusual increase in non-Christian religions. Christianity will prevail in the U.S. America will remain very much a Christian nation in the decades ahead, albeit less so than in the past because of an increase in Americans who don't have a religious identity."¹²

Heed the Warning Signs

Evangelicals and culture warriors do not have to look far to discover what happens when Christian denominations give up on their traditional convictions and teachings. All we have to do is look at the example of mainline Protestant denominations—the United Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ (UCC), and Lutherans.

Before I go any further, I must make a confession. When I joined the staff of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), I dismissed mainline denominations such as the United Methodist Church as liberal and thought they were beyond

saving. Shame on me for giving up so easily! Thank God I discovered IRD's United Methodist Action (UMAction) ministry, which was established by United Methodist leaders David Jessup and Rev. Edmund Robb to challenge radical leftist leaders, or "revisionists," as they are often called, within their church.

Today UMAction leaders Mark Tooley and John Lomperis have numerous stories of victory in their efforts to bring a renewal of orthodoxy. But UMAction faces an ongoing battle against radical United Methodist leadership, and the quest to limit their damaging impact continues. We evangelicals should take note of ministries such as the IRD's UMAction, Anglican Action, and Religious Persecution and apply similar principles in our own communities.

The similarity between where the mainline Protestants have been and where evangelicals are heading is just plain scary. For many mainline denominations the decent down the slippery slope of compromise started when they embraced the social gospel movement. This cause stressed the need for salvation from poverty, inequality, and oppression over forgiveness of sins through Christ—all in order to accommodate the opinions of secular society.¹³ (Sounds familiar, right?) This movement backfired. Almost immediately after adopting the social gospel and forgoing traditional Christian teachings that were deemed offensive and exclusionary, mainline membership began to decline, and congregants no longer affirmed the role of faith in their lives. These denominations didn't know it at the time, but the church needs *all* of the gospel to see lives, cities, and nations transformed.

Since then two mainline denominations have attempted to reverse the decades of membership loss. Between 2001 and 2008 IRD reported that the United Methodist Church spent \$47 million on television ads in hopes of igniting congregation growth. In 2004 the wildly secular UCC—a denomination that endorses

abortion and same-sex marriage—launched similar television commercial ads. But because the church did not also change its teachings, the campaign was worthless—so ineffective, in fact, that two hundred more congregations actually withdrew their membership from the UCC within one year after the campaign was launched.¹⁴

The continued decline makes sense to me. Why continue to attend a church that says truth is whatever you make it to be? I mean, why sit under a minister who simply encourages you to determine good and evil on your own? We can do that at home in our pajamas.

Beyond the church walls, radical liberal teachings also have been permeating mainline Protestant seminaries since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁵ This also has contributed to mainline churches' plummeting membership. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago noted that the mainline Protestant churches began their rapid decline because their institutions failed to adequately engage and intellectually stimulate their own youth. Dr. Lewis Andrews, executive director of the Yankee Institute for Public Policy in Hartford, Connecticut, rightly noted, "Only by providing an education that rises to the challenge of secular culture can Protestant denominations ever give large numbers of youngsters the intellectual strength and stamina to be practicing Christians in the modern world."¹⁶

I am so sorry to say that if you stop and investigate even the most prominent evangelical colleges and seminaries, you will discover that liberal doctrine runs rampant. Some Christian colleges such as Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, are endorsing official gay student groups on campus.¹⁷ The traditional Christian doctrine taught within evangelical campuses is, well, not so traditional anymore. Be still my soul. (We will

discuss the decline of Christian colleges further in chapter 5 when we uncover the social justice disguise.)

The takeaway here is the evangelical community can never embrace actions clearly outlined by Scripture as sin. To do so is to sacrifice God's authority, commandments, and blessings for humanity on the grand altar of tolerance. Let this be a lesson for evangelicals to speak out against misleading theology and dangerous compromise. As A. W. Tozer wrote, "We are sent to bless the world, but never are we told to compromise with it."¹⁸

Renewal groups such as the IRD and the Association for Church Renewal continue to uphold the inerrant Word of God as the standard for faith and ethics for mainline churches as well as "a culture in confusion." Their work is challenging. Finding support, encouragement, and prayer is extremely difficult. Still they refuse to quit. So too should evangelicals.

In order to safeguard the trajectory of young evangelicals (and, inadvertently, the well-being of our nation), we must take a similar stance. It is imperative that those in a position to influence Millennials have transparent and honest discussions about the culture wars evangelical youth are already engaging. Otherwise they will be silent and accepting in the face of persecution and false doctrine.

The importance of arming the next generation of evangelicals cannot be overstated. If we continue to follow the example of mainline Protestants, evangelicalism will have a gloomy future. We must offer sorely needed leadership, but before we can do that, we need to know exactly *who* and *what* we are up against.