

# The Coming Evangelical Collapse

by Kevin Swanson

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*Kevin Swanson discusses the impending collapse of evangelicalism in America and the need for a return to deeper theological engagement and discipleship.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 28:19

**Topics:** "Interview"

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## Description

In this sermon, Kevin Swanson discusses the decline of Christianity in the West and the need for a new strategy to recapture the faith. He highlights a Newsweek article that acknowledges the radical alteration of American culture and the loss of the Judeo-Christian consensus. Swanson criticizes the market-driven approach that many evangelicals have adopted, emphasizing the importance of staying true to biblical principles rather than seeking numerical results. He concludes by urging listeners to cast a vision for the next generation and work towards reestablishing a biblical worldview in a lost and lonely world.

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## Transcript

Welcome to the Generations Radio broadcast. My name is Kevin Swanson. I'm Executive Director for Christian Home Educators of Colorado, but also a pastor and a father of five broadcasting from my basement in Elbert County, Colorado, a safe distance from the demise of Western civilization and the decline of the faith in the West.

No surprise here, but front page article in the Newsweek magazine. This is April 13, 2009. Front page.

This is the front cover of the magazine reads, The Decline and Fall of Christian America. That's right, folks. Christianity dying in the West.

We've been saying this, of course, for the last 15 years, but now Newsweek magazine has figured it out, and Al Mohler is quoted in this article as saying, The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture. That's right, folks.

For the first time in, he says a millennium. Then he says a thousand years. A thousand years of Christianity, of the Bible actually having influence in the way that people live their lives, has come to an end.

It's over. It's over in Europe. It's been over in Europe for at least 40, 50 years.

It's over now here in America. Christianity is dying. We talk about faith, family, freedom.

All these things are dying. The empires are coming down, and so is the Christian faith. Tremendous things happening.

Again, no surprise to us. We've been saying this since the 1960s and 1970s. The foundations of the erosion are coming apart, but the facade is also coming off.

The foundations were gone years ago, but now the facade is coming down. The question is, is there any hope for this? Recently, Michael Spencer wrote an article for the Christian Science Monitor called, The Coming Collapse of Evangelicalism in America. We're going to speak with Michael Spencer.

Folks, these are important programs because they will impact our children and our children's children. What kind of world will our children inherit in the next generation? That depends on what we do in this generation. And, of course, we're losing the faith right now.

So, if you're going to recapture the Christian faith, you're going to have to take the right strategy to this. What do we do? Do we go back to the Old Reformation and just replay the same Old Reformation from the 1500s and expect that that will meet the antithesis of the present day? Was their antithesis the same as our antithesis? Maybe we should get megachurches started. Try to be relevant with minimum compromise.

Maybe just water down our God-centered ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology, and that will be fine. Or the emergent church. Bring in more relationships and put truth back on the sliding postmodern scale.

Well, these are the approaches people are taking, but unfortunately, many of these approaches may end in failure. And so we've got to be very careful with how we look at the church in the 21st century, especially if we want to leave the faith for our children in coming generations. In just a moment, Michael Spencer will be with me from the Christian Science Monitor.

Stay with us. This is Kevin Swanson. Generations of Knowing Him is the theme for the Christian Family Conference coming to the Denver Merchandise Mart June 18-20, featuring 70 workshops, an exhibit hall with curriculum from over 200 vendors, and speakers including Bill Jack, Kevin Swanson, and Little Bear Wheeler.

Come to the 25th Annual Christian Family Conference at the Denver Merchandise Mart June 18-20, presented by Christian Home Educators of Colorado. Register online at [check.org](http://check.org). That's C-H-E-C.org. Welcome back to the Generations radio broadcast. This is Kevin Swanson.

And with me today is Michael Spencer from InternetMonk.com. He's got a great blog online. At InternetMonk.com, you recently wrote an article in the Christian Science Monitor called, Becoming Evangelical Collapse. Michael, welcome to the Generations broadcast.

