Fixing the Trouble with Evangelicalism

Part 1 of 2: Learning from the Great Evangelical Recession
with Darrell Bock, John S. Dickerson
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. And my guest today is John S. Dickerson, who has written a book on the condition of evangelicalism in our world as we deal with the seismic change in culture that is taking place in our midst. And we hope to have John help us sort our way through that. Now, he looks pretty young, but he’s pretty wise.

So John, it’s a real pleasure to have you with us today.

Thank you, Darrell. It’s great to be here.

Tell us a little bit about yourself. You didn’t start out in the pastorate. You started out doing –

Journalism, and mainstream journalism.

Mm-hmm. And what kind – were you an editor or a writer or –?

Actually, I’m a little bit of each. Started as a writer. Was an editor for a while and went back to writing. Did a lot of investigative reporting, a lot of – it’s called long-form journalism where you’re doing these 8,000-10,000 word stories.

Now, so how does a journalist get to the pastorate?

[Laughter] By God’s providence.

Yeah.

Yeah, so I grew up in a pastor’s home, and I kind of knew the weight of ministry, and as a result, dreamed of just being a tentmaker. You know, wouldn’t it be great to get to teach the Bible and use your spiritual gifts but not have some of those extra burdens. So while I was in seminary working on my M.Div, I was working as a journalist and hoped to really just be a layperson who could handle God’s word well.
But ultimately, God just made it clear he was calling me to give my life really the way Christ gave his life, sacrificed himself for the Bride, not in the same way, but to follow him in that way, to give up my ambitions, my desires, set those aside and serve his church. So that’s when I surrendered to be a vocational pastor.

And just to show that you weren’t just a run-of-the-mill journalist, you did win some journalistic awards, is that not correct?

Yeah, by God’s grace, Tom Brokaw and Charles Gibson of ABC News gave me the Livingston Award. That’s a pretty notable national one. A few others. And I always wondered why God gave those to me. I didn’t really feel like I deserved them, and a lot of the bigger ones came right as I was leaving journalism to go into the pastorate. And so you wonder sometimes, “God, why did that happen in my life?” And then when I started to really have this desire to make the Church aware; not that I’m the one source of truth or anything, but to help the Church understand how the culture’s changing and how we fit in, then it really all came together. Okay, here’s why God gave me these journalism credentials.

So now, you’re a pastor where?

Pastor in Arizona, about two hours north of Phoenix. It’s called Prescott, Arizona, up in the mountains.

Oh, very nice.

And we have a great congregation up there and just trying to love God and love people.

Well, let’s talk a little bit about evangelicalism in your book. I take it that your journalistic skills really did help you in putting together the book, particularly your analysis of culture. Why don’t you talk a little bit about what that involved, taking a look at how the culture worked and the types of things that you were looking at?
John S. Dickerson: Great. So one of the kind of unique things about the sort of journalism I did, especially the work that won those national awards, was looking at really big, complex issues. For example, oversight of all medical physicians in the state of Arizona; 20-some thousand doctors there, and just kind of analyzing big systems and seeing how they work. And in that case, figuring out the different medical boards, their different oversights, finding the holes. So that’s just kind of the way God wired me.

And so really after five years of doing that kind of work, I don’t know, you almost get – you just kind of get a feel for looking at a big system and trying to figure it out and finding expert sources, which is really I think what’s unique about the book God let me write, The Great Evangelical Recession, is that I didn’t commission any original research. I essentially found there’s more than enough research out there. The difficult thing is making sense of it all. The difficult thing is aggregating it, kind of wading through it.

And that’s sort of the age we live in. Aggregation is so important, whether it’s Google aggregating search for us or Facebook aggregating our friends [laughter], there’s so much information, but we need programs and humans who can make sense of it. So I started really by reading a lot of the experts who have done primary research, whether it’s Christian Smith from Notre Dame, or George Barna, dozens of others, and really started by spending about half a year just reading about 40 of the leading books at that time 2 or 3 years ago to just start to get a sense of the big picture.

