

# The Next Evangelicalism

Releasing the Church from  
Western Cultural Captivity

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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press  
Downers Grove, Illinois

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## Introduction

AT THE CORNER OF MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE and Beacon Street in Boston sits an awe-inspiring building. The gray stone front and ornate stained glass are reminiscent of the glory years of a bygone era of the American church. It is the type of church building associated with the rich tradition of a church in New England. The first time I walked up to that corner, I couldn't help but be intimidated by what must be an impressive history for that church building. But when I turned the corner, I realized that the church building is literally a façade. Two of the outer walls of the church remain, but the actual church building behind the walls has been demolished and a luxury high-rise condo now inhabits the former sanctuary space. There is the external appearance of an historical church, but in reality that church is long since dead.

Throughout many cities in North America, there are numerous church structures that may have an impressive history but now host a very small group of worshipers on a Sunday morning. In Cambridge, there is a massive church building that dominates a central, busy intersection. In recent years, on a typical winter Sunday, that church will meet in a back room rather than in the main sanctuary. The church cannot afford the heat to meet in the thousand-plus person sanctuary. Nor would it be appropriate for a dozen or so elderly white women to meet in a thousand-plus person sanctuary. Within a half-mile radius of that

church, there are close to fifty churches (most of them immigrant, ethnic minority or multiethnic churches) that are crammed into much smaller spaces. Right down the street from that large empty sanctuary are over five hundred worshipers from five different congregations meeting in a small, cramped space—the host congregation of about forty worshipers, a multiethnic congregation (with the largest group being Asian American college students), a Haitian congregation, a Cape Verdean congregation and a Friday-night gathering of Chinese international students. The contrast between the large near-empty church building at the busy intersection and the crowded smaller church building down the street illustrates the reality of twenty-first-century American Christianity—the white churches are in decline while the immigrant, ethnic and multiethnic churches are flourishing. As Dave Olson points out in *The American Church in Crisis*, “The church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. . . . As the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind. . . . Almost all of the data indicates that the church is fated to decline in influence every year in the near future.”<sup>1</sup>

As many lament the decline of Christianity in the United States in the early stages of the twenty-first century, very few have recognized that American Christianity may actually be growing, but in unexpected and surprising ways.<sup>2</sup> The American church needs to face the inevitable and prepare for the next stage of her history—we are looking at a nonwhite majority, multiethnic American Christianity in the immediate future. Unfortunately, despite these drastic demographic changes, American evangelicalism remains enamored with an ecclesiology and a value system that reflect a dated and increasingly irrelevant cultural captivity and are disconnected from both a global and a local reality.

#### A BOOMING GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

One of the most significant developments in the new millennium is the dramatic shift away from a northern and western hemisphere-centered Christianity to a southern and eastern hemisphere-centered Christianity. As Philip Jenkins asserts in *The Next Christendom*: “Over the past

century [the twentieth century] . . . the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. . . . Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American.”<sup>3</sup>

Parallel to the undeniable reality of the changing demographics of global Christianity is the reality of Western Christianity’s inability to grasp the implication of such dramatic changes. As Jenkins reveals, “Perhaps the most remarkable point about these potential conflicts is that the trends pointing toward them have registered so little on the consciousness of even well-informed Northern observers. What, after all, do most Americans know about the distribution of Christians worldwide? I suspect that most see Christianity very much as it was a century ago—a predominantly European and North American faith.”<sup>4</sup>

Fifty years ago, if you were asked to describe a typical Christian in the world, you could confidently assert that person to be an upper middle-class, white male, living in an affluent and comfortable Midwest suburb. If you were to ask the same question today, that answer would more likely be a young Nigerian mother on the outskirts of Lagos, a university student in Seoul, South Korea, or a teenage boy in Mexico City. European and North American Christianity continue to decline, while African, Asian and Latin-American Christianity continue to increase dramatically. In the year 1900, Europe and North America comprised 82 percent of the world’s Christian population. In 2005, Europe and North America comprised 39 percent of the world’s Christian population with African, Asian and Latin American Christians making up 60 percent of the world’s Christian population. By 2050, African, Asian and Latin American Christians will constitute 71 percent of the world’s Christian population.<sup>5</sup> These numbers do not account for the fact that a majority of Christians in *North America* will be nonwhite. Global Christianity is clearly nonwhite. Thankfully, there is a growing recognition and an increasing awareness of these global changes. More literature is now available exploring global Christianity and its impact on missiology and theology.<sup>6</sup> But understanding the dramatic changes in Africa,

Asia and Latin America is only a part of the equation.

