

MEDIA - [Billy Graham mixing religion and politics](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's just a snippet from a sermon by William Franklin Graham Junior - better known as Billy Graham - delivered in Chicago's Soldiers Field in 1962 to tens of thousands of listeners.

Billy Graham is arguably the most influential Christian of the last century - he spoke to around 210 million people in live audiences in more than 185 countries and territories. His total audience, including television broadcasts, runs into the billions.

Wheaton College, where I teach, has the Wheaton College Billy Graham Centre and Museum, where people can learn about the history of Christian evangelism in the United States and, in particular, about Billy Graham's extraordinary career.

Billy Graham was an American Evangelical.

That's a term with mixed connotations today.

There is a widely accepted definition or description of the term 'evangelical'. It comes from decades ago and was proposed in a British setting. We'll say more about it later, but it's known as the Bebbington Quadrilateral and it lists four key features of the evangelical: a commitment to the content of the Bible, a focus on the death of Jesus on the cross for salvation, an emphasis on the need for personal conversion, and fourthly, what Bebbington called 'activism'--furthering the cause of Christ through preaching, educating, and social reform, whether Billy Graham-style evangelism or William Wilberforce abolitionism.

A distinctive of 'American' evangelicalism – the focus of this episode – has often been what you might call 'political messaging'. As early as

1962, even Billy Graham sailed pretty close to the 'political' at an evangelistic rally to 10s of thousands at Soldier Field Chicago. America will fall, he said, just as ancient Rome fell, if we don't do something about increasing taxation and deficit spending – under the newly elected Democrat President John F Kennedy.

By 1968, Billy Graham even publicly endorsed Republican presidential nominee Richard Nixon—of Watergate fame. He even gave permission to Nixon's campaign to use his endorsement in TV ads. Nixon, of course, won.

Now, what's fascinating about Billy Graham – as an emblem of American evangelicalism – is that, later in life, he said he regretted being party-political. In an interview in 2011 (7 years before he died) he said if he'd had his time again "I would have steered clear of politics ... Looking back, I know I sometimes crossed the line, and I wouldn't do that now." Check the show notes for the details.

It seems Billy Graham realized that, while party-politics is important at one level, for many people, it wasn't a wise focus for someone who seeks to persuade all people – whatever their politics – of a kingdom that transcends the governments of this world.

The same might be said of the evangelical *movement*, as well. If evangelicals are perceived to be cheerleaders for one party, what hope have they got to persuade the other half of the country about the truly important things concerning Christ and his kingdom.

My perception is that Billy Graham's regret about his partisan involvement has given a lot of American evangelicals pause. I've been struck, for example, how Wheaton College where I teach – one of the best known evangelical institutions in America – seems to studiously avoid party politics. I'm sure my colleagues have their views. I think they're mostly conservative. But you couldn't work that out from the public discourse here. To be honest, it feels a bit like home. In the Australian setting, it's usually regarded as gross for Christian leaders to be publicly party-political.

But ... there are plenty of evangelicals in America who see things very differently.

There are many Christian leaders and pastors here in the States who feel nothing of Billy Graham's regret. They see politics – and I don't just mean social advocacy but party politics – as a major theatre of the battle for Christ's kingdom. The Church must engage in politics as an act of loyalty to Christ and an act of love for the world.

And because this part of evangelicalism gets so much airtime around the world, the word 'evangelical' itself has, for much of the media, come to have a definite political connotation.

MEDIA - [NBC Evangelicals supporting Trump](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

That's Tim Alberta, a best selling author and journalist and the son of an American Evangelical pastor. He's reflecting on the relationship between the leaders of his faith and President Donald Trump.

He's being interviewed on MSNBC about his new book, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an age of extremism."

And he's up front about the way certain social issues have led members of the church to form close relationships with representatives of the state.

Whoa! What a statement!

Is this the heart of the American evangelical today — a willingness to retrieve Christian virtue by any means, even by jettisoning Christian virtue itself?

For some the answer is probably yes! Emergencies demand emergency measures.

And it's this picture of the evangelical that has made many other evangelicals around the world wince at the term.

But is that truly what an evangelical is? Is that the norm even here in America?

Well, we hope to find out ... the good, the bad and the ugly of American Evangelicalism.

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

MEDIA - [Westboro Baptist Church protest](#)

John Dickson (studio)

That's the colourful rhetoric of the Westboro Baptist Church, often referred to as the 'most hated church in America'.

They would claim to be evangelical. They would certainly claim to be 'Bible believing'--one of the key marks of the evangelical.

And our first guest has the honour of being attacked by Westboro Baptist Church. In fact, he put their insult on a nameplate that sits on his desk: 'Lying whore, false prophet'.

TAPE - ED STETZER (VIDEO)

Ed: Yeah, I have to explain that a lot because people walk in and they don't know the story. And if you're not from certain parts of the world, you don't know what Westboro Baptist is.

So it's kind of a group that protests people with terrible signs about how God hates everybody. And so they showed up one day at my church and they were protesting at our church. We were, I don't remember what brought them, but we were preaching about God's love and they don't believe that God loves everybody.

I believe God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son. So we, uh, we came out, we, we welcomed them with, with tea and doughnuts. And, uh, and you know, we, we, we said God loves protesters too. And in the news, I think it was the Associated Press. They called me a lying whore, false prophet. So one of my staff, we thought that was pretty, uh, maybe funny and apropos decided to make that into a name plate.

And I keep that name plate on my desk as a conversation starter.

John Dickson (Studio)

Dr. Ed Stetzer is the Dean of Talbot School of Theology at Biola University and Scholar in Residence and Teaching Pastor at Mariners Church, a massive evangelical church in southern California.

He has earned two masters degrees and two doctorates, as well as writing hundreds of articles, including opinion pieces for USA Today and CNN.

He is the editor of Outreach Magazine and the author of a dozen or more books.

He is the quintessential American Evangelical.

And I'm glad to call him a friend.

I talked with Ed in the Billy Graham Hall at Wheaton College - an august building complete with fluted columns and stone portico. Billy Graham himself opened this building back in the 1980.

Ed is a member of the board of the National Association of Evangelicals, so he's well placed to help us put together the puzzle of the American Evangelical.

John Dickson: Um, what on earth is an American evangelical?

Ed Stetzer: Well, an American evangelical being evangelical is an American. So, and you know, so, so it's complicated because America, the United States is an outlier religiously. And it used to be, uh, the U. S., Ireland, Poland were just outliers religiously had this high religiosity. And Christian identification, uh, that's changed some in Ireland.

It's still pretty high in Poland and the U S um, but the U S like every place, it has a complex history and that complex history has woven evangelicalism into certain cultural expressions as well. So the American South is far more, uh, religious than, uh, than the Northeast is. The Northeast feels in some places like Australia or the UK, whereas, um, Mississippi has the highest percentage of, uh, Christian church membership and participation, uh, in the country.

Uh, and, and Utah has Mormonism, a different religious expression, and also has very, very high. So it's different and it's regional. But there's all kinds of historical eddies and currents that relate to that. Okay, but what is an evangelical? An evangelical, evangelical, the typical most used definition is by a Brit by the name of David Bebbington.

John Dickson (Studio)

David Bebbington is a British professor of history and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Royal Historical Society.

