

What's Wrong with Evangelical Christians and Why are we Destroying America? (Part One)

By Coleman Luck

This is a very difficult column for me to write. It's hard to say negative things in public about your family even when what you are saying is true and needs to be said. And evangelical Christians *are* my family. The evangelical Church is my spiritual home. I was born into it. From my earliest childhood to the present moment I have been nurtured in its churches, schools and organizations. My father was an evangelical leader, a theologian and Bible teacher who was faithful to his family and calling all his life. I can say with the deepest gratitude that over my 61 years the most wonderful loving and giving people that I have ever known have been evangelical Christians. And I have known thousands of them in an array of denominations across America. Many hundreds have left a personal stamp of God's love on my life. So I write as an American evangelical who owes much to this branch of the historic Faith.

But I believe there is a deep sickness in American evangelicalism. The germ of the disease has been there for many generations but at least since the 1960's it has become virulent to the point where our very spiritual life is at stake. And for those who read this who are not evangelical Christians take no joy. I do not argue as do some that America was founded as a "Christian nation" and we need to go back to our "Christian roots." Given the number of Masons who were among our early leaders and the deep influence of Masonry I could argue just as well that the United States was founded as a Masonic nation or if that makes you uncomfortable how about a Deist nation? My atheist and agnostic friends should find little comfort in either of those positions. But, such arguments are beside the point.

What no one can argue against is the fact that an extremely large percentage of Americans claim to be evangelicals. Now if you hate evangelicals you can rant and rave all you want about that. It won't change anything. As much as you may dislike us you will be forced to agree that what happens within evangelicalism deeply influences every aspect of American life and it's going to be that way for a long time to come. So, strange as it may seem, even those who consider themselves our enemies should be very concerned about our spiritual health and in my opinion our spiritual health is in an advanced state of disaster.

How do I define disaster?

Now I'm going to speak directly to my brothers and sisters in the Faith. It is disaster when we give up our ability to carry out the Great Commission of Jesus and live out His love within the culture to which we have been assigned. It is disaster when we lose our moral authority. It is disaster when political/cultural/moral ends come to justify ungodly means. It is disaster when we commit ourselves to an agenda of fear instead of faith. It is disaster when we choose leaders who tell us what we want to hear instead of what we need to hear. It is disaster when we condone ungodliness and hypocrisy in those leaders.

And because all these things have been happening, it is disaster for the spiritual life of America. In my opinion not since the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages or the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell has a Christian church so failed a culture as evangelical Christianity is failing and destroying America right now.

Not long ago the sad revelations about the Reverend Ted Haggard spread through the media. Because of his prominence as an evangelical leader all of us are a laughing stock, the butt of tawdry late-night humor. And we deserve it. Not long ago I read David Kuo's important book, Tempting Faith about the seduction of power within the Bush White House. Both the revelations regarding the Reverend Haggard and the experience of Mr. Kuo among "political Christians" point in the same direction. They are the symptoms of a disease.

Now, every disease has an etiology. To understand the nature of a disease and recommend treatment doctors begin by looking at symptoms. Before we try to define the disease that is destroying evangelical Christianity we should do the same. Symptoms are anecdotal. It's easy too misinterpret them because they are viewed through the lens of a specific and very limited observer. In this case that means me. So, I present the following perspectives with the hope that you will make your own examination and decide whether my diagnosis is correct or not. Here is the first symptom:

The evangelical church is addicted to choosing destructive leaders.

In my experience this is true from the foundational level of the pastorate all the way up to those who represent us in the national arena. Please understand that I am not saying that every evangelical leader is destructive. There are many wonderfully gifted and spiritually mature people in church leadership today. But a disturbingly high percentage are lethally damaged and damaging human beings incapable of making righteous personal decisions much less guiding others. Why are we addicted to following such leaders?

Back in the early 80's I was an elder in a small church in North Hollywood, California. At a certain point our pastor moved on and we had to start the process of finding his replacement. As we began the search the district supervisor of the denomination met with us and confided to me an important principle to help us in the choice of a new pastor. At first I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. In his opinion after many years of guiding evangelical churches in southern California he had determined that there was an important trait necessary to assure a man's success in the pastorate.

All things being equal he needed to be a jock.

That's right, a *jock*. Being a jock (okay, a former jock was acceptable) would give him the ability to relate more effectively to his church members and the more prestigious a jock he had been...well, you get the picture. Now the district supervisor was a good and godly man. There was nothing cynical about him. He was honestly giving me the

wisdom of many years during which he had dealt with scores of churches and hundreds of pastors and he had been a pastor himself. He knew his target audience.

Granted southern California is unique. But in almost every area of culture it has proven to be a bellwether for the whole nation. Several decades later we might add a new element to the guidance of the district supervisor. Today besides being a jock it would be helpful if a prospective pastor had some experience as a rock musician. This is because since the 1960's in most of our churches music has become more important than preaching. (For those unfamiliar with such things church-style rock and roll is now the musical base for what most evangelicals call "worship." That's a change from previous eras when the entire Sunday morning service was called worship.) Many evangelicals choose their church depending in large part on the quality of the musical "worship" experience.