Darrell Bock: So you were pooling a whole lot of information that is out there?

John S. Dickerson: That’s correct. And exactly. It just hasn’t been – the dots hadn’t been connected on the particular information that’s in this book.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Well, let’s talk about what you found. And the way you did it was – the way the book is set up, which is so nice, is that you go through six key things that are happening really to churches and to Christianity currently. The focus is pretty much North America, is that correct?

John S. Dickerson: That’s correct.

Darrell Bock: Yeah.
Okay. So let’s talk about these six areas. You highlight six things that are going on, and I think the most efficient way to do this is to just talk about them one at a time. So you talk about inflation, but you don’t – we aren’t talking about what’s happening in the monetary or economic system. We’re talking about something else. What’s inflation about?

We’re talking about the actual size of the evangelical movement and our perception, at least for many of us, the circles I was raised in, that evangelicals are one-third or even one-half of the population. Logically, as I was reading all these different great primary research works, I felt like logically we had to establish a baseline of what percentage of the population are we roughly. It’s a given that it’s impossible to know for sure. Like any good sociologist would say that I think Jesus said that when he said there’s wheats and there’s tares. [Laughter]

We can’t really know exactly what percentage of the population we are. But what I found is four separate researchers who used four separate methodologies that were all really thorough. This isn’t just a phone survey kind of methodology. And these four researchers all found that we’re about 7 percent; one found 8.9 percent. The other three were in the 7 percent of the U.S. population, so less than 1 in 10 Americans who are actually an active evangelical Bible-believing Christian.

Which means that rather than thinking about ourselves as kind of a significant plurality, we’re actually much more of a minority than we tend to think.

Yeah, unfortunately. And there’s a lot of confusion on it because still to this day, if you ask Americans, “Are you a born-again Christian”, we know 30 to 40 percent will say yes. But then if you ask that same group, “Is Allah the same God as Jesus”, half of them will say yes. So obviously those people who say, “I’m a born again Christian,” but believe Allah is the same God as Jesus, they’re not quite in our camp [laughter] theologically.
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John S. Dickerson  And so that’s where it gets difficult and I think the best numbers are those researchers – come from the researchers who’ve really spent three or four years figuring it out because it’s a complex thing.

Darrell Bock  Okay. So what do you think is the significance of the fact that the numbers are smaller than we tend to think?

John S. Dickerson  Great. So I named the book The Great Evangelical Recession to parallel with the great financial recession. And a number – there were a number of triggers under the great financial recession. But a lot of economists agreed that a primary trigger, if not the primary trigger, was the inflation of home values. The mortgage market and other factors had inflated home values in a lot of markets far above their actual value. So in a lot of ways, the great financial recession was actually just a market correction.

The market was correcting. Houses that were selling for $300,000.00 that are really worth $120,000.00 went back down to $120,000.00. And when markets that big correct, there’s a whole lot of ripples that go out as a result. And so we saw the stock market lose half its value. We saw millions of Americans lose their retirement and their home equity. Well, in a similar way, culturally, evangelicalism in the United States has acted and behaved and claimed in many circles from the early 1980s until recently that we are a majority in the country, or at least almost half the country.

Darrell Bock  Yeah, one of the largest pluralities around, yes.

John S. Dickerson  So if these numbers are true, and I say at the beginning of the book, “I hope I’m wrong. [Laughter] I hope I’m wrong about all these findings. I really do.” But if this 7 percent, if we’re 1 in 10, if that’s true, well, that’s a huge market correction. That’s going to show in our political influence. It’s going to show in a whole bunch of ways that essentially the culture I believe is starting to realize we’re not as influential of a group as we’ve claimed. Now, we’re still obviously a very significant group.

One in ten Americans almost, that’s a lot of people, lot of resources. But not the same as being almost half the country.
Okay. So that’s inflation. Now, switch the metaphors here. We’re going to go to bleeding, which is not the most pleasant image in the world. [Laughter] So what is bleeding represent?

