

Episode 173 The State of Evangelicalism (USA) with Ed Stetzer

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Ed Stetzer

I'm Ed Stetzer, the Dean of the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University.

David Capes

Dr. Ed Stetzer. Ed, it's great to see you. It's good to see you sitting in that chair, face to face. We don't have to do this over Zoom.

Ed Stetzer

That's true. I think we can say old friend though. Haven't we known each other for a longtime, I'm guessing close to 10 years?

David Capes

Yes! Well, you're here to do a lecture this weekend at the Lanier Theological Library, and we've already had a good day.

Ed Stetzer

Anytime you're surrounded by cool Christian books is a good day. I can't believe you work in this environment. We used both used to work at Wheaton College But now you walk down these hallowed halls. I wish people could see the beauty of this library.

David Capes

Now you were on a radio show this morning right in the very spot where we're recording this. And it's called Ed Stetzer Live.

Ed Stetzer

Yes! Very creative name. The creative people worked hard at Moody Radio to come up with Ed Stetzer Live. It's every Saturday coast to coast on 250 outlets. So, David when do you have your new book out? What's the title of your next book?

David Capes

The title is *Matthew Through Old Testament Eyes*. Hey, for those who aren't going to be here for the lecture, we want to let you know you can view it on our YouTube channel at any time. So this whole weekend has been about evangelicals and culture and living in that space here in America in particular. But we've also had a wonderful British evangelical Amy Orr-Ewing who's been here and sees things a

little differently, But today we're talking in an American context, primarily. You live in California; we live here in Houston. But the same is true over much of the country.

Ed Stetzer

Yes, it's a mess right now in American evangelicalism. And I think everybody acknowledges that. And I think there's a vying, there's a struggle for what will be the future of evangelicalism. What should be evangelical identity and more. You know, we're talking some about what evangelicalism is, what it could be, who's vying for its future identity, because I think I am. I think lots of people are trying to say what should evangelism be, which tells you that a lot of people are unsatisfied or dissatisfied with what evangelicalism is. I would be among those who are unsatisfied, by what evangelism is.

David Capes

But you're seeing a better day, aren't you? I mean, are you hopeful?

Ed Stetzer

I don't know. I don't know, when you're in the arena, on these issues. Billy Graham, for decades, was the person who decided what evangelicalism is. There's a very famous quote, of how you know if someone's an evangelical, whether or not they liked Billy Graham. And it sounds like a throwaway joke line, but it actually has a lot of wisdom to it. Let me just unpack that for a minute. These are simplistic categories, but everyone to the left of Billy Graham, or let's just say, why a lot of mainline Protestants didn't like Billy Graham, was because he was a conversionalist. And he would be theologically conservative in certain areas. So mainline Protestants are generally not evangelicals. And in part you can also say they don't like Billy Graham. Now they're exceptions, don't misunderstand. There are exceptions. I mean, everyone sort of liked Billy Graham by the end, but during his ministry, it might have been a little different.

Whereas to the right of Billy Graham would be fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a real thing. There are 13,000 independent fundamental Baptist Churches in the United States. For example, there are fundamental Presbyterians. They don't like Billy Graham because he cooperates with other people that they would be uncomfortable with. They may be too ecumenical to compromise this first and secondary separation questions. So in between mainline Protestantism and fundamentalism is where a lot of evangelicalism thrived. And most people in the space that use the word of evangelical would say, they like Billy Graham. So we're going to talk some about that in the lecture. But what happened was Billy Graham was the shaper of the movement. So Billy Graham would actually cooperate with some people and then not cooperate with others. We have letters by Billy Graham, when *Christianity Today* was founded, where they said let's not have that person write. They were trying to shape who was and who was not in the movement. And so for decades, and really, centuries before that it was being shaped.

I use the example in my forthcoming book, of a potter's wheel. Now you've seen a potter's wheel, you know how it spins around. When a potter is working on the clay making a bowl if there's too much clay, they remove some and that's called throwing. So they throw it to the side, or they want to add some clay to add a bubble or ridge onto a plate. They throw clay into it. That's called throwing. So right now we had a potter for decades, and that potter was primarily Billy Graham and the structures and

institutions he created like *Christianity Today*, and Lausanne. His influence on the National Association of Evangelicals was unparalleled. He would throw certain things in and remove certain things.

