What Can We Learn from Global Christians?

Part 1 of 2: Younger International Views on American Christianity
with Darrell Bock, Shane Angland, Cesar Restrepo, Mikel del Rosario
Release Date: October 2013
Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture, and today, our subject is global engagement. And what we've done is we've brought together three of our students here at Dallas Theological Seminary. They will represent three different continents – so you all have a big representation place here – and to discuss being a Christian in the United States and being a Christian outside the United States, and what the similarities and differences are, and I will introduce each of the students.

I'll let them give their full names, but I've got Shane here from Ireland, and Mikel here from – well, grew up in the Philippines, and then Cesar from Venezuela. And I will let you all give your names and where you're from, and then we'll start in.

Great. Well, my name is Shane Angland from County Clare in Ireland, so I'm from the west coast. I'm studying here at DTS ThM program.

Beautiful part of the world. I took a trip out there with my brother, and we were in the Galway area, and it was just absolutely gorgeous.

Great.

We love Ireland. Mikel?

Yeah, Mikel Del Rosario. I'm in the ThM program. I was born in Evanston, Illinois, but I grew up in the Philippines in Quezon City from the time I was three years old up until I graduated from high school.

Okay. Cesar?

My name is Cesar Restrepo. I am from Caracas, Venezuela. I'm in my third year of the ThM program at DTS.

And you have a fine Texas accent. I just want you to know.

I'm catching that.
Darrell Bock: So we don't have any gals here. We actually did ask for a female student, and we were unable to get ahold of her in time to bring her in, and I just mention that because you'll look at this table and you'll say, "Well, this is a global engagement discussion, and half the population isn't represented." And so we're attempting to do that, and I'm sure we'll do that in the future. But for now, this is our group. So as you can see, we have Europe represented, and then we have Asia represented, and Latin America/South America represented here.

Let's start first a little bit with your story so people can get to know you. Shane, talk a little bit about your upbringing and how you came to know Christ.

Shane Angland: Sure. Well, as I said, I'm from County Clare in Ireland, so I grew up in a predominantly Roman Catholic part of the country, so my parents were born-again Christians so that was something unusual for my community that I grew up in. So I was raised in that context.

Going to school, my brother and I would have been the only non-Roman Catholics in our whole school, in our whole town, so we were kind of almost a minority, if you will, within that community. So I came to faith from the Gospel of my parents. They shared faith with me and I became a Christian as a young kid, grew up in our small church which used to meet in a friend of ours, their living room in their home. That was the church, basically.

Darrell Bock: Wow, really small.

Shane Angland: Yeah, pretty small. So we'd all just fit into their living room, and that was Sunday church for us for many years. So, yeah, that's –

Darrell Bock: Was there a denominational connection to the church, or was it just a group of people meeting together in church?

Shane Angland: Yeah, it pretty much was just a group of people meeting together. There wasn't a denomination for it.

Darrell Bock: So you were the County Cary –

Shane Angland: County Clare Church, yeah.

Darrell Bock: Okay, County Clare Church.
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*Shane Angland:* Yeah, it seems strange, but we weren't affiliated with any denomination at that time or anything like that. It was we were just known as born-again Christians.

*Darrell Bock:* Now did that change as you grew up, or did you stay in a small church context?

*Shane Angland:* No, I stayed in a small church context growing up. That church has grown quite a bit since then. They now have a building. There's appropriately 100 people in that community, and the church is known as NS Evangelical Church. They define themselves as an evangelical church now. Yeah.

*Darrell Bock:* Oh, wow. That's interesting. So well, yeah, that's important. Part of what we want to discuss is what it's like living as a minority culturally. And, of course, in Europe, Christians themselves are a growing minority, so that's going to be important.

Mikel, tell us about your upbringing.

*Mikel Del Rosario:* Yeah, again, I was born in Evanston, Illinois. My mom was a Fulbright Scholar to Northwestern, and she got her PhD in social psychology. So I grew up in graduate housing, staying up late, my parents doing their papers and me just staying up real late. When I was three years old, we moved back to the Philippines, so I grew up there in a city called Quezon City. I spent a couple years in Maryland while my dad was getting some further education. But I didn't really come to live in the United States as an adult until I was in college. I went Biola.