So bleeding, obviously we all know – we are the body of Christ. We’re told that over and over in the New Testament. Bleeding is the loss of people from the body, not the failure to generate new believers. That’s a different chapter. But the actual loss of people who are born into evangelical households. So the biggest demographic of that group is the 18 to 29 year olds. And David Kinnaman’s done such great work with You Lost Me. Drew Dyck over at Leadership Journal has done some great work with Generation Ex-Christian.

And we know from multiple sources, from Barna to LifeWay to even UCLA that two and three who have been attending an evangelical church will stop attending, and other ones stop believing. There’s multiple surveys on this between the ages of 18 and 29. Now, the great hope is that a lot of them will come back. And there’s not a lot of hard data on how many do. One of the reasons is I just turned 31, so if I was the 18 to 29, well, how long will it take to know if I was a prodigal, if I came back. It might take another 30 years.

So you know, people get upset that there’s not more hard data on that, and we have to understand the constraints of research, that we don’t really know what the 31-year-olds right now will do until 29 years from now or something. [Laughter] But we’re definitely seeing anecdotally and from the research that does exist on it that it’s not the majority who are coming back. One suggests that it’s about a third of those who leave who do come back.

And we get into anecdotal anecdotes here as opposed to objective research because of what I described. But we see that the ones who do come back typically return not right where they left off. You know, if they’ve, for their 20s, been away from the Lord, they’ve made a whole lot of lifestyle choices during that decade that typically set a course for your life. So whether it’s alcoholism or pornography, just other really they’re sins that enslave, and so even the ones who do come back, it’s not like they come back and right away start leading a home group or [laughter] discipling other people.
They come back kind of wounded, limping in, and hopefully, we put our arms around them and restore them.

**Darrell Bock**

So if I’m getting this right, you’re saying out of the group that we’re talking about, we have one-third that stay; we have two-thirds that leave; we might get one-third back, but even that means that one out of every three doesn’t remain.

**John S. Dickerson**

That’s right.

**Darrell Bock**

And so obviously, dealing with the age group that is 18 to 29 is important and I take it that part of what emerges out of what you’re looking at is the idea that we really need to pay careful attention to that age group, the 19 to 29-year-old group, which actually translates into paying really good attention to them when they’re in their teenage years and earlier before they get there.

**John S. Dickerson**

That’s exactly right. And that’s my heart in this is thinking of the future church. My concern is not that the evangelical movement, if we could call it that, evangelical Christianity, the Bride of Christ. Let’s just call her that. My concern is not that the church is going to fall apart in the next year or two. We’ve got great resources, great momentum. My concern is that all of these trends come together in a very consistent pattern of gradual decline, and yet, the – in addition to that, the culture’s rapidly changing, and that seems to be contributing – it seems like the decline is accelerating in the face of cultural change.

So theologically, I should couch this, that in Matthew 16, Jesus is so clear; “He will build his church. The gates of hell will not prevail.” There’s certain folks that come across my research and say, “Well, you obviously don’t trust the sovereignty of God.” Well, I do trust the sovereignty of God. I know his church is going to prevail.

And yet, I think we have to be careful about claiming the sovereignty of God as an excuse to not be honest about what’s going on in the country where God has placed us. So we know his church is going to prevail. But I think that especially those of us who are leaders in ministry, we have a responsibility to really be aware. The church has prevailed since the 1600s in the world. But it has definitely declined in England and in Scotland and in Germany.
And if we’re now on that track in the United States, what can those of us who God strategically placed in this country, first of all, what do we need to understand and then what does God’s word say about it?

*Darrell Bock*  
Well, we’ll come back to how to deal with some of these because they’re important issues related to how this works. But this particular age group is also a concern that we have seen in some of the conversations we have. We’re in the process of mapping many college campuses across the country and asking what the pressures are on students who go into college, particularly colleges that aren’t Christian colleges. And then the backside of that is, well, how do we prepare students who go into those environments for what they’re going to face, both socially and intellectually.  