And it was not just him. It was Harold Ockenga. It was Carl Henry. You know, there's a group of older white men who described and defined what evangelical is. And when you say that it can be triggering to some people. But that's a factual situation. Well, now we're in a season of contested identities. No one individual or institution is saying let's throw this part out or throw this in. I was on *NPR Morning Edition*, where we talk about some of the struggles in evangelicalism. And I said, there are some things we need to disciple into evangelicalism and some things we need to disciple out of evangelicalism. So I think right now we're in the season when people have different prescriptions to the current maladies of evangelicalism. You asked if I'm encouraged. I don't know where that's going to end. Some people are going to end up outside of evangelical faith practice, sometimes because of their theological beliefs and sometimes because evangelicalism jettisons them out. Some people are going to be brought into it.

In the past few years, we've seen a lot more politics than the last 20 years brought in. Some people say, maybe that should be out. But that is not dissimilar to how it looked in the 80s. And then people pushed against that. So right now, I think we're in an internal struggle of who we are and what we want to be. And I don't know how that ends. I know I'm going to keep loving Jesus, I'm going to love the Word of God. What the eventual movement is 10 years from now, I don't know.

David Capes

I think part of understanding where it is now is by getting to know a little bit about the history. And that's a part that we don't always know, right? Because evangelicalism isn't just something that happens here in the United States. It's really a worldwide phenomenon and we need an understanding of its roots. So is there a particular book that you feel explains that history?

Ed Stetzer

There's like 100 books that do that. The most recent one that I liked was Tommy Kidd's book on evangelicalism. Alister McGrath has one. The first three chapters of my new book is quoting fifty people who've written books on evangelicalism. But I would say that part of the challenge, particularly as historians, we're in a season where sometimes Christian historians seem to me to be struggling with how to articulate the movement. You read an historian's description of evangelicalism, and you don't recognize what you're reading? And I don't think that you are aware of some of the currents that were there. And I think there are good books that help us be more aware of some of the currents that are there.

Sometimes it's not you being aware of currents, it's that they're engaging in a caricature. Because there are some evangelicals that just have a lot of angst. And you can see that reflected in there. There's often a bit of a cachet that comes with being critical. I get asked to write in all kinds of places and you can really feel the draw towards being that. But I like how Mark Noll wrote about evangelicalism. He always spoke of himself as like a wounded lover. Like he loves the movement. And he's critical of the movement, out of love. And so when I read an historian, that's what I'm looking for. And that's not the only type of historian that I read. Because I think it's good to read people who are overly critical. I even read the caricature. And the reason is as part of the preparation of this book, I want to understand

where people are coming from and sometimes what I think of as a caricature is actually true. And it might take me two or three books to actually see the light. There are some unhealthy things in the water of evangelicalism that I think we need to disciple out of the movement. And I'm going to talk about that.

David Capes

They need to be thrown out.

Ed Stetzer

Yes, thrown out using the potter's example. And I think healthy self-examination is a good God-honoring thing. There are also things that I think some people like to throw out that I think need to be central to the movement. I think, a higher view of conversion, for example. I'm not embarrassed by my view of conversion, or evangelicals' emphasis on conversion. I think we need to focus more on conversion. I think we need to focus more on common mission, not to the detriment of others. I think every evangelical, when we talk to one another outside of the spotlight say 'When did Jesus change your life?'. It's the kind of thing that we say to one another. And that speaks to a conversion.

In the panel yesterday, when David Fleming asked me to define evangelicalism, I gave a really long answer after the really short answer. But the really short answer is, they're orthodox, conversionary, Protestants. Of course, when you say that people ask aren't there Catholic evangelicals? Or are there non-orthodox Evangelical? Are they all conversionary? Yes. but in general, they're orthodox conversionary Protestants. Orthodox in belief and practice, holding to what is historic Protestantism conversionary. It's very centered on women and men receiving by grace and through faith, the good news of the gospel.

And Protestants because historically, this is a movement in and within Protestantism. In full disclosure, I'm a Christian today because of the charismatic Catholic movement, that was an evangelicalism inside Catholicism that got ahold of my mother. One day I got in trouble. And she sent me to Christian youth group camp as punishment. Every youth director in America is horrified by that idea. But she sent me to Christian camp as punishment. And there I heard the gospel at a charismatic Episcopal youth camp called Camp Wingman. So again, I say that there are exceptions to all of these things. But the exceptions don't change the reality. So maybe an easy definition, if you have just three words, is orthodox, conversionary, Protestantism.

David Capes

Tell us a little bit more about your book. I know it's not complete yet. Do you have a title yet?

Ed Stetzer

No, more of a description. I say it's the current state and future prospects of evangelicalism.

David Capes

And one of the ways that we were a part of this was helping you get to England. You stayed as a resident there at our Yarnton Manor.

