

How the New Christian Left Is Twisting the Gospel

Peek behind the curtain of some “progressive” or “hip” 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. They are accused of having too many rules as well as 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. 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' 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 because my experiences and those of my fellow bold evangelicals are a testimony of God's awesome, transforming power. Being countercultural for Christ isn't easy. What does the Great Commission say? Jesus commanded us to go, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).

Where Did We Go Wrong?

I see so many parents 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"—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 isn't a parenting how-to guide that, if followed, will lead your loved ones to salvation. Instead, what I can offer you is a glimpse into the world of a twenty-something 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.

Research tells us that evangelicals are drifting further away from the orthodox truths their parents and grandparents held dear.

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.

The Collision of Faith and Culture

Faith and culture will continue to collide in America. 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 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 nonprofits that exploit and misuse terms such as *justice*, *oppressed* and *inequality* because tweaking the language makes us feel more neutral, less confrontational.

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 mindset 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."

Right now cheap grace theology is proliferating around evangelical Bible colleges, seminaries and Christian ministries.

Christian Doctrine Hijacked

It is not that millennial evangelicals were not taken to church by their parents. It is that their training has been hijacked by ineffective and sometimes intentionally distorted doctrine.

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. Their understanding of Jesus' teachings and cultural convictions begin to form while they are still at home and under the influence of their local church.

What I hope and pray evangelical parents and leaders come to realize is that the church has been too trusting. In our jam-packed lifestyles, parents have treated Sunday school as they do softball or ballet class—drop off the kids for an hour then pick them up and hope they learned something.

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.

We taught all about Jesus' 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.

No. 1: Jesus is God. "True." Great job.

No. 2: Jesus sinned. "False." Bingo!

No. 3: 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? 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 school teachers, TV celebrities and rock stars.

Youth ministers, volunteer leaders and pastors also have to start preparing these kids to deal with the very real hostility that faces young evangelicals.

If we never talk about abortion in church, how can we expect the rising evangelical girl to calmly explain the option of adoption to her frightened best friend who just admitted she is pregnant?

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 non-negotiable 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. 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.

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.

What Happened to the Religious Right?

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 died, there are very few traditional evangelical leaders left holding the torch and even fewer candidates to whom they can pass it.

But 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: "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."

Heed the Warning Signs

Evangelicals and culture warriors in the U.S. 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 dwindling memberships of mainline Protestant denominations.

In order to safeguard the trajectory of young evangelicals, we must uphold the authoritative Word of God. 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 whom and what we are up against.

Chelsen Vicari serves as the Institute on Religion and Democracy's evangelical program director. Prior to joining the IRD, she worked for Concerned Women for America. She holds a bachelor of science in political science and history and a master's degree in international politics. Her articles on evangelicalism and public policy have appeared in TheBlaze, The Christian Post, and RealClearReligion. She recently wrote her first book, *Distortion*, from which this article is excerpted.

Mat Staver and Matt Barber discuss the clash between Christianity and Progressive Liberalism at [this link](#).

More information

In her book *Distortion: How the Christian Left Is Twisting the Gospel and Damaging the Faith*, Chelsen Vicari reveals the disturbing truths behind liberal teachings. Using her own experience, Vicari shows how the deception impacts Christianity and the church. This book can be found wherever Christian books are sold or at [this link](#).