

## REVIEW ARTICLE: *THE GREAT RECESSION*

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***The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church . . . and How to Prepare***, by John S. Dickerson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013. 247 pp, pb, \$14.99.

This book is a wake-up call to the Evangelical church about the great recession that is on its way for the church in America. Unless there is a sharp change in current trends, within a generation there will be a major recession for the church. Dickerson, a prize-winning journalist, who now is senior pastor of a growing church, bases his assessment on statistical studies of six trends affecting the church. He likens the situation to the days just before the Great Recession that hit the American and the world economy. Though there were warning signs aplenty that the bubble had to burst, most ignored the warning signs until it was too late. He hopes the church will not mimic this behavior. Dickerson brings home the point with an example from his own behavior during the Great Recession. He bought a house in Arizona for \$120,000. Its value soared to \$240,000. He was warned by a real estate tycoon to sell it, but ignored the advice, even as prices slid downward. He eventually sold the house for \$48,900. He writes this book in the hope that the church can avoid this experience by acting before it is too late.

The first factor that warns of the great recession that is coming is the inflated statistics of the Evangelical church. Reports often say that 70% to 80% of Americans are Christian, and 40% of Americans claim the label Evangelical or born-again Christians. If “Evangelical Christian” is defined as a person who believes in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the centrality of the atoning death of Christ, and salvation by faith alone, who attends church regularly, and is a dependable supporter of the church, only 7% of Americans are Evangelical Christians—22 million out of a population of 316 million. Three different studies all support the 7% figure (the outlier reported 8.9%). As additional support for his premise Dickerson cites the statistics for Southern Baptists. Reported membership is 16 million but weekly attendance is 6 million. The number of active members may be more than 6 million, but it is considerably less than 16 million. The fact that some churches are growing partially masks the reality of declining

attendance. Some big churches are growing but most of their growth is by transfers from small churches. The overall downward trend is somewhat masked by the growth of big churches at the expense of small churches. Though self-reported polls on church attendance show that up to 40% of Americans claim they attend church on a given Sunday, in most communities the real figure based on actual attendance counts is 5 to 10% (higher in some areas of the Bible Belt and Midwest). Americans apparently still have enough of a Christian consciousness to lie about whether they attended church.

The second ominous sign is the increased hatred for Christians by a secular society. Dickerson cites and documents numerous attempts to silence Christian testimony in the public arena. Two specific examples cited were African-American women who lost their positions in academia for their belief that homosexuality is not determined by birth (p 40) and the Chick-fil-A saga, another example of pressure from public officials in support of the gay rights lobby. Google's exclusion of churches from the use of their online tools for non-profit organizations was an example of growing anti-Christian bias in the corporate world (Google backed off from this stance, but it was an ominous sign) (p 47). In a survey of 1,200 university professors, 3% had negative feelings toward Jews, 9% toward non-evangelical Christians, 22% toward Muslims, and 53% had unfavorable feelings toward Evangelical Christians. The host culture is changing much faster than many think, and the direction is anti-Bible-believer and pro-homosexual. This trend will accelerate as the oldest two generations die off over the next 30 years. Dickerson does not see Soviet-style gulags or Nazi-style camps in America, but threats to academic positions and to other jobs, potential loss of tax exemption, and laws that make anti-homosexual statements hate crimes are not far-fetched.

Dickerson's third warning sign of recession is division in the church. One type of division is between those Evangelicals who connect the church with the political right and those who want to resist and break such ties (a trend strongest among the young but including such veteran leaders as Cal Thomas). The second type of division is the increasing doctrinal division of Evangelicalism. There are persons who call themselves Evangelicals today whom no one would have recognized as an Evangelical 40 years ago. Dickerson is ready to deny the Evangelical credentials of those who question such core teachings as the atonement, but he defines the biblical standard for unity in the church too narrowly. (More on this later in the section on solutions.)

The fourth critical omen is the prospect of plummeting financial support. The older generation is disproportionately keeping the church afloat. It is not simply that 75-year-olds give more support than 35-year-olds. That is normal. The problem is that today's 35-year olds do

not support the church at the level that today's 75-year-olds did when they were 35. Half of the support for the church comes from the oldest generation. Dickerson estimates that if current trends continue, financial support of the Evangelical church may decline 70% over the next 30 years and 46% over the next 14 years (the oldest 19% of members give 46% of the support).

Trees are brought down by strong winds buffeting them from the outside, but vulnerability comes from inner decay. The fifth and most ominous trend is the defection of young people from the Evangelical church. Various studies show that 70% of Evangelicals drop out of the church in their late teens or twenties. Many observers take comfort in the hope that they will return to the church in their thirties. Data, however, suggests that only about one third will do so. If this proves to be the case, 5 million people will leave the church between 2007 and 2027. This loss will be from the group that would be the core of the church from 2020 to 2040. Worse yet, studies suggest these people are not just leaving the church. They are leaving the faith.

The sixth ominous trend is lack of new disciples. Most growth in Evangelical churches is not new disciples, but transfers from smaller struggling churches. Even in Evangelical strongholds growth in disciples is not keeping up with population growth.

Dickerson does not just throw out scary statistics and lament "woe is us." He suggests specific measures for confronting each threat.

