

My Prediction: The Coming Evangelical Collapse (1)

January 27th, 2009 by [iMonk](#)

I'm not a Prophet or a Prophet's Son. I can't see the future. I'm usually wrong. I'm known for over-reacting. I have no statistics. You probably shouldn't read this. The "Gracious God" post depressed me.

Part 1: The Coming Evangelical Collapse, and Why It Is Going to Happen

Part 2: What Will Be Left When Evangelicalism Collapses?

Part 3: Is This A Good Thing?

1. My Prediction

I believe that we are on the verge- within 10 years- of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity; a collapse that will follow the deterioration of the mainline Protestant world and that will fundamentally alter the religious and cultural environment in the West. I believe this evangelical collapse will happen with astonishing statistical speed; that within two generations of where we are now evangelicalism will be a house deserted of half its current occupants, leaving in its wake nothing that can revitalize evangelicals to their former "glory."

The party is almost over for evangelicals; a party that's been going strong since the beginning of the "Protestant" 20th century. We are soon going to be living in a very secular and religiously antagonistic 21st century in a culture that will be between 25-30% non-religious.

This collapse, will, I believe, herald the arrival of an anti-Christian chapter of the post-Christian west and will change the way tens of millions of people see the entire realm of religion. Intolerance of Christianity will rise to levels many of us have not believed possible in our lifetimes, and public policy will become particularly hostile towards evangelical Christianity, increasingly seeing it as the opponent of the good of individuals and society.

The response of evangelicals to this new environment will be a revisiting of the same rhetoric and reactions we've seen since the beginnings of the current culture war in the 1980s. The difference will be that millions of evangelicals will quit: quit their churches, quit their adherence to evangelical distinctives and quit resisting the rising tide of the culture.

Many who will leave evangelicalism will leave for no religious affiliation at all. Others will leave for an atheistic or agnostic secularism, with a strong personal rejection of Christian belief and Christian influence. Many of our children and grandchildren are going to abandon ship, and many will do so saying "good riddance."

This collapse will cause the end of thousands of ministries. The high profile of Christian media will be reduced, if not eliminated. Hundreds of thousands of students, pastors, religious workers, missionaries and persons employed by ministries and churches will be unemployed or employed elsewhere. Christian schools will go into rapid decline. Visible, active evangelical ministries will be reduced to a small percentage of their current size and effort.

Nothing will reanimate evangelicalism to its previous levels of size and influence. The end of evangelicalism as we know it is close; far closer than most of us will admit.

My prediction has nothing to do with a loss of eschatological optimism. Far from it. I'm convinced the grace and mission of God will reach to the ends of the earth. But I am not optimistic about evangelicalism, and I do not believe any of the apparently lively forms of evangelicalism today are going to be the answer. In fact, one

dimension of this collapse, as I will deal with in the next post, is the bizarre scenario of what will remain when evangelicals have gone into decline.

I fully expect that my children, before they are 40, will see evangelicalism at far less than half its current size and rapidly declining. They will see a very, very different culture as far as evangelicalism is concerned.

I hope someone is going to start preparing for what is going to be an evangelical dark age.

Why Is This Going To Happen?

1) Evangelicals have identified their movement with the culture war and with political conservatism. This was a mistake that will have brutal consequences. They are not only going to suffer in losing causes, they will be blamed as the primary movers of those causes. Evangelicals will become synonymous with those who oppose the direction of the culture in the next several decades. That opposition will be increasingly viewed as a threat, and there will be increasing pressure to consider evangelicals bad for America, bad for education, bad for children and bad for society.

The investment of evangelicals in the culture war will prove out to be one of the most costly mistakes in our history. The coming evangelical collapse will come about, largely, because our investment in moral, social and political issues has depleted our resources and exposed our weaknesses. We're going to find out that being against gay marriage and rhetorically pro-life (yes, that's what I said) will not make up for the fact that massive majorities of evangelicals can't articulate the Gospel with any coherence and are believing in a cause more than a faith.

2) Evangelicals have failed to pass on to our young people the evangelical Christian faith in an orthodox form that can take root and survive the secular onslaught. In what must be the most ironic of all possible factors, an evangelical culture that has spent billions of youth ministers, Christian music, Christian publishing and Christian media has produced an entire burgeoning 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 that they will endure.