I met my wife at Biola. And then after I graduated with my BA, I got an MA from Biola, and then we went overseas, back to the Philippines as missionaries, my wife and I and our little boy who was just one year old at the time. So we went back there, and then we helped to train Filipinos who were going overseas as English teachers. We helped equip them with worldview training and apologetics and things like this.

*Darrell Bock:* Now Quezon City, is that the second largest city in the Philippines, or not?

*Mikel Del Rosario:* It's part of Metro Manila, which is a big, gigantic metropolis, so, yeah.
Darrell Bock: Okay. So and the church that you were in, in the Philippines, probably bigger than Shane's church?

Mikel Del Rosario: Yeah. It was one of the mega churches in the area, actually.

Darrell Bock: So a mega church in the Philippines would mean?

Mikel Del Rosario: Oh, gosh. I don’t know. There's –

Darrell Bock: Thousands.

Mikel Del Rosario: Yeah. No, definitely thousands, thousands. It's like a Bayside.

Darrell Bock: So small groups in your church would be bigger than the people –

Mikel Del Rosario: Yeah, it’s kind of like in Sacramento, California, they have a big mega church called Bayside. It was kind of like that.

Darrell Bock: Okay, great. Cesar?

Cesar Restrepo: In Caracas, most people are Catholics. 90 percent of the people are Catholics, so the dominant religion there. I grew up in a Catholic family, and one day some kids preached to me and I just converted. I backslid for many years as I going through medical school, and after many years, I came back to faith, went back to a very small church founded by American missionaries. And then after that, I just got married with a nice Christian girl who's now my wife, and that's where I heard about DTS, and then I decided to come here.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Now you've anticipated my next question, which is good. So you came here and you've been here, what, three years, four years now?

Cesar Restrepo: Almost three years. Yes.

Darrell Bock: Okay. And you grew up all of your life in Venezuela until you came here?

Cesar Restrepo: Yes. I did my medical training in Venezuela, although I spent two years doing my fellowship in the US in Massachusetts.

Darrell Bock: Okay. So you'd been here before.
Cesar Restrepo: Yes.

Darrell Bock: Okay, great. Well, that's good. So a variety of experiences here. So, Shane, how'd you get to Dallas?

Shane Angland: It's an interesting one, I guess. I was sitting in a café on Khreschatik Street in Kiev in Ukraine, and I was reading an article by this guy called Dan Wallace. I don't know if you've heard of him. He was talking about the Greek language and how important it was, and I felt that's something I could really see a use for in ministry, because at that time, I was serving InterVarsity in Ukraine as a missionary with my wife. I really felt that to get a good theological training was essential for what I wanted to do in the future working with the church. And so I thought this guy, Dan Wallace, seemed pretty trustworthy, so I decided to check out DTS, and here I am.

Darrell Bock: Wow. So recruitment all the way from Kiev. I don't know if I've heard a story like that before. That's interesting. And Ireland by way of Kiev to Dallas. We've got to work on the geography of that or something. Mikel, how'd you get to Dallas?

Mikel Del Rosario: Well, actually, back in the Philippines, the mega church that I was at, the pastor was a DTS guy. Luis Pantoja was his name. And growing up, I heard lots of great things about DTS, even as a junior high/higher schooler. And then I went to Biola, and also worked for a man named JP Moreland, who was a DTS guy as well.

So heard about the program here, that you are here, that Dan Wallace was here, and all the great scholarship was coming out of DTS, both in the church and the popular culture, and on the scholarly level as well. So what I wanted to do is because in California, I was an adjunct at three universities, and a goal I have is to be a full-time professor and have a church ministry. So the ThM at DTS seemed like a perfect fit to move me into a PhD program.

Darrell Bock: Okay. And, Cesar, we know that you came to Dallas three years ago, but how did you get here?
I had medical conventions every year in different states in the US, so every time I went to a conference, I would stay a couple more days and visit seminaries until one day I came to Dallas I just fell in love with the program, with the curriculum, the staff, so I knew this is where I wanted to go.

