

What's Wrong with Evangelical Christians and Why are We Destroying America? (Part 2)

By Coleman Luck

My career in Hollywood was never stellar. But I experienced enough success to know that it changes you in fascinating ways. At the heart of that change is a kind of mystical exhilaration about winning a subtle sweetness in knowing that you have succeeded where so many have failed. With success comes flattery. The flattery of Hollywood is like crack Cocaine for the soul. You suck it in whether you want to or not because it's in the air you breathe and it isn't just the flattery of words. It's the many oblations that are laid on your altar.

During my years of success in Hollywood, there was a single airline that came to personify it all. Yes, an airline and its name was MGM Grand Air. This delightful if small collection of planes flew between New York and Los Angeles and every inch of them was First Class. None of this pretense to grandeur called "business." And certainly no hordes of smelly bodies crammed into constricted seats in a cattle car called coach.

To fly MGM Grand Air your limousine took you to a private terminal. From there you were ushered onto the aircraft and seated in a soft, Lazy Boy style lounge with plenty of legroom. Fine wine and caviar were served followed by a delightful selection of gourmet meals. An hour or so before landing the staff would bake chocolate chip cookies. (I am not lying about any of this. Every word is true.) I came to look forward to a hot chocolate chip that would sweeten my arrival on either coast. The rear of the plane was divided into cubicles with four chairs facing each other. One night flying back to LA I was alone in a cubicle. Just for me the staff collapsed the loungers into a queen-sized bed. (Isn't this sickening?) As I lay there looking out the window I knew without a doubt that God loved me more than anyone else.

But the most subtle joy in flying MGM Grand Air was the other passengers. Not on one of those planes would you be crammed in with the riffraff and illiterati that slosh down the aisles of Southwest Airlines. You weren't even subjected to the lesser mortals who flew first class on American. (Some of them might have been upgraded. You just couldn't tell.) Every time you boarded the plane there was the quiet assurance that MGM Grand Air catered only to stars and moguls, truly important people just like you. I won't mention any of my seatmates on those flights. Being from Hollywood, I hate to drop names. Suffice it to say that just to walk on board and sit down made you feel as though you had pierced the inner circle. Flying at studio expense became a delicious form of flattery.

Too bad they went bankrupt.

What's the purpose in going into all of this in a screed about why we evangelicals are destroying America? Because I take seriously Jesus' command to remove the beam from

your own eye before you go after the mote in someone else's. Most often, where you choose to be critical of others is where you are at fault. But there is another truth to consider. The person who can most easily spot an addict is another addict. Since I have a verified weakness for success and all the accoutrements it brings, perhaps I am uniquely qualified to identify other addicts. Or perhaps I shouldn't be writing about it at all. At any rate keep this in mind as you read on.

Once you smell the sickly sweet stench of celebrity you don't forget it. It's the reek of desire in your own soul.

Over the course of my professional life I have known more than my share of "celebrities." In almost every case, the public persona was quite different than the "off-camera" individual. Each of these people had a wonderful gift for public charm, but when the camera was switched off, the truth came out. Infused into many of them was a sickening narcissism that expressed itself in various levels of whining, rage, and abuse. The people forced to deal with these "elite" individuals suffered in silence remaining in their jobs only because they were extremely well paid to do so. Now none of the celebrities I'm talking about claimed to be evangelical Christians. Some were openly hostile to Christianity. While dealing with them was unpleasant it doesn't compare to the disturbing experiences I have had with certain evangelical "celebrities." Let me give you three examples:

The National TV Reverend

This man is an ordained minister who exudes charm and caring while on camera. Off camera he is well known for his cavalier lack of concern for the employees in his own large organization. Some of his actions are horrifyingly laughable such as arbitrarily firing a person then several months later wondering where he was. Yes I have it on good authority that that actually happened. I know it sounds brain-dead, but the man's incapacitation is not mental.

My own experience with the National TV Reverend took place over a four-day period a number of years ago. I was part of a small group who stayed with him in a private villa that he had rented for our meeting. The purpose was to work on a project that he was funding. (He is a very wealthy man.) I came to the meeting with enthusiasm. However, it wasn't long before all of us crashed into the reality behind the mask. The private arrogance and elitism of the National TV Reverend were breathtaking. For four days we were with him from breakfast in the morning through an excellent dinner each night. During that time he made it clear that he had no personal interest in anyone but himself. In our little group there was at least one non-Christian. Though the TV Reverend trumpets his commitment to worldwide evangelism he showed disdain for this man.