Ed Stetzer

Yes. Yarnton Manor is of course, the partner location of Lanier Theological Library in the UK. And you take the S2 bus in case you're wondering. You take the S2 bus right down the road to Wycliffe Hall. So I taught there and lived there for the Fall or Autumn, as they say there. Michaelmas is what they call the term and I taught at Wycliffe Hall at Oxford for that Fall term. And will be ongoing teaching there in December 2023. And then back in May 2024. And you may want to come study with us at Wycliffe, if you're listening in Europe. If you're listening in America, you can also take a Talbot course at the same time. I'll be teaching Wycliffe and Talbot students simultaneously in the same classroom. So come study with us at Talbot if you're here in the North American context.

David Capes

That would be terrific! Now this is a master's level course?

Ed Stetzer

Well, it's different, you know, in the British system. But for the students at Talbot, it's a master's level course. I think sometimes you can take it for D.Min credit as well. We have a really robust D.Min program at Talbot as well

David Capes

Is there more research to be done for your book? Or have you done all the research and it's now just a matter of writing?

Ed Stetzer

That's a great question. I would say that the research is done. The first two thirds, maybe three fourths of the book is done. I'm just trying to land the plane on some conclusions. And just to be transparent David, I don't know if you've noticed, but evangelicalism has been a bit of a freak show the last five to six years. So in some ways I'm glad I didn't write the book when I was supposed to because I would have to rewrite it. Some of the key players have shifted. One of the things that we've seen happen in the last few years is that what was once on the fringes of evangelicalism has moved to the center of evangelicalism. But the last few years have just turned everything upside down. I'll talk some more about that.

But it's a strange time. Historians tell better histories than I ever will, but I have to touch on history because that's one of the subdisciplines of missiology. But as a missiologist, I'm answering questions about where has the syncretism come in and again, what needs to be disciplined out or thrown out. I'm using that as a potter's term and what needs to be disciplined in. Those are the kind of questions that missiologists asked. You know, I'm the regional leader for Lausanne, North America so I meet with the heads of the region from around the world. I think there's eight other regions. They're like, what is going on in American evangelicalism? Earlier this week I was in Canada speaking to a Baptist denomination in Canada, and they were happy and unified. So it is possible.

David Capes

But it just seems to be impossible right now in the 48 lower states.

Ed Stetzer

I would say, people around the world are saying that there's something wrong with American evangelicalism if the rest of the world is looking at us and saying, you guys have got some really serious issues you need to address. I think we should take that seriously. And that's part of what I'm trying to look at as a missiologist.

David Capes

Is there a section of the world that you think really has its act together? Is there a particular place? I know we all have our challenges. Is there something we could model ourselves on?

Ed Stetzer

Well because of culture, and because of cultural context, every cultural context both brings opportunity for gospel clarity and opportunity for gospel delusion. You know, we would say, do we look at the persecuted church? And do we say thank God for the persecuted church? It's for sure! There are certain things with the persecuted churches at work. However, we would also say that there's going to be theologically problematic things in some of those areas. We look at the church in Brazil, which is one of the fastest growing resilient evangelicals. Last time I checked there will be more evangelicals in Brazil than the US by 2040. Robust, and beautiful. You know, I preached often down at the tip that points to Africa and northeast of Brazil.

And I love the churches. The pastor of one is a dear friend. I would also say that neo-Pentecostalism, which is huge in Brazil, perhaps half the evangelicals, is really theologically problematic. I'm guessing we have Pentecostals listening and the Pentecostals in Brazil think Neo-Pentecostalism is theologically problematic. I would look to the church in Brazil. I thank God for what's going on there. We talked about the global south and Africa. In 2000 years, I don't know that anyone's walked it perfectly, because we're imperfect people in broken cultural systems. I think we can learn from other people as well. I want to learn from Brazilian evangelism about their passion for evangelism. Combined that with a passion for societal transformation that I see in their favelas, and as they're showing and sharing the love of Jesus. I want to learn from British evangelicalism to engage the educated classes in a way that they have. I want to learn from Filipino evangelicalism and their passion to engage the 1040 window. I think it's a platter and array to learn from.

David Capes

We await the book then. Ed Stetzer, thanks for being with us.

Ed Stetzer

Thanks for having me. Good to talk to you.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Ed Stetzer

You know we're in the midst of a cultural convulsion probably unlike anything we've seen since the late 60s. Everything feels like it's pulling apart. If we're going to walk through this time, both faithfully and fruitfully, we're going to need to build up reservoirs of resilience to make it through. It's probably going to be a difficult two to three more years and we need communities of support so we can walk through those times with others.