



UNDERSTANDING
Our
EVANGELICAL
NEIGHBORS

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1

Evangelicalism: A Brief Historical Account

By Dr. Richard J. Mouw

Evangelicalism is a Christian tradition that has encompassed people from many denominations and nations, that is, Evangelicalism is trans-denominational. The label “evangelical” comes from the Greek word *evangel*, which means “good news,” or “gospel.” Evangelicals identify themselves as people who want to be faithful to the central teachings of the Christian tradition.

At various points in Christian history movements have emerged by people who were convinced that many in the Christian community were departing from key Christian teachings. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was an obvious case in point, when Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others led their followers to separate from the Roman Catholic Church. On a smaller scale, the “restorationist” movement that emerged soon after the American Revolution, of which the Latter-day Saints were a part, was a rejection of what were seen as departures in the Protestant churches from the vibrant faith of the New Testament period.

As Evangelicalism took shape as an American protest movement in the nineteenth century, it drew strongly on the “revivalist” spiritual energies that surrounded Joseph Smith in western New York state, but it began to focus more on theological concerns when evolutionary thought began to influence Protestantism. Charles Darwin’s *Origins of the Species* had appeared in England in 1859, and it quickly stirred up controversy both there and in the United States, focusing on how the theory of evolution related to matters of faith.

Darwinian thought reinforced what was already a growing emphasis on what came to be labeled “the doctrine of Progress.” There was a general sense, especially in the intellectual community, that the human race was progressing to new stages in the capacities for moral, political, and religious development. This idea of progress began to take hold among many theologians, resulting in a re-thinking of many assumptions that had long influenced Christian thought. A growing trust, for example, in the gains of scientific research encouraged a re-examination—and in some cases an outright denial—of the more explicitly supernatural elements of traditional Christian belief. Many

Protestant theologians began to play down the Bible's account of miracles.

For example, in one sermon, the topic was Jesus's feeding of five thousand people. A large group of people had gathered to hear Jesus speak, but the crowd became hungry and there was no food available for all. The disciples were concerned. All that was available, they told Jesus, were a few loaves and fishes that a little boy had offered to feed people—hardly enough for all of the crowd. Jesus told them not to worry. He received the small supply of food, and suddenly there was more than enough to feed everyone.

The story is told in the Gospels as a clear example of one of Jesus's miracles. But in the sermon that I read, the preacher said that in reality, the people had brought food for themselves to eat but kept it hidden because they did not want to share it with others. The boy's innocent gesture made them feel guilty about their selfishness, and when everyone started to share their food, there was plenty to go around. In other words, Jesus taught them to share. This way of construing what happened was clearly meant to downplay what the Bible teaches about the miraculous. The story of the feeding of the thousands is not about people being shamed into revealing that they had hidden their lunches. It is about the divine power of Jesus, the Son of God, to transform a small amount of food into a quantity that would feed a large crowd.

A sermon like this one signaled a change that was taking place in the Christian community. People were being taught about the power of moral improvement—encouraging individuals to draw on what was seen as our innate ability to act with sensitivity to the needs of others—rather than relying on the power of a Savior who entered into our human condition to change our hearts by atoning for our sins. This perspective took public shape in what came to be known as the Social Gospel, an approach promoted by theologically liberal Protestants that drew on Progress thinking in insisting that the Kingdom of God would greatly expand in the twentieth century through Christian peacemaking, programs of social justice, and other efforts to alleviate collective ills. This approach was aptly expressed in the name given to a modernist magazine established (and still in existence) in the final decade of the nineteenth century: *The Christian Century*—the coming century was going to bring major gains in the spread of the influence of the social teachings of Jesus. This is what is often referred to today as the rise of Mainline Protestantism.