Among the unpleasant realities to be observed in this larger-than-life minister was his clear lack of Biblical knowledge. Though we were working on a story from the Bible he had little interest in the source material. What fascinated him were the thoughts in his own head. Let me be quick to say that I had no personal conflict with this man. When

the project was finished he was very complimentary about our work. But I left the meeting deeply concerned for the millions who follow his leadership and contribute millions to his cause.

The World-famous Bible Teacher

This man is an acclaimed Bible scholar who has written many books. From this success he has grown wealthy and powerful. Yet with all his Biblical knowledge he thinks nothing of suing other Christians. I watched as his actions dragged the name of Jesus through the dirt in Hollywood. How do I have personal knowledge of this? It's not because I was sued. Rather, a number of years ago this man asked me to moderate a meeting between him and several Christians whom he was suing. Ostensibly the purpose was to settle the dispute and I was overjoyed at the possibility. I had a personal stake in the situation. His suit was blocking a project in which I was involved.

The meeting went for five hours. Miraculously at the conclusion he agreed to drop the lawsuit. I considered this to be a real victory for the Faith. My sense of victory was short-lived. Within 24 hours he went back on his word. For years afterward he continued the suit spending millions of dollars on attorneys and forcing those he was suing to spend millions as well. The entertainment industry watched with smug interest as the Christians threw muck at each other. Ultimately the World-famous Bible Teacher lost his multi-million dollar suit. As it stretched out for years it was a matter of personal sadness and frustration. The project that would have been groundbreaking for evangelical Christians in secular television withered and died. I came away from all contacts with the World-famous Bible Teacher feeling that something was deeply wrong.

The Christian Media Mogul

This is a man who is well known within powerful circles in the entertainment industry. Because of his prominent position he is pursued to act as sponsor of various evangelical events. Unlike the other two, very often the Christian Media Mogul is openly brash and arrogant. Like the others he can be very charming. Within Hollywood his reputation is for making one right decision years ago that brought him great wealth followed by a long string of stupid decisions. Also he is well known for deceit. Several years ago he boasted to me personally about 20 different individuals and organizations that were suing him because of the slick and underhanded way in which he had breached contracts. (He didn't use the words "slick" and "underhanded." To him it was just "good business.") As bad as Hollywood can be within the industry your word is your bond. Long before contracts are written deals are entered into based on a handshake. For the "Christian" Media Mogul, even written contracts mean nothing.

For all of these men, the end justifies the means. All have been corrupted by power and money. All are Individual Operators (see Part 1) on a grand scale. Yet, evangelical Christians fawn over them. Instead of being petted and feted they should be placed under church discipline for the good of their souls. Of course they would never stand for such a thing. And who would consider attempting it? There is no church with authority that

they would recognize. But what about a Christian peer group? Aren't there other mature, evangelical leaders on their level who could take them to task?

Welcome to the International “Fellowship” of Independent Operators

From what I can determine exactly the opposite is true. Instead of a peer group that would hold each member accountable there exists across the United States (and even out into the rest of the world) an elitist “Christian” clique of very powerful men. These individuals are leaders in media, politics, business, the mega churches and the Christian academic world. I have had friends who have touched the periphery of this clique. The members protect each other, fund each other, and promote each other. Unless someone in the group does something particularly egregious that embarrasses everyone (such as the antics of the Reverend Ted Haggard) normal, everyday arrogance, narcissism, and deceit on a grand scale remain hidden.

Because they are wealthy and powerful, these men receive special “spiritual” treatment. I don't know whether it still exists but a few years ago there was a regular telephone “Bible study” taking place among them. Every week or two a group of wealthy men would gather in a conference call and a leading minister would give them a short “devotional” message over the phone. One of those leading ministers was Rick Warren who is certainly a good and godly man. At one point one of the members listening to him was the Christian Media Mogul. Perhaps Reverend Warren doesn't understand that such special treatment is exactly the opposite of what is needed. Perhaps he should take another look at the Book of James. What these people require is a truly, tough, godly group of “powerless” men who would kick their rich camel butts hard enough and often enough so that they just might squeeze through the “eye of the needle” that Jesus warned about.