Thank you, Kevin. I'm really honored to be on. Michael, you're talking about the collapse of evangelicalism.

I have forecasted it a bit myself. I've seen some cracks here in Colorado. Colorado being very much, I think, the center of evangelical Christianity.

At least Colorado Springs has a great deal of the evangelical ministries down there. I sense that there's a weakening, though, in the systems right now. How did you come upon this? Well, I think the first time I ever thought about this was when the person who was then the president of my denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination, said that within 25 years he expected half of our churches to be closed.

Now, you just have to understand that Southern Baptists are an extremely confident denomination, and we're not used to hearing anything like that. That really made my ears perk up, because I had said for some time in my writing that we were facing a kind of generational horizon in a lot of our churches. Now we know statistically that Southern Baptists are the oldest denomination.

They have the largest group of over 70, so that generational horizon is absolutely out there. That got my attention. Then a writer named Christine Wicker wrote a book called *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*, in which she really questioned numbers like the 35 million evangelicals of the National Association of Evangelicals, the 16.5 million of the Southern Baptists, and I thought made an excellent case that what we've got here is a very amorphous movement with a lot of people who are in audience mode or who are barely related to the movement by anything substantial, and that we are facing, probably within 10 to 15 years, a generational turnover that's going to reveal a very different evangelicalism.

It's going to be much smaller. There's going to be a real collapse of the evangelicalism we see now, and it's going to look quite different in the next chapter. Is America following Europe where the facade is starting to fall off, and we're seeing that there really wasn't much behind it, at least as Christianity developed in this nation over the previous 100 years or so? I have a lot of people ask about parallels with Europe, and it's hard for me to answer that question because Europe's state church model was almost doomed to collapse.

I don't think evangelicalism was really doomed to collapse. I think we made some strategic decisions in the post-war era about what kind of movement we were going to be. I think we made decisions like to emphasize the parachurch as much as or more than the local church.

We made decisions to go to what we called the megachurch model, to use more entertainment-oriented methodology, to stop emphasizing discipleship and emphasize instead growth and numbers, and then our entire engagement with culture became one surrounded by the term relevant, which is a term I don't think we really thought through exactly all that that meant. I think those decisions, as much as the environment in the country itself, have affected what evangelicalism has become. So you're saying more fluff, less substantial Christianity, that really worked its way into the fiber of the people and institutions of those people.

Oh, very, very well put. Very well put. That's exactly right.

We made a decision to be much less substantial and defined as a movement. Today there are large numbers of people who call themselves evangelicals that aren't on anybody's church roll. They voted Republican.

They consider themselves pro-life. They like some TV preacher. They listen to some Christian radio station.

But their actual connection to evangelicalism is extremely tenuous. And I think when you look at that generationally, and you look at that with many of these other factors culturally, that's not a good forecast. We need a stronger hold on what it means to be evangelical than just methodology or preference.

Michael, you've got people with the greatest of motivations and intentions, some valiant attempts out there to try to, in some way, reconstruct Western Christianity, the mega-church, the emergent church, the home church, the seeker-friendly church, the biker church. Here's a cowboy church. My dad sent me this on email last night.

You don't have to have a horse to come to cowboy church. Just the cowboy spirit. You'll find the dust is real, the horses are waiting, the music is toe-tapping, and the preaching is down to earth.

They're trying to salvage something here, Michael. Well, I think what they're trying to do is to keep up with the spirit of the age, the spirit of the culture. They're following this market methodology that evangelicalism bought into in the post-war era.

I mean, in my own denomination, you can look at where the marketers basically took over from the more theological types, and that an entirely different view of why we do what we do came into focus so that, really, any methodology that works was assumed to have God's blessing because it would get numerical results. I think that's been disastrous for evangelicals. You can see in some of the comedy of our own diversity that we are very confident we know who we are, but we've completely lost our way in many instances.