Do not be deceived by conferences or movements that are theological in nature. These are a tiny minority of evangelicalism. A strong core of evangelical beliefs is not present in most of our young people, and will be less present in the future. This loss of "the core" has been at work for some time, and the fruit of this vacancy is about to become obvious.

3) Evangelical churches have now passed into a three part chapter: 1) mega-churches that are consumer driven, 2) churches that are dying and 3) new churches that whose future is dependent on a large number of factors. I believe most of these new churches will fail, and the ones that do survive will not be able to continue evangelicalism at anything resembling its current influence. Denominations will shrink, even vanish, while fewer and fewer evangelical churches will survive and thrive.

Our numbers, our churches and our influence are going to dramatically decrease in the next 10-15 years. And they will be replaced by an evangelical landscape that will be chaotic and largely irrelevant.

4) Despite some very successful developments in the last 25 years, Christian education has not produced a product that can hold the line in the rising tide of secularism. The ingrown, self-evaluated ghetto of evangelicalism has used its educational system primarily to staff its own needs and talk to itself. I believe Christian schools always have a mission in our culture, but I am skeptical that they can produce any sort

of effect that will make any difference. Millions of Christian school graduates are going to walk away from the faith and the church.

There are many outstanding schools and outstanding graduates, but as I have said before, these are going to be the exceptions that won't alter the coming reality. Christian schools are going to suffer greatly in this collapse.

5) The deterioration and collapse of the evangelical core will eventually weaken the missional-compassionate work of the evangelical movement. The inevitable confrontation between cultural secularism and the religious 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, that much of that work will not be done. Look for evangelical ministries to take on a less and less distinctively Christian face in order to survive.

6) Much of this collapse will come in areas of the country where evangelicals imagine themselves strong. In actual fact, the historic loyalties of the Bible belt will soon be replaced by a de-church culture where religion has meaning as history, not as a vital reality. At the core of this collapse will be the inability to pass on, to our children, a vital evangelical confidence in the Bible and the importance of the faith.

7) A major aspect of this collapse will happen because money will not be flowing towards evangelicalism in the same way as before. The passing of the denominationally loyal, very generous "greatest generation" and the arrival of the Boomers as the backbone of evangelicalism will signal a major shift in evangelical finances, and that shift will continue into a steep drop and the inevitable results for schools, churches, missions, ministries and salaries.

The Coming Evangelical Collapse (2): What Will Be Left?

January 28th, 2009 by [iMonk](#)

2. What will be left after the evangelical collapse?

1) An evangelicalism far from its historical and doctrinal core. Expect evangelicalism as a whole to look more and more like the pragmatic, therapeutic, church growth oriented megachurches that have defined success. The determination to follow in the methodological steps of numerically successful churches will be greater than ever. The result will be, in the main, a departure from doctrine to more and more emphasis on relevance, motivation and personal success...with the result being churches further compromised and weakened in their ability to pass on the faith. [F]or some time, we've been at a point that the decision to visit a particular evangelical church contained a fairly high risk of not hearing the Biblical Gospel. That experience will be multiplied and expanded in the years to come. Core beliefs will become less and less normative and necessary in evangelicalism.

2) An evangelicalized Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Two of the beneficiaries of the coming evangelical collapse will be the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions. Evangelicals have been steadily entering these churches in recent decades and that trend will continue, with more media and publishing efforts aimed at the "conversion" of evangelicals to the Catholic and Orthodox ways of being Christian.

A result of this trend will be the increasing "evangelicalization" of these churches. This should yield interesting results, particularly in the Orthodox church with its ethnic heritage and with the tensions and diversities in Catholicism that most converts never see during the conversion process. I expect the reviews of the influence of evangelicalism in these communions to be decidedly mixed.

3) A small portion of evangelicalism will continue down the path of theological re-construction and recovery. Whether they be post-evangelicals working for a reinvigoration of evangelicalism along the lines of historic "Mere Christianity," or theologically assertive young reformed pastors looking toward a second reformation, a small, but active and vocal portion of evangelicalism will work hard to rescue the evangelical movement from its demise by way of 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. But I do believe many evangelical churches and schools will benefit from this segment of evangelicalism, and I believe it will contribute far beyond its size to the cause of world missions.