These changes are not only occurring globally, they are also occurring locally. Many sociologists predict that by the year 2050, the majority of U.S. residents will be nonwhite.<sup>7</sup> A U.S. Census Report in 2008 revealed that “minorities, now roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 percent minority in 2050. By 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children.”<sup>8</sup> The election of Barack Obama as the United States’ first ethnic-minority president reveals the changing face of America. The public face of America is no longer a white male. Meanwhile, the trend of a nonwhite majority America will hit the churches faster than it will hit the general population. This trend is due in large part to the sustaining of American Christianity by newly arrived immigrants who bring their Christian faith with them. As sociologist R. Stephen Warner points out, “What many people have not heard . . . and need to hear is that the great majority of the newcomers are Christians. . . . This means that the new immigrants represent not the de-Christianization of American society but the de-Europeanization of American Christianity.”<sup>9</sup> Contrary to popular opinion, the church is not dying in America; it is alive and well, but it is alive and well among the immigrant and ethnic minority communities and not among the majority white churches in the United States.

#### SHAPED BY EVANGELICALISM

My own story in coming to write this book is a result of my ongoing journey as a fellow pilgrim with other North American evangelicals. I was born in Seoul, South Korea—a nation bursting with spiritual renewal and church growth. It is a nation rapidly emerging as one of the epicenters for global evangelicalism. My family immigrated to the United States when I was six years old and encountered numerous difficulties as an immigrant family. There was the drop in social status and the economic struggles that almost all immigrant families face. I remember the shame of being on food stamps and the indignity of being laughed at by classmates because I was on the free school lunch program. For a sig-

nificant portion of my childhood, we lived in a rough inner-city neighborhood in Baltimore. The neighborhood comprised poor whites, poor blacks and recent Korean immigrants. Racial misunderstanding and incidents were commonplace.

Coupled with (and maybe as a result of) the trauma of immigration were the numerous struggles and tensions within my family. The main source of stress came from my father's abandonment of our family when I was in elementary school. Now saddled with the responsibility of caring for four children in a foreign land, my mom's limited English curtailed her employment options. She ended up working two different jobs at the same time: a cook in an inner-city carryout during the day and a night shift nurse's aide in a senior citizens' home. She would work twenty hours a day, six days a week. My father's departure from our family meant that I lost both father and mother in one shot. In the midst of all these difficulties, it was an authentic Christian community that provided support and served as a lifesaver to our family. It was the church that gave our family stability and direction. It was an evangelical faith that transformed me from bitterness and defeat to an unwavering hope. I shudder to think who I would be without my evangelical faith.

I am a product of American evangelicalism. Much of what I believe, know and try to live out arises out of my involvement and development in the North American evangelical subculture. I grew up and found a personal faith in the context of a Korean immigrant church that tried to balance the best of the Korean homeland with the best of the "American" version of the Christian faith. I am steeped in the American education system—through elementary, secondary and higher education and the evangelical expressions within the educational system, such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and North Park University. I have planted and pastored evangelical churches and have been and am currently a part of numerous evangelical small groups, networks, organizations and denominations. I currently teach at an evangelical seminary in training up future evangelical leaders. In many ways, evangelical Christianity defines my identity and status in American society.

Yet I am confronted with the reality of feeling marginalized in the context of my own faith tradition—that as immersed as I am in evangelicalism, I am oftentimes still seen as an outsider. In my journey as a neophyte believer, a youth pastor, a campus ministry participant, an emerging leader, a church planter, a local church pastor and a seminary professor, I have increased in my sense of frustration with the cultural captivity of the church. I grow weary of seeing Western, white expressions of the Christian faith being lifted up while failing to see nonwhite expressions of faith represented in meaningful ways in American evangelicalism. But as someone who loves the body of Christ, I long to see what immeasurably more God is able to do in the North American evangelical church.