Okay. One last question about your background, and then we'll dive in. So you're all in various places in terms of the program. Cesar, I think you're the furthest along. You're in your third year. What are you concentrating on as you pursue your studies?


And, Shane?

Historical theology.

Historical theology? So he came to sit under Dan Wallace, but he's ended up becoming an historical theologian.

Yeah.

That happens to people, too, right?

Yeah, it does.

And, Mikel, it's early for you. You're still in your first year.

I'm still in my general studies right now.

Okay. Good, okay, well, that gives everyone kind of a sense of where y'all are coming from. What I thought we would discuss and what I'm interested in hearing your reflections on is your experience here as people who have come from participate in Christianity in the States, but as people who come to it from the outside, who didn't grow up here. So I'd like for you each to talk a little bit about what you have experienced. Initially, we'll keep it positive, and then we'll shift gears, but what do you feel like you've gained from participation in your Christian experience here in Dallas?
Shane Angland: Well, initially, when I arrived with my wife, it's hard to believe how many churches there are in Dallas. It's incredible to think there's so many evangelical Christians in one place. There's churches in Dallas that have more evangelical Christians than Ireland. There's something like 4,000 evangelical Christians according to the 2011 census.

Darrell Bock: So are we going to start an export movement?

Shane Angland: Yeah, I hope so. We could use some. But, yeah, it was incredible to see so much opportunity, and just the real heritage of godly teachers. There's such a heritage here, especially in Dallas, of people that are equipped to really help and instruct and teach their flocks. And so you're really spoiled for choice. We visited several churches, and we could have been members of any of them. The teaching was excellent. There was a superb community and really good opportunities.

Strangely enough, we finally settled on a Chinese Baptist church.

Darrell Bock: You're going to be known as the eclectic mix here. You started out in Ireland. You've ended you in the Ukraine. You came to Dallas and you ended up in a Chinese church.

Shane Angland: Chinese church.

Darrell Bock: That's right. So how'd that happen?

Shane Angland: It's just the tofu, the food. No, there's just really a great community there. We really enjoy the church, the teaching's excellent, and there's some really good opportunities to serve, and that’s something we’ve also seen is there's some really excellent ministries here. The church that I'm involved with does some prison outreach that I'm involved with. Adult Sunday school, which is something new for me. I've never seen that before in a church, which is interesting and very beneficial. Yeah, and just a lot of opportunities to serve and to serve the community that that church is in. So, yeah, it's a really good fit for us.

Darrell Bock: Well, that's good. And you've been there what now, two years?

Shane Angland: Yeah. We've been actually eight months in that church now.
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**Darrell Bock:** I see. So you took about a year or so to find yourself. So you did a lot of visiting of a lot of different churches, and I bet that was unusual too, given seeing the variety of what's available in terms of what you're used to there in your living room in. So the music group alone was probably bigger than the church.

**Shane Angland:** The choir was more, yeah. It's incredible.

**Darrell Bock:** Wow. And, Cesar, what about your experience here?

**Cesar Restrepo:** It's very similar to Shane's. We visited at least five churches, and were really very impressed with them. The level of organization, of commitment, the quality of the teaching was really great, and we finally settled in a Presbyterian church, the PCA church. We really liked the formalism, the liturgy, and so we stayed there ever since.

**Darrell Bock:** Now that raises an interesting question. I take it you came out of a Catholic background. Is that right?

**Cesar Restrepo:** Yes.

**Darrell Bock:** So is the landing in a church that has a little more liturgy just kind of a connection back to those roots to a certain degree, and an appreciation of that?

**Cesar Restrepo:** Yes, it is. Because people in my country that are out of the Catholic background, they go to the other extreme and their churches are very I would say emotional and kind of disorganized, so this kind of gave me like a pattern from where I came from.

**Darrell Bock:** Hmm, interesting. That's fascinating. Which church is it, just out of curiosity?

**Cesar Restrepo:** It's Park City Presbyterian Church.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay, sure. Fine church. Mikel?
Mikel Del Rosario: Yeah, right now, we're at Northwest Bible right now, but throughout my adult years in the US, I've been part of churches as small as 35. I did a refugee church plant in Garden Grove in California, and SoCal, reaching out to Vietnamese refugees, Sudanese immigrants, Burmese, and so forth, to one of those mega churches in Northern California, Bridgeway Christian Church, with over 5,000 people.