Ed Stetzer: And he, uh, talks about the Bebbington quadrilateral, which I rely upon. I'm writing a book on. Some of what is an evangelical in the future of evangelicalism. So there are four things in the quadrilateral biblicism, so a high view of the Bible. Uh, so there's, uh, Crucis centrism that place, uh, you know, crucifix, crucify, um, the cross, uh, conversion is, uh, which I actually put a little higher place than Bimington does, but conversion is ...

So evangelicals believe that we are spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins until we're made alive in Christ. We call that being born again. And then, uh, activism. The, uh, and that activism can be through evangelism or service or different things. And so the best of evangelicals, you know, when you look at NGOs, uh, non government organizations started in the U.

S. Um, most of them at a given time are actually being started by evangelical Christians to, to do ministry around the world, to serve the poor and the hurting, uh, and more. When you go to the inner cities of some of our, uh, most difficult cities or, or in, in, in the, in the rural outlying places, when there's a need, it's evangelical Christians who are at the forefront of meeting that need and also to Catholics, uh, Catholics being a, Unified organization.

They're the largest, uh, they're the largest social service organization outside of government, uh, work. Um, so, so I evangelicals It's a mixed description. You know, you in bullies and saints, you talk about sometimes the best and the worst. Well, American evangelicals have some of the best and the worst. And I wish your listeners would be able to walk with me and see some of the places where American evangelicals are giving, giving wholeheartedly, showing and sharing the love of Jesus.

John Dickson (Studio)

According to the Pew Research Centre, the world's overall population of Christians has risen rapidly from 1.8 billion in 1910 to 6.9 billion in 2010.

So has the world's population of course, but Christians continue to make up the same proportion of people as they did a hundred years ago.

The number of Evangelicals world-wide numbers around 37%, which is similar to figures in the United States.

But, let's be honest, the figures relating to evangelicals, especially in the United States, have to be read with caution. The problem lies in how a study chooses to poll people.

Between 1976 and 2005, the Gallup organisation asked American respondents some version of the following question: "Would you describe yourself as a 'born again' or evangelical Christian?" The number has fluctuated over the years from as low as 33% in 1987 to as high as 48% in 2005.

But terms like 'born again' and 'evangelical' are statistically crude benchmarks.

In one of the Gallup polls only 75% of Southern Baptists (what some would consider to be core American Evangelicals) accepted either term.

Which just shows that plenty of evangelicals are uncomfortable with the term evangelical.

John Dickson: Um, but winding back, how many people would own up to being evangelical in America?

Ed Stetzer: Uh, cause

John Dickson: cause even the 5 percent of evangelicals in Australia, When asked, are you an Evangelical? They'd sort of go,

uh, And that's largely because of us. We want to Congratulate you for having to deal with our negative reputation.

So, um, depending on how you ask the question is, um, It's about a third which would be in the range of Evangelical or Born Again. So, um, if you use that language, which some of our research firms would use that language, Evangelical, Born Again, would be Pew and, and some of the others. Um, so it could be as much as a third.

Um, some would say 25%. Again, it's tricky because depending on how you ask the question and how you count it, but it's much higher here than it is in Australia, for sure. Yeah.

John Dickson (studio)

Research AI will put a link in the show notes to the study Ed is referring to – it's from Pew Research so it's pretty solid. It concludes that 24% of Americans say they are “born again or evangelical”.

That's 83 million people, folks. That's 15 million more humans than live in the United Kingdom. That's three times the total population of Australia.

It's no wonder that American evangelicals have come to set the connotations around the world for the term 'evangelical' itself.

To drill down on the numbers a little:

62% of American evangelicals are aged between 30 and 64.

The highest proportion - 35% - are part of the Baby Boomer generation.

55% are women; 76% of them are white; 84% of them are third generation Americans or higher.

What about ethics and politics:

Evangelicals are mostly opposed to abortion (63%), and oppose same sex marriage (64%).

You might have thought evangelicals are almost all Republican voters—the conservative party here in the US. But while Mormons are 70% “Republican or lean towards Republican”, 56% of evangelicals are “Republican or lean Republican,” according to Pew Research. That’s significantly more than Catholics (who are 37% “Republican or lean Republican”), but I would have thought it’d be more.

Anyway, that’s a little snapshot of American evangelicals. Let’s leave these shores for a moment ...

John Dickson: Do you see a different complexion of the evangelical in other parts of the world?

Ed Stetzer: Absolutely. So I'll be, you know, I'll be in the UK teaching this fall at Oxford and, um, yeah, I'm already, you had that conversation and part of what, you know, they, they're very welcoming and gracious, but kind of behind the scenes is, is don't bring that American evangelicalism over to here.

Um, no one would ever say it that way because Brits are remarkably kind, nice people and I'm very aware of that. So I think part of it is. Is that, and this might help people understand, you live in a world, John, where you're on the other side of what, uh, John Davison Hunter calls the, uh, coined the term the culture war.

You're on the other side of that. Uh, Christians, evangelical Christians are not going to exert enough political, influence to turn back the cultural expressions of whatever, whatever, you know, we want to call the

Australian or the Canadian for that matter. So we're not. And so there's still a sense where evangelical Christians in particular can and have exerted significant political influence and allied with people to exert that significant political influence.

So they Got what they wanted in certain areas. Um, but it also costs in certain ways. And so I think the big distinction distinction is, and you're an historian. So, you know, Christians, whatever, you know, whatever century and ever they might define themselves, evangelicalism isn't a language we would have used a thousand years ago.

But, um, when Christians have enough cultural influence that they can shape or redirect the narrative, they tend to use that, and often in ways that are really not so great. And I think, and I've been one who's said that we have, um, lost a lot of our witness by, um, With the politicization of our faith, and this is, for me, someone who speaks up on really controversial moral issues and holds a biblical standard on those.

John Dickson (Studio)

I wanted to ask a Brit about all this.

Vaughan Roberts is the rector of St. Ebbes Church, Oxford. He's the director of The Proclamation Trust, a british evangelical organisation that promotes Biblical preaching in the UK and abroad.

He is, in my view, the finest Bible expositor in England—my darling Buff has his sermons on constant rotation—and he is the quintessential British evangelical.

John Dickson: Thinking of Britain, what is an evangelical?

Vaughan Roberts: An evangelical is fundamentally a doctrinal commitment. So there's some wonderful truths that evangelicals hold

dear. Um, that the Bible speaks with authority as the Word of God. That, um, the focus of the Bible's message is transformative.

That we and ourselves cannot get right with God. We need Jesus, his death for us in our place, and the work of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to these wonderful truths. So, so, um, it's a doctrinal commitment and that leads to, I suppose, An experiential response, because evangelicals are those who are not just in their heads believing certain things.

Believe that this gospel, and the word evangelical, of course, the root is evangel, it, it means gospel.

I'm convinced that this gospel is not only true, but it's transformed our lives. So that leads to an experience. which is transformative. In my case, it was, um, in my late teens. Not everyone has a particular moment.

But for me, there was a change. As these truths became real, I should say this person became real, because evangelicals, uh, Christ is at the heart of it all, this gospel message. So it led to an experience. And then that changed my commitments. So evangelicals have Commitments about life to live under the teaching, the scripture to live in the light of the gospel and God willing that that leads in all sorts of directions, a desire to serve Christ in the world, a desire that other people might know this wonderful truth.