#### THE NEXT EVANGELICALISM IS HERE

In the early 1990s I left my hometown in Maryland to begin seminary studies in New England. In preparing to move to the Boston area, my home church in Maryland took the time to pray that I would not lose my faith and spiritual passion in a region of the country that was perceived as spiritually dead. Every story that I heard or concern that was raised seemed to assume that the city of Boston represented the worst of a post-Christian region, and that secular humanism had completely overtaken that city.

But when I arrived in Boston I found a very different scenario. I found that Christianity was not only alive in Boston, it was flourishing. “From 2000 to 2005, the evangelical church grew in 28 states and declined in 22 states. . . . Massachusetts [was one of the five states that] had the greatest attendance percentage increase.”<sup>10</sup> In 1970, the city of Boston was home to about 200 churches. Thirty years later, there were 412 churches. The net gain in the number of churches was in the growth of the number of churches in the ethnic and immigrant communities. “Since the first churches were started in the 1960s, more than 100 Spanish language congregations have been started in Boston. Beginning in 1969 the Haitian Christians began planting churches. More than 50 Haitian churches now serve the large Haitian population in greater Boston.”<sup>11</sup> While only a handful of churches in 1970 held services in a lan-

guage other than English, thirty years later, more than half of those churches held services in a language other than English.

Between 2001 and 2006, 98 new churches were planted in the city of Boston.<sup>12</sup> In a city the size of Boston, 98 new church plants in a six-year time period is not spiritual death, it is spiritual life and vitality. Why was it, then, that the majority of the country viewed Boston as a spiritually dead place? Of the 98 churches planted during that six-year time period, “76 of them reported the language of worship. Of those 76 churches, almost half of them . . . [have] non-English or bi-lingual [services], 19 worship in Spanish, 8 in Haitian Creole and 9 in Portuguese.”<sup>13</sup>

In *The American Church in Crisis*, Olson notes that every region of the United States and every major Christian group (Catholic, mainline, evangelical) experienced a decline in total attendance between 1990 and 2005. The only group that saw a numerical increase was evangelicals in the Northeast region—due in large part to “the sharp increase in Asian, Hispanic, and other immigrant populations.”<sup>14</sup> The perception nationally was that Boston was spiritually dead, because there was noticeable decline among the white Christian community. In contrast, there has been significant growth in the number of nonwhite Christians and churches in the Boston area.

At one point during my time in Boston, a group of very sincere young men and women came from a prayer group in the South to pray for revival in the city of Boston. They assumed that Boston was a spiritually dead and oppressed place. There was a sense of pity and concern expressed by these well-intentioned Christians for a pastor who was struggling in a city with such spiritual lifelessness. But that was not the Boston I knew. The Boston I knew was filled with vibrant and exciting churches. New churches were being planted throughout the city. Christian programs and ministries were booming in the city. But this spiritual vitality was not as evident among the white churches. The spiritual energy and dynamism in the city centered on the multiethnic, immigrant and ethnic minority churches. The work of the Boston Ten-Point Coalition (composed mostly of African American clergy) stifled youth-related violence throughout Boston. Haitian churches were involved in

an effort to bring justice and fairness to nursing home workers. A Latino pastor and an African American bishop led the Christian community in spiritual revival for the city and for political change. Church planting efforts among Asian American young adults and campus ministries composed of Asian Americans flourished throughout Cambridge/Boston. Boston is alive with spiritual revival, particularly among the ethnic minority communities. But very few seem to recognize this reality, even as this trend begins to appear nationally.

#### THE WHITE CAPTIVITY OF AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

While the demographics of Christianity are changing both globally and locally, the leadership of American evangelicalism continues to be dominated by white Americans. During my years as a senior pastor of a local church, not a week would go by without my receiving an invitation to some sort of pastors' conference. These national conferences would gather together the "experts" and the key leaders of American evangelicalism. Of the fifty-plus speakers (platform or workshop) scheduled for these conferences, there may have been one African American platform speaker and maybe one other nonwhite leading a workshop, but the rest of the speakers would be white. What is the message? The real experts in ministry are whites. Nonwhites may offer some expertise in specialized areas of ministry (such as urban ministry or racial reconciliation), but the theologians, the general experts, the real shapers and movers of ministry, are whites.