And I think for me, a couple of the things that I noticed right away was, one, in the Philippines, there's a strong acceptance of kind of a hierarchy where you have the priest or the pastor of vestments, obviously, in place of power, and the laity having a strong distinction between the two, versus in the United States, oftentimes from a 35-person church to 5,000-person church, you have first-name basis with the pastor, pastor in jeans, and kind of downplaying the distinction between the laity and the leadership.

And another thing I noticed is just compared to overseas, we have everything we need here in the United States. If we need something, we can buy it. Even a small, 35-person church can get the resources that they need versus lots of small churches in the Philippines that might not even have a church with four walls on it.

Darrell Bock: Now, and just letting you know, I've never been to the Philippines. I know a lot of people speak English, but is the main language English on the island, or are there a variety of languages?
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*Mikel Del Rosario:* There are a whole bunch of different languages, Tagalog or Filipino is the national language. Many people in the city do speak some English. Many of them speak English well. But English is a language that you can speak around the country because of the colonial past.

One thing that the United States did for the Philippines is train people in English so that there could be a unifying language. When I was a missionary back there, I went to a small little place called Tugbelada, and it's a tiny little island. You take a boat out to it. And I found all the cassette tapes in the entire world. I found out they ended up in this little seedy store.

There's like CD's for like two feet, and then there's just like a bunch of cassette tapes. While we were there, I was speaking with this guy and the guy spoke Cebuano, which is another dialect, and I was speaking Tagalog to him, a Filipino language, and we were having a little language barrier. And I was like, "Are you more comfortable in English?" and he said, "Yes." I said, "Well, then, we'll just speak English, why don't we?" So English is a unifying language that you can use.

*Darrell Bock:* Now the churches that you attended, would their language have been Filipino language, or would they have been in English?

*Mikel Del Rosario:* They have services in both, so most of the services would be in English, and then maybe one or two services in a Filipino or Tagalog.

*Darrell Bock:* Okay. So that's quite a variety. And well, you've observed sort of what you've seen the absence of a hierarchy and the availability of resources, and, of course, there's such a variety of resources as well. Now, Shane, have you noticed anything in particular being here? What's kind of leapt out at you in terms of your experience?

*Shane Angland:* Well, there are a few minor things that are different to what I'm used to. One is that the churches that I've been to generally didn't celebrate the Lord's Table or the Eucharist weekly. It was usually a monthly thing, and that seems to be quite common in churches in the south here in Texas.

Back home, it was definitely a weekly thing. We would always celebrate the Lord's Table together. That was one thing I kind of was trying to figure out.
Darrell Bock: Now is that because your family has – I mean in the States if that were to happen, we would often associate that with a church having almost brethren kinds of roots or something like that.

Shane Angland: Yeah, it's really interesting because that is a strong influence on the Evangelical Church in the western part of the country is the Brethren Church, yeah.

Darrell Bock: And so is that one of the reasons why the Eucharist is celebrated weekly?

Shane Angland: Yeah, definitely.

Darrell Bock: I'm actually at a church here in the States that does that as well, but you're right. It's the exception rather than the rule.

Shane Angland: It does seem to be, yeah. And, yeah, it probably is the Brethren influence on the church in the west of Ireland, certainly.

Darrell Bock: Interesting. And so how did you find that? Usually when there are traditions that celebrate the Lord's Table on a regular basis, at least in the Protestant tradition, then the service is almost built around the observance of the communion in one way or another. And when you don't have that as part of the service, it's like, "What happened?" Is that the feel?

Shane Angland: It is in a sense, yeah. I miss it. I do. It just seems odd that it's not part of the daily or the weekly liturgical cycle or however you want to put it, the service. It does seem odd that it's not part of it. But we've seen that in several churches here, so that was just an observation. Yep.

Darrell Bock: Anything else that strikes you about what you've experienced here?