An honest assessment of the real numbers of the Evangelical church is bound to be depressing, but it should not lead to despair or defeatism if the church turns to God. As the early church prepared to confront a hostile Israel and a world that was serving Satan, its strength was about 500. Today in America there are some 20 million Evangelical Christians. We might add, on the eve of the Reformation the situation for the church looked hopeless, but it was not. The church needs to turn to the Word, to prayer, and to the Spirit. For a word of encouragement Dickerson turns to an unusual source, Gandalf, the Christ-figure in *Lord of the Rings*. To Frodo's discouraging words, "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened," Gandalf replies, "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world." This advice is not Scripture, but it is apt advice for the time into which the Lord has placed us. It is not up to us to decide the present or to predict the future. What we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

To that end Dickerson proposes five main emphases: rediscovering our ambassadorship to a foreign culture, renewing Evangelical unity,

redefining ministry funding, giving new life to discipleship and shepherding, and resurrecting personal evangelism.

### **Rediscovering our ambassadorship to a foreign culture**

We have to understand that in America we are evangelizing “tribes” that are as foreign to us as tribes that the church has evangelized in Africa, the Amazon, or New Guinea. It might not seem that way because most of them speak English and look much like us. But the appearance is deceiving. In their beliefs, assumption, values, morality, and even their use of language, they may be radically foreign to us and we to them. They are hostile to our culture which they regard as an alien culture that is a threat to their way of life. The great gap between the church and society which was the norm for the New Testament church is becoming the norm for us. As an example, Dickerson outlines the approach we should take to the “homosexual tribe.” Take God’s goodness directly to the homosexual tribe. Don’t wait for them to come to you. Expect misunderstanding, hatred, and hostility. Realize that some of that hatred may be provoked by unloving actions and words of Christians. Don’t expect quick results. (Would you expect quick results in an Islamic land?) Don’t place homosexuality in its own category as the worst sin. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 12-20 are the place to start to build the right attitude.) Don’t focus on first changing behavior. Focus on changing the relationship to God through Christ. When you encounter hatred, don’t become defensive but work to overcome hatred with loving actions and above all with God’s grace and love for all.

### **Renewing evangelical unity**

Dickerson is certainly correct in his opinion that disunity in the church is a hindrance to outreach to the world, but he draws the boundaries of the desired unity too narrowly (the Trinity, depravity of man, substitutionary atonement, complete deity and humanity of Christ, sufficiency and exclusivity of Christ’s atonement, and the need for a personal relationship with Christ). He is ready to say that Evangelicals who do not hold to these views and to the infallibility of Scripture have become non-evangelicals, but he applies the principle “in non-essentials charity” too widely. Differences such as the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism and the baptism of infants do have a great impact on the message and mission of the church, and they cannot be so lightly dismissed. The principle “in non-essentials charity” is properly applied to adiaphora and to political differences but not to doctrines clearly taught in Scripture.

### **Redefining ministry funding**

If Dickerson's projections of the decline of financial support for the church come true, he believes that the church will have to make greater use of "tent ministry." A congregation that had five full-time pastors and staff ministers might have only one full-time pastor and nine well trained and commissioned (we would say called) pastors who work ten to 15 hours a week for the church and support themselves with a secular job. Other suggested measures include avoiding accumulation of long-term debt, teaching mature givers about the impending crisis, encouraging legacy giving that will help cover the expected short-fall, and encourage giving levels that come closer to the tithe (17% of Evangelicals claim to tithe, 6% do). The expected crisis is not due to a shortage of funds but to a shortage of commitment.

### **Giving new life to discipleship and shepherding**

To stop the bleeding of membership especially among the young, Dickerson stresses the need for a greater emphasis on shepherding and discipling. Preaching to large audiences and teaching large classes is great, but it is not a substitute for personal pastoral care with a focus on the home. A numbers-driven model for ministry must give way to a more individual-focused model. Committed disciples are not mass-produced on an assembly line but hand-made one at a time with individual pastoral attention. Pastors must focus more on being shepherds and must be given time to do so by other members of the flock picking up more of the peripheral work. Many Evangelicals frequently no longer have a pastor that knows them by name and visits them. Pastors need to focus more on training leaders by the dozen (get the significance of the number?) rather than just preaching and teaching to large crowds. A larger church which can produce a better Sunday performance is not a substitute for a congregation that provides personal shepherding. The best way to love multitudes is to pray for laborers, find them, and train them.

### **Resurrecting personal evangelism**

Dickerson's last emphasis is strengthening congregational evangelism. Companies like Amazon make a lot of money from a few blockbuster best sellers, but the profit that really makes the difference comes from the "long tail," that is, the long list of titles, none of which sells very many copies, but which cumulatively add up to a lot. Congregations can grow through "long tail" evangelism in which many bring in one or two. In a post-seeker society the entire body of Christ needs to take evangelism seriously. Only a minority of believers will have a special gift of evangelism, but all can be witnesses. There is no magic three-step program, one DVD, or seminar that can do this. In

Dickerson's opinion, a congregation's most pressing need after an all-round pastor is an evangelist/evangelism trainer. Only God can give the increase, but where no planting and watering is going on, there will be no harvest.

Dickerson hopes that his projections are proved wrong, and he does not claim any comprehensive package of solutions, but he urges the church not to have its head in the sand but to energetically address the looming crisis. The best hope for minimizing the crisis is training disciples who train more disciples who gain more disciples.

Though Dickerson's specific data is drawn from Evangelical churches, the trends he discusses are broad-based demographic trends that effect WELS in a manner and a degree not dissimilar to the way these trends are impacting Evangelicals. He does not address some issues important to us, such as the support of Christian schools. Some of his suggested solutions we would shade somewhat differently, but any pastor could benefit from a thoughtful reading of this book and from a careful consideration of how Dickerson's concerns apply to our church body and to his congregation.