In February of 2005, *Time* magazine profiled the twenty-five most influential evangelicals in the United States. Only two of those slots were occupied by nonwhites.<sup>15</sup> Initially I was quite upset at *Time* magazine for having so few nonwhites on that list. But eventually I came to accept that, in this case, the media was actually reporting the news rather than creating it. *Time's* perception of who represents and leads American evangelicalism was a fairly accurate portrayal. While the demographics of American Christianity are changing, the perceived and acknowledged leadership of American Christianity remains white.

The *Wall Street Journal* recognized the changing demographic in American Christianity and responded to the *Time* article:

Time Magazine built a recent cover story around its list of the 25 most influential evangelicals. The list features a fair number of success-driven entrepreneurs whose achievements can be measured by standards that Time writers understand—book sales, converts, market share. Time's evangelicals of influence are Anglo (23 of 25). . . . But this traditional face of American evangelicalism is changing. An ever higher number of U.S. evangelicals—perhaps nearing a third of the total—are Asian, African, Latin American or Pacific Islander. . . . The 20th-century global explosion of evangelicalism has come full circle: Evangelicals from everywhere rub shoulders in the U.S. Not that the media have really noticed.<sup>16</sup>

Both *Time* and the *Wall Street Journal* had it right. The acknowledged leadership of American evangelicalism is white, but the face of American evangelicalism is now multiracial.

In the last few years, I have had the opportunity to visit and speak at a number of different Christian colleges, oftentimes to speak on the topic of racial reconciliation and multiethnicity. I raise the question that, given the changes in demographics in both global and American Christianity, why are there not more minority faculty members at these Christian colleges and seminaries? There may be a handful of minority faculty members at these Christian schools, but usually no more than that. The few ethnic minority faculty members will often be held up as examples of the school's progress toward diversity. However, most institutions face great difficulty moving beyond the one or two minority hires. The consistently poor record of minority faculty hires at Christian colleges and seminaries is not only disappointing, it is irresponsible. Among evangelical seminaries, the percentage of nonwhite student enrollment has increased from approximately 15 percent in 1977 to 31 percent in 2005. However the percentage of faculty of color in 2005 stood at 12 percent,<sup>17</sup> which is disproportionally and significantly lower than the 31 percent minority student enrollment.

Furthermore, the last available study on the percentage of minority faculty at evangelical Christian colleges and universities, conducted in 1998, shows that minority faculty made up only 3.6 percent of Christian

college faculty, which was actually a drop from the percentage of minority faculty in 1995.<sup>18</sup> A random sampling of twenty different Christian colleges and evangelical seminaries provided by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2007 reveals that ethnic minorities comprise less than 7 percent of the faculty at those twenty schools.<sup>19</sup> If these schools are indeed preparing leaders for the next generation, then for their students to have limited or no exposure to minority faculty mentors is to short-change their education.

What is even more distressing is that institutes of Christian higher education oftentimes set the theological agenda for the American church. So while the demographics of American evangelicalism are undergoing dramatic change, the theological formation and dialogue remains captive to white Christianity. What we are witnessing in the twenty-first century is the captivity of the church to the dominant Western culture and white leadership, which is in stark contrast to the demographic reality of Christianity in the twenty-first century. Even if we could justify the white captivity of the church in the early part of the twentieth century, there is no justification for it now.

#### THE DEBILITATING POWER OF CULTURAL CAPTIVITY

What is Jesus' heart for the church? I once heard the perspective that Almighty God has had to endure three indignities in human history. The first indignity was Adam and Eve's disobedience and rejection of YHWH in the Garden of Eden. The second indignity was Jesus' suffering and public humiliation on the cross. And the third indignity was that he trusted his name to a group of humans (the church) that have brought humiliation and indignity to the holy name of Jesus. This ongoing humiliation requires repentance and reformation. We need repentance from our cultural captivity and a willingness to reform our church in the next era of North American evangelicalism.

For most of its history (but particularly in the last fifty years), American evangelicalism has more accurately reflected the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture. At times, the evangelical church has been indistinguishable from West-

ern, white American culture. In the emerging culture and the next evangelicalism of the twenty-first century, we must consider how evangelicalism has been held captive to Western, white culture and explore ways that the Christian community can reflect biblical more than cultural norms. Where is the church that will uphold the name of Jesus? Where is the pure and holy bride that Jesus longs to return for? Currently, we are seeing the Western, white captivity of the American evangelical church, but we can hope that it is time for a new era of the church in the next evangelicalism.