Shane Angland: It's just a whole different culture. It really is.

Darrell Bock: Well, we'll go to that list later, okay? I'll come back to that because that's actually what we want to eventually focus on.

Cesar, what did you find in your experience that's different from what you're used to in Latin America?
Cesar Restrepo: First, the level of education of the lay people here is very high. Even lay people here could have more theological training than some pastors down in Venezuela. And, also, the fact that the pastors are all paid. In my country, they would mostly be bi-vocational.

Darrell Bock: Oh, really?

Cesar Restrepo: Yes. So the difference in that is that the pastors there will be preparing the sermon on Saturday night, and –

Darrell Bock: Can you tell?

Cesar Restrepo: Yes. So the quality is not so good as it is here.

Darrell Bock: Interesting. Okay. Well, that's kind of what you've spotted. What do you feel like you have learned from being here? Let's keep on that for a second. What have you learned from your experience here versus the experience that you had overseas? And I'm going to do this in a different order this time. Cesar, I'll start with you.

Cesar Restrepo: Learning in seminary?

Darrell Bock: Yeah, or learning in your church experience, in your Christian experience here.

Cesar Restrepo: Yeah, sure. First, the level of commitment of Christians here is very high. People are very committed to their churches. They tithe, something that we don't do over there very much. They're committed to teaching small groups in the church, going to meetings. They have small groups during the week. So they're very integrated with their churches here, so I'm very impressed with that.

Darrell Bock: Mikel?
Mikel Del Rosario: One thing that I found in the United States is that we have a strong emphasis, and perhaps it's because of the culture that we live in today, but a strong emphasis on objective truth, that the Christian claim is that Christianity is true, and not just in a personalized internal feely kind of way. In the Philippines, it's a Catholic culture, so there's kind of a cultural Roman Catholic tradition that's undergirded really by animism. So you have Roman Catholic icons, Christian traditions, and yet you have this different worldview underneath. And so many people will say all the right things, but not really believe that they're objectively true.

Here, part of one of the main turning points in my life was when I made a recommitment to the Lord when I was in college at Biola, and it was really hammered home to me that if this is true, if Jesus really rose from the dead in time and space and there's no such thing as religious truth and regular everyday truth, then this has to affect my whole life. So that's one good thing that I've found here because in the Philippines, there's a lot less of that emphasis on proclamation of objective truth.

Darrell Bock: Shane?

Shane Angland: Yeah, I just see that there is a lot of really good things in place to equip the church members. I think that's something that the Irish Evangelical Church can really learn from what's here in the States.

Things like adult Sunday School, I never knew such a thing existed. Sunday School was kind of just to take care of kids when I grew up, but I'm really seeing the value of it to really try to build up and equip the congregation as a whole to become more theologically minded, become more confident in thinking and expressing themselves as Christians. Yeah, I just really see the value of that as something that I've really benefited from here. Yeah.
Okay. Now we're going to shift gears and I'm going to go to the really what I'm hoping will be our main topic, which is what do you think we could learn from the Christian culture that you came out of? What things do you see there that you don't see here, or that you would have us think about? And then eventually, we'll be moving towards the question of what is it like to be a Christian in a minority culture. And what's interesting about this, and this is just the luck of the draw, I guess, is all of you come out of backgrounds in which there's a heavy Roman Catholic influence, so it's still very Judeo Christian.

At some point, we will do this and we'll do this with people who live in a context where their Christian influence isn't quite so great, and so it blurs that question a little bit. But Cesar, let's start there. What do you feel like either you miss from your experience in Latin America or that you feel like that our church at home does this well, "I wish Americans got this"?

Well, as I said, Americans are very focused on efficiency, on excellent time management. As much as this impressed me, I feel it goes against them sometimes because they are not so much people-oriented as we are, because for you, time is just such a high commodity that you want to take advantage of every minute.

You manage it, yeah.