So evangelicals have gone around the world telling others about this great message and God willing added value anyway, because, of course, this gospel message transforms the whole of life. And down the ages, that's had a transforming effect on individuals, families, communities, even societies.

John Dickson: Where do they come from as a group? When do they start being called evangelicals as opposed to something else.

Vaughan Roberts: Well, you see, it goes back, I suppose, originally to the time of the Reformation. When, um, Martin Luther and, and Co.

started saying, hang on, let's, let's compare what we're being taught by the, the official Roman Catholic Church as to what the Bible's saying and saw a distinction there. And so the time of the Reformation, the 16th century, very often they began to be called Gospel people, um, evangelicals,

So that's the beginnings of that kind of language. And then very much at the time of the so called evangelical revivals of the 18th century, it became associated with the Wesley brothers in England, George Whitfield in America, who came to see that at the heart of the Bible's message was this transforming Gospel, rooted in the authority of scripture and saying we can't save ourselves, we need Jesus and that changed lives. And so from, I suppose, the 18th century onwards, that became a very common word to describe these reform movements, revival.

John Dickson (Studio)

John and Charles Wesley were prominent English evangelicals in the 18th century - John was responsible for a massive outdoor preaching ministry (think Billy Graham in the 1700s), and Charles wrote thousands of hymns, including one Buff and I had at our wedding (And Can it Be).

George Whitfield is another English outdoor preacher who spent ages in America in the late 1700s preaching to something like 10 million people over the course of his visits. He was friends with the famous Benjamin Franklin, who wasn't a believer but who admired Whitfield immensely. He was curious about the size of Whitfeild's audiences and so one day turned up to calculate it. Here's what Benjamin Franklin wrote:

READING

He preach'd one Evening from the Top of the Court House Steps, which are in the middle of Market Street, and on the West Side of

Second Street which crosses it at right angles. Both Streets were fill'd with his Hearers to a considerable Distance. Being among the hindmost in Market Street, I had the Curiosity to learn how far he could be heard, by retiring backwards down the Street towards the River; and I found his Voice distinct till I came near Front Street, when some Noise in that Street, obscur'd it. Imagining then a Semicircle, of which my Distance should be the Radius, and that it were fill'd with Auditors, to each of whom I allow'd two square feet, I computed that he might well be heard by more than Thirty Thousand. This reconcil'd me to the Newspaper Accounts of his having preach'd to 25,000 People in the Fields, and to the ancient Histories of Generals haranguing whole Armies, of which I had sometimes doubted.

John Dickson (Studio)

It could be argued, however, that the evangelical movement goes back well before the 18th century.

John Dickson: We are not far from the site where. Some Reformation martyrs, English Reformation martyrs, were burned at the stake, Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer. Um, were they not evangelicals? I mean, they don't make the 18th century cutoff, they're a bit early enough.

Vaughan Roberts: uh, but the, they, they, they make the, the 16th century reformation cutoff, which is where the language started becoming, and, and they were martyred for their evangelical convictions. Because they were, they were being called on to, um, go with the Roman Catholic Church on, um, something they felt was, was actually

John Dickson: Unbiblical.

Vaughan Roberts: And so their commitment to the Bible, and to the gospel as they understood it, led to their martyrdom.

John Dickson: Now that means, um, original Anglicanism, original Church of England as a reformed Protestant, not. Catholic movement is true evangelicalism.

Vaughan Roberts: Yeah, absolutely. And you can say that of all the the Protestant denominations They all have their roots all the mainline Protestant denominations many of them going back to the 16th century Others coming out of the 18th century revival. They are all in their roots

John Dickson: Evangelical.

Vaughan Roberts: Absolutely. This is not some Modern 20th century 21st century phenomenon that this goes back a long way and by the way the the reformers Were not saying we're inventing something new evangelicalism was an invention of the 16th century What they were saying is we are proclaiming no new truth We're trying to hold the church to what it's always believed So it was a conviction that actually over the centuries Roman Catholic, uh, religion had, had just drifted away from the origins.

So many, what they would have undoubtedly say is, we are representing apostolic biblical Christianity. And they had a very high view of the teaching of the Church Fathers in the, the, the late first into the second and third century. They were not innovators.

John Dickson: You've been to America many times. Now we've shared the platform there and we're about to again in January. Um, how to put this nicely. Do you feel evangelical means something different there from, you know, if you just live in England in this evangelical movement?

Vaughan Roberts: It means lots of different things to lots of different people. But within, so there'd be many in America who would understand evangelicalism just as we've been talking now. But in popular parlance, I think it's associated with a modern phenomenon. Um, that is certainly not trying to go back to 16th century, let alone as, as I believe that the first century, but is, um, it's a product at the earliest of the Enlightenment and more likely of the kind of, um, television or age it's mass marketing.

It doesn't really stand for anything. It's opportunistic. It's, it's, um, it's experiential. without a doctrinal root, and it's, it's corrupt. So that's how it's seen, sadly. It's often regarded as essentially allied to a certain political movement, and is more convinced about certain political positions than about doctrinal positions.

I think that's unfair. For a lot of American evangelicalism, but, but in I'm, I'm, unfortunately that the movement's been tainted in popular, uh, ways of thinking.

John Dickson (Studio)

I asked Ed Stetzer if this political reputation was a new thing, or if it been part of American Evangelicalism from the very beginning.

Ed Stetzer: Well, that's a good question. So, um, I, I think the answer is, is, um, it has been in the past, you know, America has two political parties so what's happened is it's historically the political parties were actually closer. And so there would be people who would be evangelically minded or use the word evangelical derives skulls in both parties. But what's happened is in the, the democratic party refers to the God gap.

So if you are, um, if you are irreligious. You're almost certainly a Democrat and that's just people when I say that people get mad because I'm not saying I'm not making all kinds of other statements around everything That's just a question of math and if you're religious you almost certainly are a Republican not everybody and the big exception would be in our african american community But by and large those numbers tend to stay true and as the parties have sort of moved away from one another And particularly areas of, um, traditional Christian belief, like marriage, uh, like the pro life issue and more.

So evangelicals, which this wouldn't be true 50 years ago, but evangelicals have now overwhelmingly moved, particularly white evangelicals, have now, and among some Latino evangelicals as well. have overwhelmingly moved to the Republican Party, and uh, irreligious people have overwhe and others have overwhelmingly moved to the Democratic Party, and African Americans being an outlier in both of those, in both of those settings.

So, um, so no, the answer to your question is, is no. Historically, there would be, and it's the same true, you, what's fascinating to Americans is that you have evangelical Christians who vote for all different kinds of parties, Because you're not in the same place thinking if we vote for this person, this cultural issue could be, could be, you know, rolled back or could be addressed.

So you don't think that way, and Canadians don't think that way. So you have Canadians who vote for somewhat big government, somewhat small government. Whereas because, um, Evangelicals, often on moral issues have ended up more, and it's not just moral issues, they're historic issues and I'm very much simplifying for a short podcast.

Um, what happens is, is that most evangelicals also think smaller government's better than bigger government because that's the kind of the space that we're in. Whereas I think Australians, you'd have many evangelical Christians who want a stronger social safety net as well. That's not generally how evangelicals think.

John Dickson (Studio)

It's an interesting thing.