In church history, the phrase “captivity of the church” has been used in different contexts with varied meanings. In the context of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther wrote the tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*,<sup>20</sup> likening the Catholic Church’s stranglehold on the sacraments to the capture and exile of the Israelites by the Babylonians. To Luther, the church’s lack of understanding and application of faith and grace revealed a doctrinal captivity of the church. Luther asserts that the medieval Catholic Church held little resemblance to the characteristics of the community of God found in Scripture.

In more recent years, R. C. Sproul has written the “Pelagian Captivity of the Evangelical Church,”<sup>21</sup> about a church that is held captive by the Pelagian view of the basic goodness of humanity rather than reflecting Scriptural perspectives on original sin and human fallenness. Authors such as H. Richard Niebuhr, Lesslie Newbigin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rodney Clapp and others have written about the relationship between the church and the culture—employing concepts that speak to the potential danger of the church’s captivity to the culture around it. *Total Truth* by Nancy Pearcey is an attempt at “liberating Christianity from its cultural captivity.” Gibson Winter seeks to address the *Suburban Captivity of the Churches*, while Cornel West alludes to a Constantinian captivity of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

The phrase “captivity of the church” points to the danger of the church being defined by an influence other than the Scriptures. The church remains the church, but we more accurately reflect the culture around us rather than the characteristics of the bride of Christ. We are

held captive to the culture that surrounds us. To speak of the white captivity of the church is an acknowledgement that white culture has dominated, shaped and captured Christianity in the United States. At times, the white evangelical church has been enmeshed with Western, white American culture to the great detriment of the spread of the gospel. This state of American evangelicalism cannot continue if we are to move toward the future of a next evangelicalism.

In some portions of the book, I will use the term *white* captivity as a synonym for *Western* captivity. In my description of the white captivity of the church (individualism in chapter one and materialism/consumerism in chapter two), many of these attributes may appear more simply to be characteristics of Western culture, rather than specifically of white America. The phrase “white captivity of the church” is used to remind us that Western culture has been dominated by whites throughout its history. It is also used to help us distinguish the significant role of racism in Western culture and subsequently, American Christianity (chapter three). A significant oversight that will be confessed from the onset is that, in our focus on the issue of race in this work, we will not invest the necessary time and effort to discuss the white *male* captivity of the American evangelical church. We must recognize, however, that the issue of gender captivity also plays a prominent role in the cultural captivity of the church.

The Western, white captivity of the church is most evident in examples like the church growth movement of the latter half of the twentieth century (chapter four) and even evident in a new thing like the emerging church (chapter five). But surprisingly, it is now finding its strongest and most visible expression in many non-Western cultural contexts (chapter six). Breaking through the white captivity of the church will be a difficult task, but with the dawning of the next evangelicalism, change must come. The change that must come may find its inspiration from nonwhite expressions of Christianity in the United States: the African American church of the Civil Rights movement and the contextualized theology emerging out of the Native American Christian community provide a model of a prophetic church confronting racism and breaking

the barriers of power and privilege (chapter seven); the holistic expression of evangelism as reflected in the immigrant church in contrast to the materialism of the church growth movement (chapter eight); and the liminal, bicultural expression of multicultural community developing among the second-generation progeny of immigrants (chapter nine). These examples will provide a template and model of best practices for the next evangelicalism.

There are portions of the book that are intended to provoke. There may be times when the reader may react with anger, derision, defensiveness and so forth. But as you read through the major arguments of this book, I hope you will find my deepest concern for the church, the body of Christ and the pure and holy bride of Jesus. The tone of this book will at times seem angry and confrontational. There may be aspects of this book that cause discomfort. Confrontation can lead to discomfort, but confrontation and discomfort can also lead to transformation. After all, without a disturbed sense about ourselves,<sup>23</sup> why would anyone change?

The true intention of the book is to bring reconciliation and renewal to the church in America—confronted with its past, concerned about its present and confused about its future. I believe in the future of the church. It is not a hope based upon what I see in the now, but in the promise of the not yet—the promise that what Christians have repeatedly damaged, Christ is able to restore and to heal. It is for the church that Jesus was willing to lay down his life. It is for the church that Jesus longs to return. It is for the church that Jesus has a greater promise beyond Western, white cultural captivity.