In most of our congregations rock and roll "worship" (all right with a strong influence of folk, gospel and country/western, but let's not quibble) can go on for 45 minutes or even longer on a Sunday Morning. But God help the pastor who preaches more than half an hour. Twenty minutes is the optimal length. If sermons consistently drag out beyond the thirty-minute barrier the perpetrating pastor had better be one of the greatest storytellers in the world and no matter how good he is he should never talk past noon. Why? Because it will encroach on two other vastly important Sunday evangelical activities – getting to restaurants for lunch and home for the games on TV. (Do you see the nexus between the jock pastor and preaching?)

Our little church in North Hollywood had another problem. Not a lot of people attended because we were within five miles of several "mega-churches" with "superstar" pastors who drew large crowds and generous offerings. Their churches could afford all the amenities. Why waste your time in a little church with a pastor who struggled to construct a sermon when you could attend a Grand Event that would truly "meet your needs?"

While we were searching for a pastor I ran into a dirty little reality of evangelical church growth. With a few striking exceptions I discovered that most of the mega-churches had not grown from reaching the non-believers of their communities. Like giant corporations that suck up the competition they had grown at the cost of hundreds of other small churches. Was there some pseudo-spiritual capitalistic conspiracy behind this? Of course not. It just happened because great numbers of evangelical Christians are anxious to sit under the ministry of a "Superstar."

What is a "Superstar Pastor?"

First, he is a Great Communicator who is skilled in moving crowds through the Power of Emotion. More than most other preachers the Superstar seems to have an ability to open his heart, to communicate with amazing honesty and vulnerability in front of thousands. He preaches with passion appearing to relate on a personal level with each individual in the huge room. Now some of these men are quite legitimate. They are exactly what they

appear – honest, caring individuals struggling to perform a difficult job. But a dangerously significant percentage are not. For too many of our Superstar pastors how well they preach the truth of the Bible or how well they even *know* the Bible is of secondary importance. Evangelicals automatically assume that numbers and spectacle equate to God’s “blessing.” (For non-evangelicals the word “blessing” is our code word for success.) Based upon the size of the “blessing” we make a very dangerous logical leap. We assume that if there’s great success the pastor’s moral and spiritual life must be exemplary. He must be a true “Man of God.” We ask ourselves, “would God fill a dirty vessel?” Tragically over and over these assumptions have trapped us. Either He “fills dirty vessels” or we don’t have a clue what the “filling” of His Spirit is all about. How have we become so muddled? Here is another statement that will disturb many of my fellow evangelicals:

For most of us emotion has become the measure of Truth.

We are the “Me” generations. Everything revolves around meeting our “needs.” How does a “Me” generation member know that God is speaking through a pastor? Emotion. If our hearts are moved then the message must be from Heaven. For most of us when certain emotional manifestations are present it is conclusive proof that the “Power of God” is resting on the person in the pulpit. Let’s be brutally honest.

Much of what we consider to be God’s Power in our pulpits is nothing but the Grand Illusion of Celebrity and its hypnotic influence on crowds.

How dare I make such a statement? First, from 61 years of observation in many different churches and, second, from spending decades as a writer and producer in Hollywood the heart of Grand Illusion. In the entertainment industry the principles of Grand Illusion and the Concept and Uses of Celebrity are well known. Finally, and what may be viewed as oddest of all, I am a magician, a mental illusionist, who has spent years studying selective perception, misperception, and the power of hypnotic influence in the befuddlement and control of crowds.

Am I saying there should be no drama or emotion in preaching? Absolutely not. Our emotions are God-given. I want to hear passionate preaching. I’m a professional storyteller and I want to be touched by stories. But when emotion is the measure of truth instead of truth the measure of emotion we are vulnerable to every trap and disaster that can befall us.

One of the great lies of Hollywood storytelling is that when you are “in love” somehow a deeper “wisdom” enters your life. You can understand truth that no one else sees. When you “follow your heart” everything will be all right no matter how stupid a particular decision may be. Almost everyone who has lived beyond 35 years old knows from painful experience how asinine this philosophy really is. But we evangelicals display our own version of this romantic stupidity when we fall in love with and idolize our Superstar Pastors and Christian Media Celebrities.

Now it's always dangerous to generalize. Let me underscore a previous statement. There are many wonderful men and women in church leadership today. (One or two may even be on radio and television. And, no, that's not a joke.) But the evidence is overwhelming. A frightening percentage of our leaders are not spiritually qualified to sweep the parking lot much less preach the Bible or make decisions for us. The clearest argument proving this fact is the number of men who are forced to leave church leadership every year because of "moral indiscretions." The evangelical church of a hundred years ago would have used different words. They would have called it Gross Sin.