I've often felt weird in America whenever the topic of healthcare comes up. In Australia, there's universal healthcare through our Medicare system. It's the same with the NHS in the UK. Virtually all Australian and British evangelicals – conservative evangelicals – assume that free

healthcare is a wise and important part of society. But this almost makes me a socialist in America. My conservative evangelical credentials might be seriously questioned. In fact, they were in a recent public event. Someone who'd read that Australians, even Australian Christians, support universal healthcare asked me in a public Q&A how this could possibly be! I'm not sure he was satisfied with my answer.

My point isn't really anything to do with healthcare. It's that the political views of evangelicals don't necessarily have much to do with theology; they are sometimes just culturally conditioned. Certain cultural and political opinions come to be bundled together and smuggled into the evangelical outlook, without much reflection on whether those opinions really are connected to evangelical theology.

Now, maybe that's me with my socialist healthcare views. Or maybe it's American evangelicals with their frequent rejection of universal healthcare. I'm just saying that the cultural, the societal, the political – not just the biblical – can shape what it means to be evangelical.

And after the break, I want to puzzle through one dramatic example of this.

The widespread evangelical support of President Donald Trump.

BREAK 1

MEDIA - [Evangelical pastors pray over Trump](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

Picture a flag-decked stage with a lectern bearing the seal of the US presidency, and presided over by the ultimate stylish, articulate Republican evangelical woman.

President Donald Trump has just walked on stage to the strains of a classic American song about national pride.

We're at a rally in Miami, Florida, where American evangelical pastors have gathered to pray for the President's 2020 campaign.

MEDIA - [Evangelical pastors pray over Trump](#)

John Dickson (Studio)

As it turns out, these prayers weren't answered. President Trump lost the 2020 election. But, of course, fresh opportunities for answered prayers reemerged this year in 2024.

I wanted to ask Professor Ed Stetzer about the evangelical support of President Trump.

John Dickson: So the perception out of side of America is that basically he was elected by the evangelicals.

Ed Stetzer: I think that's a pretty fair perception.

John Dickson: Is that true and why?

Ed Stetzer: Okay. So I'm not a political scientist, but, um, but versed in this enough. So, uh, president Trump was elected primarily from, uh, three groups, right?

So, and one of them is evangelicals, but it's, it's rural Americans, which has substantial overlap to evangelical, but it's rural Americans who, who felt left out and left behind. Um, and they, and you know, rural America is 60 million people. So overwhelmingly voted for president Trump. Um, what, and then evangelicals overwhelmingly voted for president Trump.

And then the third group that people sometimes forget is, um, it was kind of. Uh, the Democrats had what they called a firewall that didn't hold and that would be rust belt. So Rust Belt America would be once the thriving steel belt and now the rust belt. Uh, people often felt left out and left behind in those contexts who voted for President Trump as well.

But you can't see any path to victory for President Trump that didn't involve substantive evangelical support.

John Dickson: Yeah. So, so the question I think a lot of people have, and, you know, maybe it's wrong headed, but they'll say, aren't those evangelicals, you know, meant to be the kind of moral majority people that are the people who believe in, you know, living a squeaky clean life and so on.

Ed Stetzer: Here's the people who said Bill Clinton should resign for exactly.

John Dickson: And so it's seen as completely hypocritical that they voted Trump and so passionate for him. Um, And, and the, the perception is, and you can correct it, evangelicals really are just a political movement. They could overlook moral issues for the sake of more power.

Ed Stetzer: No, I'd say not just a political movement, certainly there are political ramifications. So, so, um, you know, most of your listeners don't know me from Adam, so I was pretty public and vocal about my concerns about the Evangelical Alliance with President Trump. Um, at

the same time, I defended, uh, at times, and where I would say is this, I was very uncomfortable with two things. One was the percentage of people, and there was actually a study that PRRI did that I commented on. That when asked, you know, I'm paraphrasing, uh, but there's the private lives of public officials matter and evangelicals before President Trump were overwhelmingly the highest group that said yes. And then after President Trump, they flipped, I mean, just stunning shift.

John Dickson (Studio)

PRRI is a non-profit, non-partisan research organisation with an interest in the intersection of religion, culture and politics.

The study Ed commented on (see the shownotes for a link) - discovered two important things about the importance of personal morality in politics.

Producer Kaley?

READING

Key finding number 1: Americans have grown more likely to believe that an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life. The percentage of Americans who agreed with this statement went from 44% in 2011 to 57% in 2020.

Key finding number 2: The belief that an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life increased among white Christians between 2011 and 2020.

Ed Stetzer: And, and I, I think that's fundamentally wrong. And I think

ultimately, uh, now that being said, um, you have to remember too, there were two people. At the end of the campaign and, uh, and two parties at the end of the campaign. And so I would be one who, though I was not a supporter of president Trump, I would be one who would speak up for evangelicals who said, you know, I, I was down to two choices and they're really, uh, neither of them were great.

Um, one would be, uh, would also align with some of my issues and concerns. I think as now we're seeing, um, you know, Roe v. Wade and more. I think those who voted for President Trump could, would point to and say, look, the Supreme Court has been changed. And so, so what I would say is, um, my concern is that, um, so I said at the beginning, there were two, there were two concerns.

One was those people who changed their view of the morality of public officials in order to accommodate this. I think that was wrong. And I called it out on more than one occasion. People got mad at me and that's okay. I don't mind people being mad at me. The other is, just to be blunt, I don't think that.

Um, it, it, it bothers me and concerns me when I see the full throated endorsement. I'm all in, I like what he says, I like how he says it. Uh, I, I, I think ultimately President Trump has shown himself to, uh, be a person who says deeply wrong things, uh, who has lived a life that should, uh, now maybe, you know, people say maybe he's changing that life, but, but I think ultimately the full throated endorsement of the president, I, I can understand that evangelical Christian who said, these were the choices that I had, and I made a difficult choice between these two, and these are the reasons Uh, for me, I'm concerned that people will change their view of morality to accommodate that.

And I'm concerned about people who embrace all of the things that were around. There's comments about, about immigrants, there's comments about refugees, comments about women, there's comments about his opponents, and more. Um, I, I, I, I don't think that we need to hold President Trump up as a role model. And throated place when you do

that, I think you've had to, you've really had to intentionally blind yourself to some realities to do that.

So those would be my Two concerns, keeping in mind that I think Where you are internationally, people will look and say, how could you possibly do that? Let me also say to you that many, uh, African American, uh, pastors, pastor friends, they would say, uh, you know, you, I couldn't overlook those things and they say by voting for him, you voted this way differently, uh, and chose made a choice that impacts me negatively.

So I, I get people of different views. I just, I try to recognize that when people walk into a voting booth, they, they have complex reasons for why they vote and some charity. For people of different views, I think it's a good thing. Now that may be shocking to people in Australia. Uh, but, and I will tell you, for people, most evangelicals wouldn't agree with what I just said.

Keeping in mind that I am an outlier in this, is that the vast majority of, uh, white, I'm white, the vast majority of white evangelicals made a different decision than I did.

John Dickson (Studio)

Ed's great. He's one of the most connected humans in American Evangelicalism. But I wanted to get another perspective?

The Gospel Coalition is a group of pastors and churches in the Reformed evangelical tradition that aims to further the good news about Jesus Christ and uphold Biblical truth as the standard in the church. These are core evangelical aims.