While the liberal Protestants were anticipating decades of significant progress in spreading the influence of the social teachings of Jesus, Evangelical Christians were preparing for bad times to come. In the final decades of the nineteenth century they sponsored "Bible prophecy" conferences, focusing on "end times" scenarios about a coming period characterized by wars, natural disasters, and the deterioration of social bonds. When things finally get very bad, they taught, the true Christians will be "raptured" to heaven, and the final battle with the forces of evil will take place, prior to the return of Christ, with the establishment of His one-thousand-year reign as the—now to be acknowledged by the Jewish people—true Messiah of Israel.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Evangelicals opposed the new modernistic trends, attempting to keep the major Protestant denominations and their theological schools within the boundaries of traditional orthodoxy. In their efforts, they emphasized what they insisted were the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the non-

negotiable doctrines for preserving a genuinely Christian point of view. Human beings, they insisted, are sinners, desperately in need of salvation by divine grace; Jesus was birthed by a virgin, lived a sinless life, and offered Himself to the Father as a sacrifice for sin. He was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. Presently on His divine throne, He will return someday as the glorious King. We learn all of this from the Bible, which is God's infallible Word to us.

The Christians who defended these teachings became known as the Fundamentalists, and they aggressively challenged those whom they saw as departing from the true faith. However, the Fundamentalists lost the battle for control and departed the Mainline Protestant church bodies. Some of them formed smaller denominations, but many of them established independent congregations, with names such as Bible Church or Gospel Fellowship.

Having basically been rejected from the established theological seminaries, the Fundamentalists established Bible institutes where practical training for Christian leaders was emphasized, thus replacing the more traditional subjects of graduate theological seminaries, such as systematic theology, church history, and biblical languages with courses focusing on practical Christian service.

The cultural pessimism associated with the strong interest on "end times" prophecy scenarios was now reinforced by an experience of cultural marginalization resulting from losing some key theological battles. Since American society was seen as destined to get worse and worse, there was little motivation to address social ills. The real mandates were evangelism and foreign missions. As the great evangelist Dwight L. Moody put it, since the ship of the large culture was sinking, the main task of true Christians was to urge drowning people to get into the lifeboats. The sea vessel imagery was also used specifically to counter the liberal programs of social improvement—efforts which were likened by the Fundamentalists to rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. The primary mandate for the Christian community was to help people avoid eternal damnation by preparing for a heavenly destiny.

In the post-World War II period, a younger generation who had been formed by Fundamentalism began to question what they saw as unfortunate traits within the Fundamentalist movement. A book by theologian Carl Henry, entitled *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, came to serve as a kind of manifesto for this critique. While Henry remained convinced of the Fundamentalists' basic doctrinal convictions, he offered a bold critique of its excesses. Fundamentalism had downplayed—and even frequently ridiculed, he argued—the life of the mind. He called for a new kind of Christian scholarship that was faithful to biblical teachings while addressing the key intellectual challenges of our times, as well as issues of social concern. While the Fundamentalists were right in their insistence that the fulness of the Kingdom of God will only be revealed when Christ returns, Henry stressed that this does not excuse Christians from addressing matters of racial prejudice, poverty, and an over-reliance on military solutions to international tensions.

Since the labels "Fundamentalist" and "Evangelical" had often been used interchangeably, the movement that Henry and others came to lead was called "Neo-Evangelical"; gradually, though, simply "Evangelical" became the term of contrast to the

older Fundamentalism. As mentioned earlier, Evangelicalism is not attached to a particular religious tradition but is trans-denominational. That is, it includes people who have in the past identified themselves as Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and so on but who share in certain core doctrine.

Carl Henry himself led the way in the causes he espoused. He was a founding member of the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary, established in the same year that his book appeared. That school, along with Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Gordon-Conwell Seminary, and others, including a network of Evangelical colleges and universities, became strong intellectual centers for the Evangelical movement. Wheaton College in Illinois, for example, came to be dubbed frequently as “the Harvard of Evangelicalism.” In 1956 Henry became the editor of the new magazine *Christianity Today*, which continues to be a major evangelical voice in commenting on a broad agenda of cultural topics.

The Evangelicals disagreed among themselves about some traditional doctrinal matters, such as infant versus adult baptism, interpretations of what the Bible says about “the end times,” the nature of ordination, and perspectives on how to understand the office and ordinances of church life. They tolerated their difference about such teachings, while maintaining a consensus on the key doctrines that had served as the basic convictions of the older Fundamentalism. In this regard, Billy Graham’s ministry served as an expression of this emphasis on central gospel themes while tolerating disagreements on less central issues. For example, Graham welcomed the support for his evangelistic efforts from any church body that affirmed his calls for individuals to put their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. Graham’s espousal of “cooperative evangelism” was, however, firmly denounced by the continuing Fundamentalist faction.