Since the 1960's the wave of men guilty of such sin has grown ever larger and they are only the ones who have been caught. How many more are enslaved to pornography and its correlated perversions but manage to keep their addiction secret? One figure I have read is that four out of ten men in every church from the pastor to the custodian is a porn addict. Given the influence of the Internet I do not doubt this.

How many pastoral search committees have ever asked a prospective candidate to bring his personal computer in for examination by an expert who would expose all the deleted files? How many members of a pastoral search committee or elder board would be willing to undergo that kind of scrutiny themselves? Do you want to assure yourself about the spiritual quality of your leadership? Then try it in your church. The measure of the negative response will be a measure of your problem. Do you think such a requirement is insulting and unnecessary? If you do either you're a porn addict yourself or you are abysmally naive. The fact that we need to start taking such measures speaks to the depth of our crisis.

But let's go deeper toward the core of the disease.

The addiction to sexual sin is not the most dangerous of our leaders' problems. Many times those sins as damaging as they are, eventually come to light because of the Law of Diminishing Returns. This inexorable Law forces a person to take greater and greater risks in order to achieve the same satisfaction. Once in the light the sin can be dealt with if we choose to do so. Sadly, I know several churches where senior pastors have been removed for "moral indiscretions" and what did these men do? Each went out immediately and started a new church. Hundreds of people followed them because they didn't want to be "judgmental" and they loved the wonderful "preaching." But at least the revelation about moral foulness gave everyone a clear choice. The most dangerous addiction is one that we evangelicals *reward* our leaders for having and the more they are controlled by it the more we revere them. What is this addiction?

It is the Addiction to Spiritualized Power.

The heart attitude of one so enslaved might be verbalized in this way: "God has blessed me. I am gifted. Many people hang on my every word. Obviously I am doing God's Work. Look at how many lives are being changed, healed, delivered. Look at the financial resources that have opened to accomplish my vision. The Mantle of the

Apostles is upon me. I live in the bubble of my own special dispensation. The people around me are to be used to fulfill the Great Work that God has given me to do. Because my Vision is God's Vision what I set out to accomplish justifies the means that I choose and anyone who stands in my way is a Servant of Darkness who must be removed." While, this is a crude statement of the philosophy it is operationally accurate. Throughout my adult life, I have seen it play out with the most damaging results in a variety of churches and evangelical organizations. The more successful and powerful our addicted leaders become the more we idolize and reward them. Charming but destructive personalities enslaved to Spiritualized Power fall into a category that we might call Independent Operators. No matter how charismatic they are and no matter how well they hide it, beyond all else these people are concerned about themselves and achieving their own agendas.

In the mountain community in which I live I attend a church that is still suffering from such a "ministry." A dozen years ago in the pulpit of this church there was a very gifted preacher. I can't speak about his abilities from personal experience. I didn't live here at that time and I never heard him. But years after he has been gone everyone still talks of his preaching power. To this day the people love him. Of course, almost everyone expresses the fact that there was a kind of mystery about the man. Though he was wonderful in the pulpit on a personal level he was distant and hard to get to know, a man with many invisible barriers carefully established. Was he an Independent Operator? You decide.

What happens when a gifted preacher is in the pulpit? From everywhere Christians congregate to hear him. And that's what occurred in this church. Membership boomed. People were "being fed." (That's the cliché that evangelicals use to describe their satisfaction with a pulpit ministry.) There was excitement. Soon the congregation outgrew its building. Big plans were laid. They would build a much larger building. They would start a school. And these things they did. They built the first of what was to be several large buildings. They started the school. Needless to say this kind of "vision" costs money and they found themselves with a huge debt. But all would be well...as long as their success continued.

Unfortunately, that success was based on the "ministry" of one person. Not long after the building was completed and the school started this man "felt the call of God" to go to a more prominent church in another state. When you lose a gifted "pulpiteer" it's hard to replace him especially in a small community. As the years passed many in the congregation did what most modern evangelicals do when they grow bored and discontented. They found other churches where their "needs" could be more fully met. For years, those who remained have labored under the financial yoke that this "pastor" left on their shoulders. Subsequent pastors have felt its crushing weight. In spite of what he did to them the people still speak fondly of this man and revere his wonderful "ministry."

Now, let's be gut-level honest.

To do this kind of thing to people who have vested all their trust in you is *despicable*. In any other area of life such lack of concern and commitment would be repudiated. In business you just don't start something huge, enlist the deep involvement of many trusting souls, then walk out on them leaving them to suffer the consequences of your grandiose "vision." If you were a General and had recruited an army based on your leadership skills then took them into battle, what would your soldiers think if you abandoned them at the height of the war? But such things don't bother Independent Operator Pastors. Why? They are "Following the Call of God."

Saddest of all because of our unbiblical pastoral romanticism evangelical Christians allow such things to happen over and over. The fact that a pastor is willing to leave a ministry in the lurch should be the first reason another church would refuse to hire him. But we encourage men like this to go on and on. That's because we view our Superstar Pastors like Superstar Athletes. If we can steal one away from another "team" so much the better for us.

And the disease continues to grow.

But there will be much more to say about these things in Part Two.

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