One of the founders of the Gospel Coalition was Tim Keller, one of the most influential evangelical preachers in America in the last 20 years. His death from cancer in 2023 was devastating for many—good for him,

he reminded us in our interview with him, but tragic for one of the healthiest strands of evangelicalism in the world.

Melissa Kruger is the vice president of discipleship programming at the Gospel Coalition.

She's the author of ten books, including 'Ephesians: A Study of Faith and Practice'.

I started by asking her about the political nationalism that seems to be present in much American evangelicalism.

John Dickson: Christian nationalism is not a thing we know anything about in Australia. Or in Europe, or the UK. Um, it's not really in Asia. But it seems to be developing, uh, its muscles here in America in the last five, ten years. Um, is Christian nationalism an evangelical phenomenon?

Melissa Kruger: That's a good question. I was just having a conversation about this this weekend because, you know, we lived in the UK for a while. And one thing that we were really struck by in the church in the UK was people voted for a lot of. It wasn't like, Oh, to be a Christian is to vote for this political party.

And some of that is, is the difference in a two party system. So when you only have two parties, it's very easy to kind of become one is right and one is wrong and all of this. And I think what has actually happened is because the evangelical movement has political power, then it is courted by the two party system to say which one is the most effective.

And when you get to other places. Yeah, if you get to most of Europe, Christians have no block of power, you know, so therefore they're not courted and, and therefore in some sense, no one expects you to vote one way or the other. And so what, what is very concerning to me, um,

when I look at what's happening is the effects that politics can have on the divisions in the church.

Um, I would hope that the church can have an impact on our political system. Like that would be a really good thing. Um, what is disturbing to me is that it seems to be happening more in the reverse. And that is very concerning that politics seems to be, um, pressuring the church in certain ways. And I'm very uncomfortable with that.

John Dickson: Can you be specific?

Melissa Kruger: Well, I think, you know, we, we would definitely say there is something called theological liberalism. That we are against meaning we don't believe the scriptures to be the inerrant word of God, things like that. And I would say that is a danger in the church. Um, I think we've gotten to a point where differing views on something like immigration can now suddenly become, um, Ooh, you might be theologically liberal if you differ on that. Well, that's an area where I think Christians might have some robust disagreement. Um, I am very willing to say, goodness, this is a really tough issue. Um, but what I would say is a political party might come in and say, this is the only, the only view a Christian can have that I'm very uncomfortable with.

There are some issues I think, you know, like. Abortion to me is not a political issue. That's a biblical issue because we're talking about the sanctity of life. Um, and so I, I am a, there's, there's one view I'm going to have on that issue. But when it comes to certain other issues, I think there's room for Christians to have definite disagreement.

And I think when a political party determines what the church should believe, that concerns me.

John Dickson (Studio)

Let's head back to the UK for a second ...

John Dickson: Are British evangelicals involved in politics in the way that that caricature in the US, uh, would depict?

Vaughan Roberts: No, in very different ways. Whereas, um, at least with predominantly white evangelicals, evangelicals, you might typically predict which party they vote for, at least in the popular mindset that they're going in one direction. You couldn't do that in England at all. Um, there's a whole breadth of political views - probably in, in, in history, I mean, certainly socially engaged, deeply concerned for the poor. So within the 19th century, um, it was the evangelical Lord Shaftesbury who was the leading social reformer of the age. And of course, William Wilberforce, the, uh, again, an Anglican evangelical, who was, uh, a very leading light in, and in the slave trade.

So, so there's certainly an engagement. in the whole of society, sometimes that's been drifted away from it. That's in our DNA as evangelicals. But you couldn't, it's not just latching onto a small number of political issues and you couldn't label it left or right in simplistic terms.

John Dickson: And here, amongst evangelical ministers, would it be completely gauche, uh, to get up into the pulpit and urge people to vote a particular way?

Vaughan Roberts: It'd be unthinkable. Unthinkable. And within, uh, we've got quite a large church here in Oxford, and, um, we would have a whole variety of, of different, uh, convictions about which way to vote. I mean, I, I couldn't predict that, and nor would I think there is an evangelical way to vote in British, in British politics. No way.

John Dickson: One of the other criticisms that's leveled at American evangelicalism is, uh, came in a book years ago called The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind. And It was written by an Evangelical saying that

Evangelicals turned away from mainstream academia as corrupt and leading people away from the gospel. Was that a problem here?

Vaughan Roberts: Yes and no. So here in, in Britain, there is a breadth within evangelicalism, and I think there are some movements within evangelicalism that are not embracing the life of the mind enough, not engaging with scholarship enough. But speaking generally, um, if you were to look around British universities, um, biblical studies departments, I mean, a very high number are evangelicals in conviction.

I'm in this, in this university, and not just Biblical studies, I should say, but across the university faculties, there are professors of engineering, of, um, physics, of chemistry, of theology, who would hold an evangelical conviction, and I, with, with a Christian mind, are thinking about the whole of life. So, um, No, some have moved away from that, certainly, but it's within our DNA to take the mind seriously, thinking seriously.

Melissa Kruger: I think the, the reality, part of what we have is a discipleship problem in America. So we have a lot of people who know a little bit about Christianity, which is very different. Different than having a strong biblical foundation, I would say we are an increasingly biblically illiterate group of people, and therefore, if we don't even know what we believe ourselves, of course we're not gonna be uniform in the way we represent that to the world.

So I see a huge problem, and it's a lack of root. Um, we have spread wide, but we haven't always spread in truth, in the depth of what the scriptures teach. And so I think it's, I think it's a problem. And so you get a lot of offshoots going a lot of different ways. But when you look at the historic Christian tradition, um, in that I'm very hopeful.

I'm not very hopeful in a modern expression of kind of a weak form. It's like a weak strand of coffee, very watered down Christianity that I think you see a lot and that's a very confusing to people. I totally agree that that's a very confusing thing for the watching world.

John Dickson: Do you think all these other problems stem from that one? I mean, is it that kind of superficial superficiality in, in, you know, Christian knowledge that leads to. Sex scandals, over political, you know, politicization, race problems, and so on.

Melissa Kruger: In some sense, yes, but, but what I do know is even Paul in his letters to the church, what did he say? He said, be on your guard, there will be wolves among you. And in fact, he said there will be sexual impropriety, there will be pride, and there will be greed. And sure enough, 2000 years later, we still see that exact thing.

And it says that they will try to destroy the flock. So Paul was very aware of this. This isn't actually a new problem. I mean, it's something that's been plaguing the church throughout all of history. And so I think as we look at it, the scriptures themselves warn against this. So, um, yes, it's there and yes, it's concerning and for sure the popularity of American religion leads to a lot of people who want to be a part of it just for how it can serve them.

That is for sure a problem.

John Dickson (Studio)

I wanted to ask Melissa about the hot-button issue of abortion.

Rowe Vs. Wade was a legal case in the 1973 that guaranteed a woman's right to abortion. During the Trump administration, however, Rowe v Wade was overturned by the Supreme Court, effectively making abortion a state-by-state issue not a constitutional one – to the rapturous applause of American Evangelicals.

John Dickson: the effective overturning of Roe versus Wade. Um. At least as federal law. Um, Was this a peculiarly evangelical victory?

Melissa Kruger: I, I actually think so. I, I think, um, evangelicals for a long time have prayed and hoped, um, for a change. From Roe v. Wade, and I think they have worked hard at a grassroots level for a lot of years, and I'm really thankful, um, for, for what happened, um, and that it has been overturned. I don't think any of us actually expected it.