Yes, you manage it so well. So sometimes people have needs that are outside of that time, and they need help right then. So if it doesn't fit your schedule, you might just try to postpone it. So I think you could learn to be more people-oriented. I feel like when church is over here, people just rush to their cars and leave, whereas over there, they almost have to kick you out of the church. You just stay and have community. So I think that's something you could learn.
Darrell Bock: Yeah, community is a big deal. I've lived in two European countries and have spent some time in Latin America. I've taught at the Central American seminary in Guatemala. I taught for several summers down there. And so that's the thing that I think I noticed as well, and that would be true both in the European communities that I've been a part of as well as the Latin American experience that I had at SETECA, which is the Central American Theological Seminary, which is when the people gather for church, they're there, and they aren't just there for the service. They're there for the congregation and people hang out and talk and engage and oftentimes will hang around for lunch together after the service and that kind of thing. Whereas in the States, you'll often be home on a Sunday by noon. At least in my experience overseas, generally speaking, that almost never happened. You were almost always either out to lunch with someone at church or something like that, and you weren't home until sometimes 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon.

Cesar Restrepo: Exactly.

Darrell Bock: I'll come back to you for more. Mikel, what do you think?
**Mikel Del Rosario:** I found that as well, actually. Here in the United States for the small churches I've been a part of, actually, it's been more like that where, yeah, you are just out, and they have to kick you out of the church. People are having lunch with one another and whatnot. But in the Philippines, your church group was kind of like your friend group. It was what they call your Barkada. It's just like the gang, the guys. And people all hang out together, and it is more event-oriented than time-oriented. Whereas here, we tend to program our fellowship time so that we do have fellowship, but we have small group times Wednesday nights. We have times where we're supposed to get together for a set period of time.

In the Philippines, you had these villages or barangays that were kind of built like old cities, where you had the Catholic Church in the center, or an Evangelical Church right near there, and people would kind of all live with each other the whole week. And so going to church was just like going somewhere with your friends and hanging out at people's houses. And I did Bible study groups with college students that started at 6:00. They'd have dinner at about 7:30 or 8:00. Bible study'd go till about 10:30. They'd hang out until 11:30, and then many of them would go to work at call centers or at the airport, and so some of them were nocturnal that way.

So definitely that kind of event-oriented or community-oriented feel versus in the United States where some people say that the neighborhood is dead kind of thing where you live in one city, you go to church in another city, your kids go to school in another city, you take your kids to soccer in yet another city, and so forth, and there's less connectedness that way.

**Darrell Bock:** Shane?
Shane Angland: Well, if you were having church in someone's living room, there's community right there. Growing up in my church back home, it was an extended family more or less. These people, they were essentially like family. And I guess you don't get that in a church with several thousand people, and that's just the consequence of architecture, I guess you could say. If you're having a massive building with that many people in it, you're just not going to have that level of community. The church I actually go to, though, we all eat after the service, the whole congregation, so they really do try to bring in that sense of community, we eat in a big sports hall, and there's loads of us there.

But one thing I guess I've seen or – and this is not so much a critique of the churches that I've been to or attended, but more from talking to American Christians in Dallas is that there seems to be a lot of nominalism within evangelicalism, and because evangelicalism is so much engrained in Texas culture that it almost becomes a required or an expected thing for you and your family to be somewhat attending church at least on Sunday.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I think that may be more unique to Texas than to certain parts of the south, and that's a particular characteristic of American Christianity because the Christian culture is so prevalent that it's possible, in fact, quite possible to be a member of a church and to connect to it almost for social reasons as opposed to substantive reasons, and that is something that you have.

But if you live in the northeast, or you live in the northwest of the United States where the percentage of people going to church is much, much less – in Dallas, on an given Sunday, up to half the people could be in church. That's very, very unusual for the rest of the country. In parts of the northeast and in parts of the northwest, the percentages are maybe not as low as Europe, but certainly moving in that direction. In Germany, where I was, I think the percentage of people in church on a given weekend was like four or five percent. So that's a completely different kind of model.

So people who show up to church in Europe when it's that much of a minority are there because they very much have chosen to be there.
Shane Angland: Right, and there's no frills. There's nothing there to go to besides Christian teaching. There's no programs. There's no social clubs or – there's just no frills. Sometimes it's meeting in a stranger's living room, and you're not going to do that unless you really are interested in what they have to say.