While Carl Henry’s leadership succeeded in promoting the life of the mind, as well as responsible journalistic efforts, the Evangelical community to which he gave leadership did not move quickly to social activism. Henry himself was a factor in this. During the 1960s, a decade marked by civil rights protests and vocal opposition to the Vietnam War, Henry argued that taking stands on social-political issues was a matter of individual Christian responsibility and not a topic for official church advocacy. Furthermore, he was clearly unsupportive of civil disobedience and disruptive displays of opposition to government policies. While he did frequently address societal concerns in his *Christianity Today* editorials, his views were not directed toward encouraging visible Evangelical activism in the public arena.

These patterns began to change at the end of the 1960s, when younger Evangelicals who had been in various protest movements during the previous decade—often to the dismay of Evangelical families and fellow church members—began to organize for a more activist approach. A key initiative in this regard was the establishment of *The Post-American* magazine by Jim Wallis and some of his fellow students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Wallis explained the magazine’s name by pointing out that some commentators were observing that the United States was moving into a “post-Christian America,” but that it was time, Wallis argued, for Evangelicals to witness to a “post-American Christianity.” (In 1975 the magazine changed its name to *Sojourners* and is still published.)

This new activism drew widespread public attention when a group of about forty Evangelicals gathered in a downtown Chicago YMCA in 1973 to issue a document called “The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concerns.”² The Declaration began with this affirmation: “As evangelical Christians committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and the full authority of the Word of God, we affirm that God lays total claim upon the lives of his people. We cannot, therefore, separate our lives from the situation in which God has placed us in the United States and the world. We confess that we have not acknowledged the complete claim of God on our lives.” The statement went on to call Evangelicals to work actively for justice and peacemaking.

Significantly, one of the organizers of this gathering was Carl Henry’s son, Paul Henry, a political scientist who would soon be elected to Congress. He was joined by Ronald Sider, who made the Declaration the founding document of Evangelicals for Social Action, which Sider would establish in the months after the Declaration appeared. The younger activists were joined in the Chicago meeting by several older evangelical leaders, including Carl Henry. While Henry had some qualms about a couple of the items in the Declaration, he clearly felt the need to put his stamp of approval on the younger generation’s insistence on a more active engagement with issues in the public arena.

The Chicago gathering received considerable attention in the national media. Later the attention was expanded when Jimmy Carter, in campaigning for the presidency in 1976, identified himself as an Evangelical. *Newsweek* magazine then declared, in a cover story, that 1976 was “The Year of the Evangelical.” In a few years, though, a very different sort of activism made its appearance when the New Religious Right became a political force in the 1980s. The most prominent of the movements in that brand of activism was the Moral Majority. And while that group no longer exists, the Religious Right is still a very visible voting block on the current political scene. Indeed, with the emergence of Donald Trump’s national political role, many began complaining that the term “evangelical” has become so politicized that it is no longer adequately refers to a set of theological and spiritual convictions.

Others point out that the “politicizing” of Evangelicalism is primarily an American phenomenon and that millions around the world nurture Evangelical convictions without the influence of the “left” versus “right” debates that have come to dominate among their counterparts in the United States. Largely as a result of active Evangelical missionary activity during the past century and a half, the Christian churches have grown significantly in the southern hemisphere (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), and those Christian communities, which are predominantly Evangelical, carry on their witness without being in any way sidetracked by ideological conflict.

Even in North America, however, the Evangelicalism that is typically criticized for its confrontational political views is of the “white” variety. Many members of Black churches hold strongly Evangelical theological views but prefer to be called simply “Bible believers,” while Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups similarly distance themselves from the “white” Evangelical churches. Some demographic studies have shown that younger Evangelicals across the board have become disillusioned with what they see as a mean-spirited older generation. The debates over the meaning and range of application of the “Evangelical” label continue. There is no question, however, that the ideas and attitudes that have been long associated with that label continue to be a major influence in the

religious world.

2. “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern,” 1973, available at https://canvas.dartmouth.edu/courses/35388/files/5264567?module_item_id=329977.

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