I mean, you know, we hoped for it, uh, but I don't think we expected it. And so, um, it's one of those things, um, that I'm truly thankful to see happen in our country. Um, and I'm, I'm, uh, yeah, yeah, I am thankful for that.

John Dickson: Um, Are you simply thankful? Um, I mean, I, I would hold your exact view on, on abortion. And we've done an Undeceptions episode where we tried to explain that the classical Christian view isn't as dumb and mean as everyone thinks. Um, I, I guess, do you, do you have any worries about how the victory is being talked about?

Do you, do you fear that, um, there's a perception that, you know, this evangelical victory was really just more of the war on women, which is what one sometimes hears. Um, to give any credence to that without, without at all, uh, budging on the morality of abortion. Are there any parts of it that make you feel uncomfortable for the reputation of the church?

Melissa Kruger: Not, not really, because I actually will say, I believe that's the lie of the other side. Um, I know more women who are very opposed to abortion. And so it's, it's always interesting to us when they claim it's a war against women because we are at war against abortion in a lot of ways for many of us because we've held this life in our body and we think what an amazing thing.

John Dickson (Studio)

I've got to admit, I was really struck by this part of the interview. Melissa is the sort of Christian thinker who can see and admit the excesses of some evangelicals, especially around politics. She isn't the caricature of

the American evangelical. But she wasn't going to give an inch on abortion. For her, this transcends politics. It isn't about blue v red, that is Democrat v Republican; it's about the truth that the unborn human has the same value as the born human. And she doesn't mind if that ruins her reputation among some.

Melissa Kruger: And we've also sat across the table from women who have had abortions. And we have wept those tears of regret with them and we have watched the harm it has done to women. So it's, it's, you know, I, I really do think, um, it harms women and it obviously harms their children. Um, and so it, it's really interesting when kind of those who are proponents for abortion say things like that, um, it's a war against women. I actually think it's a, a war that has been really convenient for men.

John Dickson: Let's talk about women in evangelicalism in America. Um, the cliché or the perception might be that women are just submissive in American evangelicalism. Uh, I don't get that impression from you, Melissa. Um, but, um, I'm not talking about, you know, those Bible passages about submission to husband. I'm saying like the, the idea is that a woman, an American woman, evangelical, is a mousy little creature who just works in the kitchen. And so, I mean, I'm exaggerating, but you know what I mean. Can you, can you speak to that?

Melissa Kruger: Yes, I think we have at times adopted a very odd take. In American culture. And again, it was super helpful to live overseas and see what complementarity, which is what we would call it. You know, this, this belief that men and women are both equal in the sight of God in creation, but there are, um, distinctions that we hold very clear.

And we, um, we believe in, you know, I, I don't believe. You know, a woman is a man and a man is a woman. I mean, we hold, we hold these distinctions and we even see those distinctions lived out in the family and in the church. So that being said, when I, we spent time in the UK,

that felt different. It was really interesting to be outside of some of what it looks like in the church.

And what I would say has maybe happened in American evangelicalism. Um, there has been a picturesque view, um, of kind of a 1950s Americana that has been applied to the scriptures rather than the scriptures informing our understanding of men and women. And so I, and I would say at times I've even bought into some of these things without thinking. So letting Christian culture inform what I understand about myself or about my husband, rather than letting the scriptures inform that. And I really am hopeful that increasingly we are waking up to the reality of what scripture teaches, not just what culture teaches. Um, and I think that's really important, but yes, there has been for sure, um, certain teachings that I do not, I think are extra biblical.

I don't see them in scripture. I think when you look at the New Testament, Jesus is robust in his treatment of women. Um, it's shocking. I just finished a Bible study on Mark and you know, it's this They're everywhere and they're everywhere as the positive example, and it is pretty shocking if you look at Romans chapter 16, when Paul is greeting the church in Rome, um, women are interspersed throughout the whole thing.

Paul talks about Rufus's mother who has been a mother to me. So what you see in the New Testament is not a CEO with hierarchy in that way. You see a family, you see fathers and mothers, daughters and sons. And I think American evangelicalism needs to get back to that versus a CEO model of a church that I don't see in scripture.

So again, I think the more we go back to the Bible, the healthier we're gonna get on men and women.

John Dickson: So you are involved with the Gospel Coalition. Um, one of the things that strikes me about American Christianity, you know, as a newcomer to your great country is the division amongst people who otherwise believe very similar things, but on a few things they don't agree. Uh. It's an interesting word, coalition, uh, it, it sort of connotes,

uh, an attempt for unity and camaraderie and affinity. Uh, is this possible in American evangelicalism?

Melissa Kruger: It's not going to be possible, um, for everyone who claims the name of Christ. I mean, that's, that's for certain, right? I mean, we look at just our denominational commitments. We have more denominations forming every single day. So there's a reality that, um, Christians are divided on what they believe. And so I think it's definitely important to understand the core of Christianity. Um, and then different modes of baptism. I mean, so there are going to be these disagreements that people have on things that aren't core all the time. So when we talk about a coalition, what we're hoping to say is these central tenets of the Christian faith, we're going to say we all assent to.

While we have serious disagreement on other issues, we're going to say that the basic truths. That there was a historical Jesus that he lived, uh, that God became man dwelt among us and he died on the cross. Like these things that Christians say and that he was resurrected. I mean, that's the important part of all of that, um, for the sins of mankind. I mean, those basic things, can we be unified on those? Hopefully so. Um, but the fact that, you know, Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane in John 17, that the very thing he prayed for was unity in the church. And I think it's because it's such a difficult thing to come by.

John Dickson (Studio)

Quite apart from encouraging unity, American evangelicals have been accused of being at the heart of the greatest example of disunity in American politics in the 21st century.

A disunity that led to political insurrection ... next.

BREAK 2

Media - [Four Hours At The Capital](#)

John Dickson(Studio)

That's the HBO documentary, *Four Hours At The Capital*, about the events that led up to the storming of the Capitol building in Washington on January 6, 2021.

It's a powerful lens on the events of the day that expertly combines the aerial view with the on the ground experience ... at least, that's what Director Mark says.

Anyway, the documentary follows the perspectives of the politicians, the civil servants, the police and the rioters involved ... on a day of shame and outrage for many Americans, but for quite different reasons.

If you'd like to hear more about the riot itself and the Christian Nationalism that coloured it, get along to the NT Wright episode we did just a few shows back, 'Political Jesus' - AI will put a link in the shownotes.

So, among the rioters were American evangelicals carrying Bibles, placards, and pausing for prayer amidst the shambles.

The Washington Post article titled 'Some Capitol rioters believed they answered God's call, not just Trump's' captures the sense of holy war some evangelicals thought they were waging.

Ten weeks before the election and four months before President Donald Trump summoned his supporters to Washington and called on them to "walk down Pennsylvania Avenue" to the U.S. Capitol, where they

staged a brutal and chaotic insurrection, one of his staunchest allies sat for an interview, the Capitol visible behind him. There was no sign yet of the fury that would soon overtake its dome, but evangelical leader Franklin Graham painted a harrowing picture of a battle on the horizon.