And it’s an important concern, and it means that youth ministry is a very, very important and strategic part of the church. We tend to view it sometimes, perhaps, as just simply people maintenance or kind of expensive form of entertainment and babysitting. But it actually is a very, very important part of the church program.

*John S. Dickerson*  
Absolutely. And American children outside of the church, as a whole, are growing up younger and younger. And they’re making their life decisions, life – setting their life courses younger and younger. And absolutely if we wait until college, we’re way too late. And that’s one of the other things where there’s not a lot of hard data, but anecdotally, it seems that a lot of – it’s Kendra Dean from Princeton who concluded a lot of these young people who walk away – and this is her conclusion – that perhaps many of their families, they didn’t really see the power of God. They didn’t really see what it is to be sold out to God.  

They saw a more nominal Christianity. They saw – and obviously this isn’t the case with everyone who walks away.

*Darrell Bock*  
Right.

*John S. Dickerson*  
There are kids who walk away from homes where the mom and dad are, you know, as we’d say, on fire for the Lord. But her conclusion from her research was that essentially, they’re reflecting what their parents are doing the other six days of the week.
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**Darrell Bock**  Right.

**John S. Dickerson**  They lived in households where Christianity, following Christ didn’t affect everyday choices. It was something that was done on Sunday and they decided, “Well, it’s not really – why play the game?”

**Darrell Bock**  Right, right. Well, that’s bleeding. That’s a pretty important category. The next one sounds equally ominous. Bankrupt. [Laughter] So we’re bleeding and we’re inflated and we’re bankrupt. So what’s bankruptcy about?

**John S. Dickerson**  Well, bankruptcy returns to the financial analogy, and it’s literally about our finances, that evangelical machine, we don’t want to call it that, but the organizations we have, the way they run, they run on the fuel of dollars. That sounds really evil or greedy. It’s not. But it is the way it works in America. If you take an honest look at our network, our web of ministries from Navigators, Campus Crusade, Focus on the Family, to local churches, to our missionaries overseas, there’s a lot of different components to this big machine.

But they all run on one fuel in the American model, and that is dollars. And again, there’s nothing wrong with that. But I think we could argue that historically, compared to a lot of other churches, and even contemporary churches in China and India, places where the church is embattled but thriving, we could argue that we’re a lot more dependent on the dollar here, if you could have a dollar-to-disciples ratio. [Laughter]

**Darrell Bock**  Yeah.

**John S. Dickerson**  And so I guess the concern there is if the amount of fuel, the amount of dollars coming in, stays consistent, then the gradual path of decline that we’re on could stay consistent. But if those dollars were to begin dropping rapidly, then the good that we are doing would also decline. It’s very dependent. I mean, right now, most of our ministries, if not enough dollars come in, we have to lay off staff. We have to lay off the people who are doing the heavy lifting of evangelism and discipleship.
So I really looked into how are we financially for the next 15 years, for the next 30 years; what are the giving trends generationally because I had seen, as probably most ministry leaders have seen in anecdotal experience, that the older generation givers are very consistent. The younger generation givers tend to be sporadic, tend to give emotionally. Many don’t give at all. Many younger generation American evangelicals are less consistent not only in their giving, but even in their attending.

They’re more likely to show up to church once or twice a month as opposed to three or four times a month for the older generations. So I worked really hard to find some hard data on this, and there’s not [laughter] there’s not much. But I did find this group called Blackbaud. They do non-profit analytics in the United States. And they had some figures and they – their figures that 46 percent of giving in Christian churches comes from the 65 and older generation.

Now, the next generation down, the next oldest generation, gives the next 20-some percent. So combined, it’s 68 percent, almost 70 percent that comes from these oldest two generations. Now, we know the oldest one, which gives almost half, in the next 15 years, most of them are going to be called home to Heaven. So there’s this huge transfer of wealth in America beyond our circles of about $2 trillion a year. So the question is as their children and then grandchildren inherit this wealth, are evangelical ministries, whether it’s a church or a para-church, going to see as much as they’re used to.