Michael, I spent the last couple of years studying church history with some of the men in our church, and one of the patterns that seems to appear from time to time is what I call the quality-quantity trade-off. It seems that we drive quantity hard, and in the process, we lose quality. We lose discipleship.

We're not spending more time with people that we need to. We're getting people, quote-unquote, converted, saved. We're putting a notch on the spiritual gun belt and moving on to the next person.

Our theology is shallow. Our discipleship is shallow. And yet there's times when I understand that you go for quantity instead of quality, but it seems to me we're just about due for another trade-off.

We need to go back to quality in the faith and in the method of discipling the nations here. You're answering my questions better than I can answer yours. I mean, really, it couldn't be put any better.

I think one of the most, if not the most, frequent conversations you'll hear among serious evangelicals is puzzlement over the issue of discipleship. If we have a theology of conversion, and if we have the right methodology, and it produces converts, then why aren't those converts disciples? I think what we have to face is that we have largely lost in this methodological rush the processes and the priorities that produce the kinds of disciples that will pass this movement on. You can pass on a movement with certain externals, with large institutions, schools and churches.

Something will pass on. But the core identity of the faith will not pass on. And I'm afraid that's the crisis we're about to see.

The largest growing religious group in the United States is the non-religious. They went from 9 to 18.6 percent in the last 20 years. And I'm going to tell you, a lot of those people grew up in evangelical homes.

But didn't we do something substantial through the 70s and 80s and 90s with the moral majority, the Christian coalition, the pro-life movement? Yet in your article you've got, you know, being against gay marriage, being rhetorically pro-life, will not make up for the fact that massive majorities of evangelicals can't articulate the gospel with any coherence. That, I think, being the most controversial statement probably in your article. We thought we were doing some good here.

Well, the battle is to produce devoted followers of Jesus Christ. What happened was we made the battle to win certain cultural issues and cultural battles. And I think that certain segments of evangelicalism, not all of it, but certain segments of evangelicalism invested incredibly in that culture war.

So as I said in the article, you now have the very unusual situation that if you pick, let's say, 100 random Christian teenagers from a major youth event and you get them in a room and you start asking them questions, they will have deep convictions on gay marriage and pro-life. But as soon as you move on to theological territory, the Trinity, the inspiration of Scripture, the doctrine of justification, you have a very different room. And we've got to own up to why that happened.

And I think we put a lot of emphasis on something important, but we put way too little emphasis on something absolutely vital to our own identity. Okay, so we've got to reestablish some firmer foundations. And effectively, the pro-life issue, the homosexuality issue are incarnations.

And these are ethical issues. They're commitments that we make politically. They're incarnations of our faith.

But if we don't have anything more substantial down in the foundations, we don't know why we believe what we believe about these things. We don't have a wider, deeper, fuller theological, philosophical construct. In the end, our commitment is still shallow.

I think one of the things that evangelicals have had a hard time swallowing, because their methodology tends to deconstruct their theology, is that Christianity is a complex that has various levels. You can't just make it a hot-button religion where, all right, what's the issues that get people really feeling strongly? That's the easy route to motivate people maybe to vote or to get involved in certain things. But to actually build a person who thinks and lives out of that sense of a total Christian worldview and can actually relate Jesus Christ to how do I live in society, how do I pursue vocation, how do I think about education, that's a much different problem.

And evangelicals have simply been lazy. Many of them have. Obviously, many of them have done excellent work.

But many evangelicals have said that is not important. What's important is just these more impulsive, emotionally-oriented issues. This is powerful stuff, important ideas to be discussing right now at this phase in the development of Christianity in the West or the degradation of the faith in the West.

The coming evangelical collapse is the article in the Christian Science Monitor, the author Michael Spencer, with me right now on the Generations broadcast. Michael, you talk about evangelicals entering the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches in recent decades. You say the trend will continue.