What would happen, the Christian Broadcasting Network's David Brody asked, if Trump lost? Graham's reply stated plainly the stakes as he saw them. "I'm just asking that God would spare this country for another four years to give us a little bit more time to do the work before the storm hits," he said. "I believe the storm is coming. You're going to see Christians attacked; you're going to see churches close; you're going to see a real hatred expressed toward people of faith. That's coming." Graham said of Trump: "God has put him in this position" to defend "Western civilization as we have known it." The Democrats, by contrast, were "opposed to faith."

While Trump may have incited the riot at the Capitol that led to his second impeachment, many of his followers already had all the encouragement they needed: They believed God wanted them to do this.

John Dickson (Studio)

Disunity amongst American Evangelicals is a problem. Ed Stetzer thinks there are bigger problems still facing them. In part, it has to do with the riot in the Capitol on Jan 6, 2021.

John Dickson: You've gone so far as to say that, um, evangelicals in America are due for a reckoning.

Ed Stetzer: I did. Yeah, that was an article that got some mail.

I don't know that the book is going to be called that, but it may be called an evangelical reckoning. So I think one of the things that, and what I

just said is what I wrote, uh, after January 6th. Um, you cannot. Escape the fact that there were deeply religious evangelical sounding or adjacent elements that were part of storming the Capitol that day, they prayed in Jesus name on the floor of the breached house in the Senate.

And, and I think that was a stunning reality. And I was one I wrote in September. Uh, I wrote my concerns about, um, avenge for USA Today, one of our, one of our national newspapers. I wrote an article saying evangelicals need to deal with the QAnoners in their midst. And people were mad at me. Oh, there's not a QAnon.

John Dickson (Studio)

What is QAnon - who are QAnoners? Well, you might not thank me ... but ...

QAnon is a movement in America that claims a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping, cannibal pedophiles controls the world. They apparently manipulate politics and the media. It comes from an anonymous "Q" on the online message board 4chan. The poster, Q, implied he, or she, had access to high-level government intel, and he, or she, dropped the messages via coded "Q drops."

Social media platforms played a pivotal role in amplifying these theories, expanding its audience far beyond its dark web origins. The movement, once fringe, now intersects various conspiracy theories, including UFOs and the JFK assassination, while introducing new ones like the dangers of 5G networks.

Central to QAnon is the belief that Donald Trump was chosen by American generals to expose and dismantle this malevolent group, implicating high-profile Democrats and celebrities. The narrative intensified around the 2020 election, with claims of a stolen election, leading to the Capitol Hill Riot.

Surprisingly, QAnon adherents aren't just fringe extremists; they include politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene, professionals, and even "health-conscious yoga moms". A 2021 poll found 17% of Americans believed in QAnon's core claims, illustrating its widespread appeal.

There's a fascinating article from the New York Times that we'll link to in the shownotes. It'll tell you far more about QAnon than you could possibly want to know. But its author makes the claim that QAnon is like a church, "... in that it provides its followers with a social support structure as well as an organizing narrative for their everyday lives."

But surely there aren't any QAnoners in the actual evangelical church?

Ed Stetzer: Well, yes, there is. Deeply influenced into evangelicals. We just passed one on the road today, a big flag outside the house. The marks of the flag. Yeah. And more. So, so this is a real issue. Um, and so what I think is one of the questions I think we need to ask is why not everybody, right? But why some of the full throated endorsement folks were so easily drawn into, uh, that orbit in a way I think that they compromised their, their witness.

Um, I think we need to ask that. So I think there's a, a reckoning that still needs to happen.

John Dickson: What do you mean by the reckoning? Do you mean? There's going to be a great turning against evangelicals?

Ed Stetzer: That you're quoting, um, I, I was actually, I was writing that evangelicals need to deal with this.

So I think part of what we need to do, and are, and are doing, is have a national conversation. And unfortunately, I don't think it's going particularly well in a lot of places. We're actually experiencing now, because of some of that reckoning, what I call the great sort. evangelicalism, Sorting themselves ideologically, and you can actually see this, probably even from Australia, you'll see all of a sudden there

are conferences and churches that are very much decidedly in a lane that has been shaped in the last four, five, six years, and there's actually a growing division between, uh, evangelicals that I think are hold of the authority of scripture, are focused on personal conversion, uh, but have not become uh, politicized to that level.

Now, they would say that, you know, you're politicized the other level, that you're, you know, um, engaging in, uh, I don't know, woke, whatever else the term may be. I don't find that word particularly helpful. Uh, but I, but I, I get what people are saying. Well, I think right now we're seeing a sorting and evangelicalism, which I think is what I was hoping would happen and maybe still will happen is we might address, you know, some of these things went too far.

And people need to be drawn back in. And I think some are. Some are like, yeah, I kind of got too caught up in that. Um, but I, but I, I still think there's a reckoning to be had and I think part of that reckoning is, uh, the lack of here's what, here's what we found there's a phrase that the kids use. It's, you know, he's just not that into you.

He's just not that into, she's not just, just not into you. I think one of the things we've found in the last few years when it comes to the church, they're just not that into you. They're far more disciplined by their cable news choices.

They're far more disciplined by their cable news choices and spiritually shaped by their social media feed. And so I think it needs to be a reckoning about the lack of discipleship that so many were so easily swept up, and I would say swept away, uh, by some of these cultural, political currents. And I, I think we're still walking through some of the consequences of that.

So it's not all bright roses and sunshine in American evangelism.

So let me say, I do have some concerns about some evangelicals who I consider my sisters and brothers in Christ, who I think have been swept up into political torrents and places that are unhelpful.

Um, I don't know that I would see myself as better or worse. I would say actually that, um, one of the things that we learned anything the last four or five years is that my views are not particularly the views of those in charge, uh, because I think ultimately my view just percentage wise is more of a minority view.

Um, and, and so, so I don't, I don't feel superior to anybody. Um, what I, what I think is, as a missiologist, you know, that's my PhD fields in mission. I've seen me. Historically, people get syncretized, over contextualized into the cultural context in ways where they lose the gospel. Dean Gilliland, uh, in his book, *The Word Among Us*, says that, um, that, that ultimately we can either be, um, caught up in obscurantism, where the truths of the gospel are obscured.

By our practical ways, by by our ways of practicing and teaching the faith. Um, and, and there are some people, it's like, it's just obscured because we're so driven by maybe tradition of the past three, 400 years ago. And that was a concern that I would have as a mythologist. But then there's also syncretism where we've lost essential elements of the faith to the culture.

And I wanna be aware that I too can fall to the right of obscurantism and the left of syncretism. And I think, um, that's part of where, so, so again, I, I'm, I'm okay when people criticize me because I want to look at and say is there some truth to that sometimes is and I got to address that so I don't think anybody Evangelicalism should be above criticism.

I also think that, um, we have to acknowledge, I mean, all Christians around the world, here you are, you know, coming from Australia, um, you have listeners all around the world. Um, what I would say is, I think the global church is deeply concerned about the state of American evangelicalism, and I share their concerns, and I think that we should look at what the issues are and address them.

John Dickson: What are the biggest challenges facing evangelicals in Britain?