The Evangelical Church in the United States is becoming like the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages.

I've told three stories that come from my personal experience. I've had other unpleasant experiences with evangelical celebrities but I won't relate them here. Sadly, there are many other cases that are known to everyone – so-called “evangelical/charismatic leaders” who live like bloated slugs crawling through their mansions and onto their private jets while they suck contributions from the pockets of foolish people. Their lives leave trails of oily stench while they plead into cameras with tearful sincerity (some with mascara running) begging for the flow of money-milk from the great evangelical boob. It's time to face a brutal fact. Many, if not most of our national leaders have been corrupted. In the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church was governed by a cabal of sleek and charming bullies. To an ever-increasing degree the evangelical church in the United States has resurrected that awful system. But are these men more sinful than the rest of us? Absolutely not. Were I in such a position without true and tough accountability I'm sure I would be just as bad or worse. One thing is clear.

We have the leaders we deserve.

Is there a single sin in them that is not alive and well in us? Greed, covetousness, selfishness, elitism, competitiveness, self-pity, vindictiveness, and pride have turned our churches into giant nurseries where pastors spend their lives struggling to change massive piles of emotional diapers. Love for grand spectacle has transformed our “worship” into expensive extravaganzas of sight and sound worthy of ancient Rome. The exponential decrease in our collective attention span demands an exponential increase in the entertainment value of preaching. In our prayers we pay homage both to Jesus and the hydra headed idol of health and wealth. Is it any wonder that so many of our leaders are corrupt? But there is an even greater tragedy.

Through it all, our children are dying.

Never in the history of the evangelical church has such a spiritually ignorant and damaged generation arisen as the one that is staggering toward adulthood right now. In their confusion and anger our children and grandchildren binge and purge, pierce and brand, cut and rage. And what is our response? Utter ineptitude. In our laziness we blame the schools or Hollywood or peer groups anything and everything to keep from blaming ourselves and taking action.

In the Middle Ages before the Protestant Reformation there was a centuries-long tragedy in the Roman Catholic Church. The people in the pews did not know the Bible. Oh, they knew some Bible stories and some truths that they were told to memorize, but the Scriptures were in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Only the educated elite could read them. And many in the religious hierarchy wanted to keep it that way. These men knew the power of the Bible and feared it. There is a far greater tragedy playing out in the evangelical church today. Often within evangelical homes there are half a dozen Bibles in as many versions. Yet, not since the Bible was translated into English has there been such ignorance and blithe disregard for the Scriptures. Let’s face another ugly fact:

Most Evangelicals find the Bible boring and have little interest in it.

How can I make such an outrageous assertion?

1. In how many evangelical homes is their a time of Bible reading with the whole family present every day?
2. In how many evangelical homes do the adults take time to read the Bible individually every day?
3. In how many evangelical churches do vibrant Sunday Schools still exist? Historically, Sunday Schools have been a primary means of teaching the Bible to each new generation. Believing it to be outdated, we have cast the Sunday School system aside and replaced it with...nothing.

4. In how many “worship” songs do we find expressed the great truths of the Bible? For untold generations hymnology struggled to put the truths of Scripture into the musical language of the heart. Hymns and gospel songs were one of the most effective means of Bible teaching. Modern Christian lyricists do not know the Bible. What they know is the power of emotion. So that is the core of their message.
5. How many pastors preach through books of the Bible on Sunday morning? In modern evangelical parlance such preaching is not considered “seeker sensitive.” That means we think it would be boring for non-Christians who might visit. But in a crowd of several hundred on Sunday morning how many non-Christians do visit? If we’re lucky, three or four. What would happen if a non-Christian stumbled into a deep Biblical message? Well we don’t really know do we? Because it rarely happens. And it rarely happens because most pastors have not been trained to preach that way. They think that’s teaching and should be confined to other times and venues.
6. In how many of our churches does serious Bible study still exist? Let’s be honest. When it is offered it’s poorly attended. Sunday evening and Wednesday evening services are extinct. Bible studies and Bible classes have been replaced by “share groups.” Most of these are based on popular books and video series or shared interest in some activity. This is probably a good thing because there are few laypeople left in our churches who are qualified to teach a Bible class.