Today I just got an article. Newt Gingrich is now a Roman Catholic. He joins, of course, Bobby Jindal, Sam Brownback, Jeb Bush, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

So a lot of big names going back to the Roman Catholic Church from the Protestant churches. Why is this happening? Well, I think it's happening for a variety of reasons. One is, I think, that if you want to see a group of Christians who seriously engage ethical issues consistently without those ethical issues becoming the entire movement, you should look at our Roman Catholic friends.

Richard John Newhouse and folks like that were very impressive examples of how to put cultural issues where they ought to be but to articulate them out of a strong Christian faith. Evangelicals have not quite mastered this. I don't know if we don't have the depth, if we're too interested in, like I said, those audience numbers, those entertainment methodologies, if we don't produce first-class thinkers, which we certainly have many, but somehow we've not pulled that off.

And you're seeing a lot of people in public life drawn to those churches that have a much deeper tradition of thinking about ethical issues. And for many of those people, they've sort of jumped the theological issues to get to those ethical issues in what they see as a more balanced form. There are other things happening there having to do with, I think, Evangelicalism's own deconstruction of history, deconstruction of worship, turning worship into a show.

Obviously the older, deeper denominations look very different than Cowboy Church. And for many people, for many people who are burned-out Evangelicals, and trust me, there are millions of them, that is a serious problem. Yeah, and I think a lot of people are searching for historical roots.

They're tired of splitting the church to their own little set of distinctives to the umpteenth degree, to the point where they're not really connected to anybody or anything in history, and that's another problem. Let's talk about the historical reform, though, because I think there are people who are saying, let's get back to the historical reform movement. Let's just try to do whatever Calvin said.

Maybe we can preach the five points of Calvinism every Sunday and everything will be fine. There does seem to be that movement saying, at least if we can hang onto some kind of historical reformed roots, we might be able to salvage something here. What's your take on that? Well, my take on that is that I'm a Reformation Christian, and I feel very strongly about the central core of the Reformation's recovery of biblical Christianity.

But the real genius of the Reformation was not just back to the Bible, but it was, let's be critically realistic about any and all claims. Let's be biblically critically realistic about ourselves. So I'm all for those good Reformed foundations, but to try to create a museum of the 16th century would be betraying the Reformation itself.

Luther and Calvin would be the first ones to say, critique the Reformation itself. Don't imitate it. Continue it with its theological distinctives, but don't enshrine its externals.

And I'm concerned, as I think many people are, that at least some of the Reformed resurgence is, as you said, let's just go back and preach proper theology and everything will work out great. I think we've got to be a little more critical of our own traditions. The Reformers did not produce many things that we need.

For example, the strong missional evangelistic emphasis that evangelicals want certainly wasn't coming out of state churches, and churches with some of the baptismal theology of those Reformed churches. So we need to make sure that's always there on good Reformation foundations. I look at history, and another element of history that I really appreciate, especially in the development of the frontier age of the church

from 500 to 1000, after the breakdown of the Roman Empire, it seems to me the monasteries and the Chaldean churches, the Scottish and Irish churches coming down from the north, provided some of those discipleship opportunities.

Certainly some isolation, but always a level of multiplication. Some pretty significant long-term, deep-seated, everyday sort of discipleship happening in those Chaldean churches and monasteries for the first 500 years following the breakdown of the Roman Empire. As we look at that, it seems to me there might be something there we can copy as well.

I think when I used the phrase earlier that we've lost the processes of discipleship, that many of those processes, we're going to find out, don't happen in the kind of churches that we've been building. They happen in a different kind of institutional environment, and a different kind of relational environment, one that probably ought to look at some of the other places in Christian history that you've mentioned. I think a lot of younger evangelicals are doing that.

Many younger evangelicals feel this great deficit of life transformation, and realize it's not just membership in a church or enthusiasm for some cause, but they really need to be on a journey of being mentored and shaped within community. I think we're making progress on at least thinking about those issues. What are some of the other positive signs that you're seeing in the church today? One of the things I feel the strongest about is that as American evangelicalism goes through what's going to be a weakening chapter, churches in the Third World and the Global South are going to come and help us.