Vaughan Roberts: I think one change that's happened in the last 10 or 15 years ago, evangelical Christians used to be regarded as a little bit quaint, a bit weird. Um, Now there's a, there's a increasing view that, um, it's a bit dangerous because you might think that the concept of truth has disappeared in our culture, um, not at all. So that the idea that you can believe what you like, well you can believe what you like as long as it's not certain things, and actually as long as long as you are convince that anyone's truth is their truth. And however graciously one says it, evangelicals believe that there is a capital T truth. That there is a God, he has made himself known in Christ, that there's a good way to live, and any perceived challenge to those convictions can be regarded not just as quaint and weird as it was a while back, but actually dangerous. And threatening, uh, especially when you, you touch on very personal areas, which we're all grappling with, I think, in the Western world, issues of sexuality and gender that, um, I think many of us have begun to, to, of whatever conviction, Christian, non Christian, that actually there's a bit more complexity around here than, than used to be said. Um, but those who are saying, actually, God is saying something in these things that, that might. Challenge some alternative use. That's a challenge, how we express that in a gracious way. But also in a way that shows that there's, there's good news here is a challenge for us.

Melissa Kruger: I think our Achilles heel is that we are rich. We have a lot of money and it makes us not prayerful. And we do not know how poor we are because we believe money can solve everything. And I see the church in other parts of the world that has so little money and they have so much more joy. And so I would say, um, that's our biggest problem.

We think power will cause us to succeed where I think, um, the spirit's work will cause us to succeed.

John Dickson (Studio)

But for all of the charges that could be brought against American evangelicalism, what can be said in its favour?

John Dickson: So, what is best about evangelicalism? Let's leave aside, you know, these difficult conversations. What's best?

Ed Stetzer: Yeah, I, I, I, again, I, I think if you walk to and you find, come, come to, come to rural America and, um, we have, we have the Rural Matters Institute here at the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center.

And, uh, I remember listening at the Rural Matters Summit, um, and someone got up and talked about it. If you don't know someone who's a meth addict, you're, you're not serving in rural America. But, you know, when you get into those situations, whether it's a meth addiction or whether it's a mental health crisis, uh, it's, it's painful.

Pastors and police both tend to be first responders, but it's pastors and numerically it tends to be evangelical pastors who are in the most difficult places showing and sharing the love of Jesus to the unlovable, um, to by the world standards, ministering to the, to the poor, you know, here, I mean, Salvation Army, you know, is, is, is, is, is a key part of that.

But there's an army of people who believe in salvation and that all these evangelical Who are not in the Salvation Army, who are still doing that kind of work. And you generally can't find, uh, a small town in, in America where some evangelical church is not doing substantive, impactful work to the, to the least of these, that those are struggling, let alone the cities.

I mean, you go to the cities and it's, it's everywhere. Yeah.

John Dickson: What are the strengths of evangelicalism?

Vaughan Roberts: I think a strength is this conviction that God has spoken and that there is truth. Because I think the Western world is in crisis. We've got moral commitments, but without any foundation behind them. And actually that foundation was a substantially Christian foundation. And if you try and get rid of that foundation, you're on very shaky ground.

And we actually have got answers to the questions that people continue to ask. Who are we? Why are we here? What's the meaning of life? Is there hope? These are profound questions that don't go away. And, actually, we have got some great news answers. And, uh, that enables us to live life with security, a secure identity, and with joy and hope. Um, that's a real strength, and I think it's very attractive once people see.

John Dickson: And the superpower of American Evangelicalism?

Melissa Kruger: The superpower, I would say we have some of the richest teaching in the world. Um, the, the word has been in our translated in how many versions do we have in English? So we have, we have access to divine wisdom. I mean, it's, it's just so hopeful. I mean, the word has the power to transform. The word has the power to comfort.

The word has the power to heal. We have it. And we actually have people who have studied it greatly and can defend it. And we have wonderful access to teaching like probably no other culture has had before.

John Dickson: Can you envisage a renaissance of the word evangelical and American evangelicals?

Ed Stetzer: Well, so I'm not. I think one of the things that, again, it reminds us because we're, you know, I'm on a podcast that people around the world listen to is that Americans don't own the word evangelical.

We may have ruined the word evangelical, but we don't own the word evangelical. So come with me to Brazil or I just was in Greece or where I was in. I was in Bulgaria or wherever it may be. The word evangelical is a positive word to people all over the world, the World Evangelical Alliance. Often, I've worked with some of the leaders there, it's like, you know, it's fine everywhere else.

Uh, and that's not true everywhere, but, you know, Australia, a lot of the English speaking world is impacted by what they see on English speaking television. Um, so I'm less concerned about the word than I am, about the root of the word, the evangel, the gospel is that, um, I'm actually, so I, I don't think that changing the word helps because in other words, let's say we called everyone who is an evangelical started calling themselves purple instead of evangelical.

Well, then it's just purple. Then it's just the, it's still, the issue is not the word. The issue is, is there are things in our movement that we need to address, that we. That we haven't addressed, that we have to address. So I want a renaissance, how do you pronounce in Australia? Renaissance. Renaissance. I want a renaissance of gospel people living on mission in their context.

Now again, I don't want to imply because I don't believe that this is not happening all over the place. It's happening. I want it to happen more, but we also have to address some of the issues that are distracting people from the reality of evangelical faith and practice that is robust and impactful in places all across America.

John Dickson: What should a skeptic make of the evangelical or perhaps to put it another way? Why would you want a skeptic to walk into an evangelical church as opposed to any other kind of church?

Vaughan Roberts: At heart, Evangelicals are Bible people. And we're Bible people because we're Jesus So if you want to engage with authentic Christianity, you've got to engage with Jesus Christ. And if you want to engage with Jesus Christ, where do you look?

It's got to be the Bible. Because any other Jesus is a speculative Jesus. We've got to go back to the source material. And, um, Evangelicals of all people should be about trying to hold up the Bible and, and, and proclaim and teach the Bible and, and, and try not to obscure it, obscure Christ by anything else, but just get back to the Bible.

So I hope that if you went to an evangelical church, you'd encounter Jesus, because you encountered the Bible.

John Dickson: So it sounds like you're not giving up the label evangelical. You don't think it's too damaged a brand?

Vaughan Roberts: No, I'll, I'll, I'll stick with it. Some conversations I'll use a different language, but what, what it stands for is hugely important.

John Dickson: My final question, Melissa, is for my sceptical listeners who have a very low view of American Evangelicalism. Um, I'd love you to speak to them about, you know, what, what evangelicalism can actually offer them as someone who just doesn't know what to make of the Christian faith.

Melissa Kruger: Well, what I would say mainly it can offer is an introduction to Jesus because evangelicals believe in sharing with others the God, the God who became man and dwelt among us in the form of Jesus. And he, um, he has the power to transform your life. And the reality is you're going to spend your life on something and we all will.

And the whole Bible is crying out. Why will you spend your money on what is not bread and your life on what does not satisfy? And it says, listen, listen to me and eat what is good. And your soul will direct delight in the richest affair. So what I think of evangelicalism offers is an invitation to come and follow Jesus and have life. And that's the best news that I could offer or that any evangelical could offer.

John Dickson (Studio)

“Offering an introduction to Jesus” – I love it! And I think I agree, that is the great gift, the superpower, of evangelicalism. Despite everything, at its best, this movement – more than other Christian movements – is devoted to introducing people to the person of Jesus Christ as found in the Bible.

And, in the end, it’s why I still call *myself* an evangelical. And it just dawned on me as we were finishing off this episode that, in view of where I now live, I’m an *American* evangelical.