4) I believe 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. I expect to continue hearing emerging leaders, seeing emerging conferences and receiving emerging books. I don't believe this movement, however, is going to have much influence at all within future evangelicalism. What we've seen this year with Tony Jones seems to me to be indicative of the direction of the emerging church.

5) Aggressively evangelistic fundamentalist churches will begin to disappear; they will exist only as a dying form of church. The Southern Baptist Convention will experience dramatic losses in the numbers of churches in the next 25 years. By 2050, the SBC will have half the number of churches it has today. (Who know how many members it will report.) The SBC will become "exhibit A" for the problems of evangelicalism, with fragmentation appearing everywhere and a loss of coherence on many fronts.

The fundamentalist ghetto has been breaking down in my own lifetime, and I expect this will continue. The “Jerry Falwell-Jerry Vines” type of fundamentalist Baptist will become a museum piece by the middle of the century.

6) Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity will become the majority report in evangelicalism. Within that community, the battle for the future of evangelicalism will be fought by those who must decide whether their tradition will sink into the quicksand of heresy, relativism and confusion, or whether Charismatic-Pentecostalism can experience a reformation and renewal around Biblical authority, responsible leadership and a re-emergence of orthodoxy.

I see signs of life on all those fronts, but the key issue of leadership and the preparation of leaders leaves me with little hope that Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity can put its house in order. The dynamics of leadership within this tradition have conspired to bring the worst kinds of leaders to the forefront.

The stakes in Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity are very high. It has become a worldwide missions phenomenon, and it has become a community carrying the most virulent and destructive heresies and errors in evangelicalism. The next 15-25 years will be crucial for this community. I am hopeful, but not optimistic. I see and hear little from this community’s younger leadership that indicates there is anything close to a real recognition of the problems they face.

7) A hope for all of evangelicalism is a “rescue mission” from the world Christian community. If all of evangelicalism could see the kind of renewal that has happened in conservative Anglicanism through the Anglican Mission in America and other mission efforts, much good would be done. 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? I do not know, but I hope and pray that such an effort happens and succeeds.

At present, most of evangelicalism is not prepared to accept pastors and leadership from outside our culture. Yet there can be little doubt that within our western culture there is very little evidence of an evangelicalism that can diagnose and repair itself.

8) A vast number of parachurch ministries are going to become far less influential, and many will vanish. The same will likely be true from everything from Christian media to publishing. This will throw what remains of evangelicalism back on the local church, and that moves us to my last post, a consideration of whether this collapse is a good or bad thing.

9) I believe that the missionary sending agencies of evangelicalism will survive the coming collapse, but will be greatly weakened by significant decreases in the giving base. It is time for mission strategies among evangelicals to change, and it is long past time for westerners to use their resources to strengthen work within a nation and not to just send Americans to the mission fields.

The Coming Evangelical Collapse (3): Good or Bad?

January 29th, 2009 by [iMonk](#)

UPDATE: *Great Minds Think Alike: Jared Wilson heard Tim Keller recently. Here's the quote from Jared's summary:*

Related to that, he predicted, in response to someone's question in the Q&A time, that in one generation's time, there won't even be the nominal Christianity in the South that there is now. The megachurches will flounder and people will just stop going. Now they are only going b/c it is somewhat expected, part of the culture, or as some moral exercise to "stay right" or raise "good families" or do what their parents did or to "connect" with other Christian consumers.

3. Is all of this a bad thing?

I've received many notes and emails over this series of posts, and I'm glad that it has been provocative and discussion-producing.

Is the coming evangelical collapse entirely a bad thing? Or is there good that will come from this season of the evangelical story?

One of the most encouraging developments in recent evangelicalism is the conviction that something is very [w]rong. One voice that has been warning American evangelicals of serious problems is theologian Michael Horton. For more than 20 years, Horton has been warning that evangelicals have become something almost unrecognizable in the flow of Christian history. From the prophetic *Made in America* to the incredible *In The Face of God* to the most recent *Christless Christianity*, Horton has been saying that evangelicals are on the verge of theological/ecclesiastical disaster.