**Darrell Bock** Yeah.

**John S. Dickerson** And are they going to see it as consistently. I believe based on research from Purdue and a number of others that are cited in the book that we’re not; that we’re going to see less, but also less consistently. And so as a result, this machinery that we have that is – our cylinders are pumping and we’re on this gradual decline because of culture shifts. Well, if the fuel does decrease, if half the gifts from this one generation, if that’s half of our giving in a lot of our ministries or more for many ministries, if their kids and grandkids don’t radically change their lifestyles, then we need to be prepared in our ministries to run on less fuel.
Interesting. Well, the fourth one is dividing. And I think this one is – we can cover pretty briefly because I think we all inherently get this, and that is that the church is fragmented into different groups and it isn’t as united as it ought to be or could be. Is that basically what that’s about?

John S. Dickerson Absolutely.

Darrell Bock Yeah.

John S. Dickerson And that’s really the result of probably the next one we’ll talk about called hated, the way the culture’s changing in its view of Bible-believing Christianity where once it was pretty apathetic towards us; you know, it wasn’t in love with us, but it was kind of – there’s those Christians over there. Well, that apathy is turning into an antagonism in many circles and actual hostility. Bills and laws that are being written and passed that actually target evangelical Christians and many of our beliefs.

And so as a result of this rapid cultural change, we’re all trying to figure out how do we respond to this; how do we adapt. And that’s, I think, where a lot of these divisions are coming from. Some people believe more than ever that we should get out of politics because that hasn’t worked, while other good people who believe and follow the same Christ from good motives believe more than ever, “Hey, the window’s closing. Now’s the time to get more involved in politics.”

So that’s just one example of these divides. And that divide, that leads to very different philosophies in ministry.

Darrell Bock And the strategy, even if you decide to engage, can be decidedly different because some people will say, “Well, we need to go in this and take the view that it is a cultural war and that we’re really fighting for some form of survival.” And then other people are saying, “Well, let’s be more discriminating.” I mean, there is a battle. No one’s doubting that. But let’s be more discriminating about those things that we can come alongside on and those things where we need to be challenging.

And so you’ve got that division as well also operating.
Absolutely. And then we also see divisions in theology, as you’re much more aware than I am, and I mean, we live in a fragmented culture. Again, a lot of these trends are taking place in the fabric of the United States.

And some of those differences are generational. I mean if you analyze the way one generation views how to engage with how a younger generation views how to engage, those numbers aren’t the same. Those hearts aren’t beating the same way.

Yeah.

Yeah.

That’s right.

So we’ve done five of them basically; we’ve done inflated. Our numbers are exaggerated. Bleeding, we’re losing young people in particular, losing people out of the church. Bankrupt, we may not have the resources that we’ve had in the past given to us. Dividing, we’re not as united as we ought to be. Hated, the culture’s turning hostile. I do want to come back to that in just a second.

The last one is sputtering. What’s that one about?

Yeah, sputtering goes back to this engine analogy. But it has to do with creating new disciples. If – you know, open up a whole can of worms – you know, what is Christ’s measure for our success. One of the most basic ones is the Great Commission. “Go and make disciples.” So we’ve seen that we are losing or not making disciples of a lot of kids who grow up within the walls of our churches. Sputtering looks at as a share of the population, about 4 million new U.S. residents every year between births and immigration, so if the population’s growing by that every year, are our churches, on a national level; not just one or two mega churches in a community, but are all of our churches combined, are we keeping up with that population growth.

And we are not. And one of the reasons we’re not is that we are not converting adult Americans. Obviously, we all know from our ministries, we have some converts. But we’re not converting them at a rate that would keep us –
Darrell Bock So evangelism isn’t what it used to be.

John S. Dickerson That’s right. It’s evangelism. It’s a failure of evangelism. It’s a failure to convert the lost.