I think we're finally in a teachable mode to learn from our Chinese brothers and sisters and our African brothers and sisters. Not to say, what can we show them? I think we're figuring out we don't have much to show them. They have much to share with us.

I'm also very optimistic about church planting. It's something I'm very passionate about. I think that this is something that in terms of dealing with the next chapter of our evangelical story, we need to plant churches.

We need to plant them in the inner cities, in the rural areas. We need to not just imitate megachurch methodology. We need to build true Christian communities that will focus on discipleship and positive engagement with that larger culture.

I think we're seeing people like Tim Keller emphasize church planting along with solid reformed biblical Christianity. That I think is really, really helpful. Michael, you talk about these communities and then in your article, the increasing concern will be how to keep secularism out of the church and not stop it altogether.

Does that mean that communities are going to want to separate more so from the culture? Are we all going to move to Idaho and form Amish communities here? Do we separate more and then come back and again impact the culture? Is this a both and? Well, we have to be reaching a saturation point with this entire relevance business. Really, I think we are becoming almost a parody of ourselves. You mentioned the Amish.

When the Amish went through the school tragedy in Pennsylvania, I'm sure many evangelicals wondered, if somebody walked into one of our churches and did some terrible, violent thing, do we have the spiritual maturity to respond like those folks did? I think we are going to ask some questions that are going to say,

maybe instead of concentrating so much on changing the culture, maybe we need to shut the doors, be a little less concerned about relevance to the culture, and ask, how can we be more like Jesus? We've become far too audience driven. I do think we're entering a phase where we are going to come more inward, and that's not a bad word. We're going to come more inward in the movement and building of our Christian communities, and we're going to say, how can we not let the world set the temperature, set the model, but how can we be more Christ-centered, more deeply, classically Christian in who we are? Let's make a strong contrast with our culture, and not be in such a rush to look and sound and act just like it.

One of the ways I put it with my men in our church is that the salt is lost its savor, so what we need to do is pull back, re-saltify ourselves, and if we re-saltify ourselves, then we have something to take to the world around us. But at this point, we just don't really have much to write home about here. Someone said, Christianity does very well in a crumbling empire.

I think it does well if you decide that you don't want to rebuild the crumbling empire, you want to share the gospel, and be a gospel-sharing people, and be a Jesus-following people in that environment. There is so much we can learn from others who have faced aggressive cultural challenges, like, as I said, our Chinese brothers and sisters, and have done far better than we've done. We should be, as evangelicals, quite humbled that we have lived in this world that God has placed us in, and become so much like the world that God has placed us in.

We have much to learn on those fronts. One of the ways I put it is, let's plant gardens amidst the ashes, and then we'll have something for the world to look at. Hopefully the light on the hill, as this nation was once configured by one of our Puritan founders.

Well, thank you so much, Michael Spencer, for joining us on Generations. I really appreciate your insights, and we'd like to revisit with you some other time. Thank you, Kevin.

It's been great. God bless your ministry, and God bless your audience. Thank you.

We hope you enjoyed that interview with Michael Spencer from InternetMonk.com. Folks, we live in remarkable times, with tremendous opportunities before us. Yes, the West is falling apart. The empires are crumbling.

Faith, family, and freedom are disappearing, and yet we have great, great potential for future generations, if we can capture the challenge that God has laid before us. I think Michael Spencer pretty much hit the nail on the head in this last interview. You can interact with this radio program by emailing me directly at host at kevinswanson.com, and you can hear this program anytime, anywhere in the world at kevinswanson.com. Tune in to us as we bring relationships and truth, concepts like discipleship, long-term discipleship in the Word of God, and the reestablishment of a biblical worldview to a lost and lonely world.

This is Kevin Swanson, and I want to invite you back again next time as we cast a vision for the next generation.

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