Horton's diagnosis is not, however, the same diagnosis as we saw in the heyday of the culture war, i.e. that evangelicals must rise up and take political and cultural influence if America is to survive and guarantee freedom and blessing. Horton's warning has been the abandonment of the most basic calling of the church: the preservation and communication of the essentials of the Gospel in the church itself.

The coming evangelical collapse will be, in my view, exactly what Horton has been warning us about for two decades. In that sense, there is something fundamentally healthy about accepting that, if the disease cannot be cured, then the symptoms need to run their course and we need to get to the next chapter. Evangelicalism doesn't need a bailout. Much of it needs a funeral.

But not all; not by any means. In other words, the question is not so much what will be lost, but what is the condition of what remains?

As I've said in the previous post in this series, what will be left will be 1) an evangelicalism greatly chastened in numbers, influence and resources, 2) a remaining majority of Charismatic-Pentecostal Christians faced with the opportunity to reform or become unrecognizable, 3) an invigorated minority of evangelicals committed to theology and church renewal, 4) a marginalized emerging and mainline community and 5) an evangelicalized segment of the other Christian communions.

Is it a good thing that denominations are going to become large[ly] 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, leaving evangelicalism with a more committed, serious core of followers? Possibly, if churches begin and continue the work of renewing serious church membership?

Is it a good thing that the emerging church will fade into the irrelevance of the mainlines? If this leaves innovative, missionally minded, historically and confessionally orthodox churches to “emerge” in the place of the traditional church, yes. Yes, if it fundamentally changes the conversation from the maintenance of traditional churches to developing new and culturally appropriate churches.

Is it a good thing that Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity will become the majority of evangelicals? Yes, if reformation can reach those churches and produce the kind of unity we see in Wesley and Lloyd-Jones; a unity where the cleavage between doctrine and spiritual gifts isn't assumed.

The ascendancy of Charismatic-Pentecostal influenced worship around the world can be a major positive for the evangelical movement if that development is joined with the calling, training and mentoring of leaders. If American churches come under more of the influence of the movement of the Spirit in Africa and Asia, this will be a good thing. (I recognize, btw, that all is not well overseas, but I do not believe that makes the help of Christians in other cultures a moot point.)

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. For those communions, it's a good development, but probably not for evangelicals themselves.

Will the coming evangelical collapse get evangelicals past the pragmatism and shallowness that has brought about its loss of substance and power? I tend to believe that even with large declines in numbers and an evidence “earthquake” of evangelical loyalty, the purveyors of the evangelical circus will be in full 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. (I rejoice in those megachurches that fulfill their role as places of influence and resource for other ministries without insisting on imitation.)

Will the coming evangelical collapse shake lose the prosperity Gospel from its parasitical place on the evangelical body of Christ? We can all pray and hope that this will be so, but evidence from other similar periods is not encouraging. Coming to terms with the economic implications of the Gospel has proven particularly difficult for evangelicals. That's not to say that American Christians aren't generous....they are. It is to say that American Christians seldom seem to be able to separate their theology from an overall idea of personal affluence and success American style. Perhaps the time is coming that this entanglement will be challenged, especially in the lives of younger Christians.

But it is impossible to not be hopeful. As one commenter has already said, “Christianity loves a crumbling empire.” Christianity has flourished when it should have been exterminated. It has conquered when it was counted as defeated. Evangelicalism's heyday is not the entirety of God's plan.

I think we can rejoice that in the ruins of the evangelical collapse new forms of Christian vitality and ministry will be born. New kinds of church structure, new uses of gifts, new ways to develop leaders and do the mission- all these will appear as the evangelical collapse occurs.

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

I expect to see a substantial abandonment of the seminary system. How can a denomination ask its clergy to go into huge debt to be equipped for ordination or ministry? We all know that there are many options

for education from much smaller schools to church based seminaries to internet schools to mentoring and apprenticing arrangements. We must do better in this area, and I think we will.

In fact, I hope that many IM readers will be part of the movement to create a 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. There are encouraging signs, but evangelical culture has the ability to disproportionately judge the significance of movements within it.

I'll end this adventure in prognostication with the same confession I began with: I'm not a prophet. My view of evangelicalism is not authoritative or infallible. I am certainly wrong in some of these predictions and possibly right, even too conservative on others. 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? Does anyone think all will proceed without interruption or surprise?