I could go on but there is no point. In my opinion, the evidence is clear. Evangelical Christians find the Bible boring. Since we don’t read or study it we don’t try to live up to it which has resulted in disaster. All the evils of the world have swept through our congregations devastating everyone. This loss of the Bible has had two results. First, we live any way we want and still claim that we are Christians, and second we expect everybody else even those in the secular world not to offend our “Christian” sensibilities. Do we not justly deserve to be called hypocrites? Is it little wonder that young people raised in the church are leaving by the droves? Which brings us back to the original point: Our reaction to our own sinfulness is not only destroying us it’s destroying the country we love. The secularists are dead wrong.

The problem isn’t that we are religious fanatics. It’s that compared to the history of our movement we’re hardly religious at all.

We’re just selfish frightened people who go to church on Sunday and give money to bully boys who lead us in flexing our political muscles because that’s all the power that remains. In Jesus’ day the Pharisees demanded that everyone live up to a standard that they themselves could not attain. We demand moral transformation from our political and social institutions but not from ourselves. We demand that the FCC and Congress clean up Hollywood while we continue watching everything Hollywood puts out. Instead of evangelizing our broken cities we demand that ICE collect all the illegal aliens and ship them back to their home countries where missionaries can deal with their souls. We

demand that moral people be appointed as judges while we don't have the moral courage or authority to judge the conflicts in our own congregations. We demand the right to be publicly religious while being privately pagan. Like the Roman Catholics of the Middle Ages we revere the relics of ancient evangelicalism and hope that by lifting them up some of the power will return. Nothing is going to change until we change. Judgment begins with the house of God. The more we scream and pound our fists, the more we trust in political movements, the more we empower Independent Operators and greedy charlatans, the more we worship health and wealth by "naming it and claiming it," the worse our country will become and the more we will be justly hated as hypocrites. The Church is either a light on a hill or a shadow of hell. There's nothing in between.

It's easy to rant about the problems. But what's the answer? Let me suggest a beginning.

Switch it off...Shut it down...Shut up...and LISTEN.

The great national revivals of Old Testament Israel began during times when the nation was in severe moral decrepitude. In the middle of the darkness someone would find the Scriptures stuck away in the temple and bring them to the king. The king would listen to them read aloud then rip his clothes in repentance. After that he would gather the people and from morning to night God's Word would be read to them.

So, here is my suggestion: Every Sunday for one month let all the evangelical churches in the United States switch off their rear screen projectors shut down their blistering worship bands silence the blathering announcements and give the pastor a break from preaching. For four Sundays no singing, no fake hugging-airkiss-greeting-time, not even communion. We're not ready for it. So what in the world do we do for those four services? Well, start with prayer. After that get someone who knows how to read in public to read one of the shorter books of the New Testament all the way through from beginning to end. (Don't give the assignment to anybody in the drama department. It isn't a performance.) Personally I'd start with the Gospel of Mark to introduce people to Jesus. Reading Mark straight through will take about two hours so given the gnat-like attention span of a modern congregation maybe you'd have to divide it into two Sundays. After that I'd read Galatians followed by Ephesians. When the reading was finished each week I would divide the congregation into groups of three or four and spend the rest of the service in prayer.

I can hear a pastor say, "If I did this I'd lose most of my congregation." If that's so, my friend, you don't have a congregation. You have an audience paying for spiritual entertainment. So stop preaching and go to Hollywood where you can do some honest entertaining work with your life.

Evangelicals pay lip service to the Bible being God's Word. We talk about God's Word not returning to Him void. We believe that Jesus is The Word Incarnate. Well it's time to prove it. It's time to get back to the foundation and trust God to speak through His Word. If this suggestion isn't realistic, if we can't trust it, if it wouldn't "work" in "our situation," then we'd all better become Zen Buddhists. And certainly we should stop

carping about America being a Christian nation that needs to “get back to its roots.” What hypocrisy if we can’t get back to our own.

The suggestion I have made is only a beginning. The point is to fall in love with the Bible again not because we love the pages but because in it we meet Jesus and will fall in love with Him again.

And you never know we might be surprised. Maybe God’s Word really does have power to change nations...one person at a time.

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