Evangelicalism – A Definition

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Defining Evangelicalism

The term "Evangelicalism" is a wide-reaching definitional "canopy" that covers a diverse number of Protestant groups. The term originates in the Greek word *evangelion*, meaning "the good news," or, more commonly, the "gospel." During the Reformation, Martin Luther adapted the Greek term, dubbing his breakaway movement the *evangelische kirke*, or "evangelical church"-a name still generally applied to the Lutheran Church in Germany. In the English-speaking world, however, the modern usage usually connotes the religious movements and denominations which sprung forth from a series of revivals that swept the North Atlantic Anglo-American world in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Key figures associated with these revivals included the itinerant English evangelist George Whitefield (1715-1770); the founder of Methodism John Wesley (1703-1791) ; and, the American philosopher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). These revivals were particularly responsible for the rise of the Baptists and Methodists from obscure sects to their traditional position as America's two largest Protestant denominational families.

Indeed, by the 1820s evangelical Protestantism was by far the dominant expression of Christianity in the United States. The concept of evangelism and the revival-codified, streamlined, and routinized by evangelists like Charles G. Finney (1792-1875)-became "revivalism" as evangelicals set out to convert the nation. By the decades prior to the War Between the States, a largely-evangelical "Benevolent Empire" (in historian Martin Marty's words) was actively attempting to reshape American society through such reforms as temperance, the early women's movement, various benevolent and betterment societies, and-most controversial of all-the abolition movement. After the war, the changes in American society wrought by such powerful forces as urbanization and industrialization, along with new intellectual and theological developments began to diminish the power of evangelicalism within American culture. Likewise, evangelical cultural hegemony was diminished in pure numeric terms with the influx of millions of non-Protestant immigrants in the latter 19th and early 20th-centuries. Nonetheless, evangelical Protestantism remained a powerful presence within American culture (as evidenced by the success of evangelists like Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday). Going into the 20th-century evangelicalism still held the status of an American "folk religion" in many sectors of the United States-particularly the South.

Defining the Term in Contemporary Times

There are three senses in which the term "evangelical" is used today as we enter the 21st-century. The first is to see as "evangelical" all Christians who affirm a few key doctrines and practical emphases. British historian David Bebbington approaches evangelicalism from this direction and notes four specific hallmarks of evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. A second sense is to look at evangelicalism as an organic group of movements and religious tradition. Within this context "evangelical" denotes a style as much as a set of beliefs. As a result, groups as disparate as black Baptists and Dutch Reformed Churches, Mennonites and Pentecostals, Catholic charismatics and Southern Baptists all come under the evangelical umbrella-demonstrating just how diverse the movement really is. A third sense of the term is as the self-ascribed label for a coalition that arose during the Second World War. This group came into being as a reaction against the perceived anti-intellectual, separatist, belligerent nature of the fundamentalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Importantly, its core personalities (like Harold John Ockenga and Billy Graham), institutions (for instance, Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College), and organizations (such as the National Association of Evangelicals and Youth for Christ) have played a pivotal role in giving the wider movement a sense of cohesion that extends beyond these "card-carrying" evangelicals.

Fundamentalism

"Fundamentalist" is a term that is frequently bandied about in the news media these days. Unfortunately, this term has been used so casually in describing anyone who seems to hold some sort of traditional religious belief--be they a Bible Baptist TV preacher, a Hasidic rabbi, a Mormon housewife, or a soldier of the Islamic Jihad--that the word has become nearly useless. When used within the North American historical context, however, there are precedents for the use of this term which restores a sense of descriptive cohesion. Fundamentalism was a movement that arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries within American Protestantism reacting against "modernist" theology and biblical criticism as well as changes in the nation's cultural and social scene. Taking its name from *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915), a twelve-volume set of essays designed to combat Liberal theology, the movement grew by leaps and bounds after World War I.

During the 1920s, fundamentalists waged a war against modernism in three ways: by (unsuccessfully) attempting to gain re-control of Protestant denominations, mission boards, and seminaries; by supporting (with mixed success) Prohibition, Sunday "blue laws," and other measures defending traditional Protestant morality and sensibilities; and (fairly successfully) by attempting to stop the teaching of evolution in the public schools, a doctrine which they saw as inextricably linked to the development of "German" higher criticism and the source of the Great War. This last strategy resulted in

the infamous Scopes Trial fiasco of 1925 (later fictionalized in the highly inaccurate play and film "Inherit the Wind") in which a substitute biology teacher in Dayton, TN was charged with illegally teaching evolution to his class. The circus atmosphere of the resultant trial, putting Presbyterian layman, former Secretary of State and three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution against the famed Chicago criminal lawyer Clarence Darrow for the defense, discredited the movement in the eyes of the intellectual and media elites resulting in fundamentalism's subsequent disappearance from the nation's cultural stage.

Since the 1940s, the term fundamentalist has come to denote a particularly aggressive style related to the conviction that the separation from cultural decadence and apostate (read *liberal*) churches are telling marks of faithfulness to Christ. Most self-described fundamentalist churches today are conservative, separatist Baptist (though often calling themselves "Bible Baptist" or simply "Bible" churches) congregations such as the churches of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC), or the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA). Institutions associated with this movement would include Bob Jones University (Greenville, SC) and Tennessee Temple (Chattanooga, TN); representative publications would be *The Sword of the Lord* and *The Biblical Evangelist*.

Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement

One of the fastest growing segments of the wider evangelical movement has been its pentecostal branch. Pentecostalism as a movement came into being in the early 1900s in a series of separate revivals. The new movement embodied an evolving body of teachings from itinerant evangelists and Bible teachers such as Charles Parham, William Seymour, and A.J. Tomlinson on the end-times, signs and wonders, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While the early revivals associated with these individuals occurred in (respectively) Kansas and Texas, California, and the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina, the news of a "new" outpouring of God's Spirit spread quickly in North America and almost simultaneously spread, or was reported, overseas. Most distinctive about this movement was an exuberant worship style and the experience of glossolalia-speaking in tongues-which was seen as a return to the apostolic experience of the Book of Acts and the biblical Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

While the pentecostal movement was traditionally associated with the impoverished margins of American culture-particularly among Southern whites and blacks--its influence began to spread during the 1950s through the visibility of healing evangelists like Oral Roberts, groups like the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship, and the migration of large numbers of Southern Protestants to the Midwest and Pacific Coast. By the 1960s, pentecostal ideas and style began to surface in the "mainline" Protestant churches, "officially" beginning in 1960 when Dennis Bennett, an Episcopal priest in Van Nuys, California, announced to his congregation that he had spoken in tongues. The movement quickly spread to other mainline denominations and, by the mid-'60s, to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The movement's visibility and networks were further strengthened by the success of the pentecostal-leaning "Jesus People"

movement among American youth in the late '60s and '70s. In the 1980s, a vigorous, independent network of charismatic churches and organizations (at times described as the "Third Wave") emerged, including churches such as the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. In recent years, a wave of new revivals characterized by such manifestations as "holy laugher" and associated with the Toronto Airport Fellowship and Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Florida have been highly influential within pentecostal and charismatic circles.

Most significant about the contemporary impact of these movements is the effect they have had overseas, leading many to tag pentecostalism "world evangelicalism." In many parts of the Third World Pentecostalism has made significant numbers of new converts. In fact, many analysts speculate that within the next decade Pentecostalism may even overtake the Roman Catholic Church as the largest Christian presence in Latin America.

How Many Evangelicals Are There?

One of the most difficult things to establish about evangelicals is a precise estimate of just how many of them there are in the United States. With so many different evangelical denominations, evangelical constituencies of varying sizes within historically evangelical "mainline" and even non-evangelical denominations (thousands upon thousands of independent churches) there is no single entity that can possibly serve as a representative gatekeeper for the nation's evangelicals. For that reason, the best approach to an evangelical head count is a judicious triangulation of various scientific surveys. But, even this is fraught with problems. As the discussion about the intricacies of definition above would indicate, the framing of the definition or wording of survey questions are important variables that can produce varying results. Estimates of the number of evangelicals in the United States, therefore, are just that: estimates.

Since 1976 the Gallup organization has been asking roughly 1,000 adults the question "Would you describe yourself as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian?" In that first survey 34% of the people being surveyed responded "yes." Over the years, the number has fluctuated dramatically, reaching a low of 33% in 1987 and 1988 during the televangelist scandals, and a high of 47% in 1998.

In its most recent sampling in 2001 approximately 40% of survey participants described themselves as evangelicals, compared to 45% the previous year. Over the years the Gallup numbers have averaged just under 39% of the population as accepting identification as born-again/evangelical.

However, describing one's self as "born again" as the definitive label for evangelical believers--or even the term "evangelical" for that matter--is a questionable benchmark for tabulating the evangelical population (in one study, only 75% of Southern Baptists accepted either term). For a variety of reasons, some groups and individuals which one would describe as "in the team picture" simply do not use those words to describe themselves. For instance, several recent studies and surveys by sociologists and

political scientists that utilize more complex definitional parameters have estimated the number of evangelicals in the U. S. at about 25-30% of the population, or roughly between 70 and 80 million people. It should be noted, however, that even these estimates tend to separate out nearly all of the nation's African American Protestant population (roughly 8-9% of the U. S. population) which is overwhelmingly evangelical in theology and orientation (for example, 61% of blacks--the highest of any racial group, by far--described themselves as "born-again" in the 2001 Gallup poll). When all is said and done, a general estimate of the nation's evangelical population could safely be said to average somewhere between 30-35% of the population, or about 100 million Americans.

The National Association of Evangelicals

One of the defining organizations within American evangelicalism is the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Founded in 1942, the NAE serves as an umbrella organization that attempts to represent evangelical interests and views on a wide ranging assortment of spiritual, social, cultural, and political issues. Including local congregations from 50 member denominations as well as individual churches from 24 other Protestant denominations, the NAE estimates that it represents a constituency of about 30 million people. For information on the NAE, visit their website at http://www.nae.net.

Evangelicals and Politics

During most of the 20th-century, American evangelicalism as a movement was generally reticent about politics because its sights were focused on what seemed more important tasks: evangelism, missions, and nurturing the faithful. All that seemed to change, however, in the 1970s when evangelicals "re-entered" the national spotlight with the rise of Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, a devout Southern Baptist layman who unabashedly claimed to be "born again." But the most visible aspect of this new political sensibility was the appearance of right-wing organizations like the Moral Majority and Concerned Women for America. This new "Religious Right" was credited with playing a major role in the "Reagan Revolution" of 1980 (and the ironic ouster of the evangelical President Carter, for the much-less obviously pious Reagan). In retrospect, it now seems clear that the part these organizations played in this outcome was not as great as either the news media or conservative evangelicals once believed. Unarguably, however, there was a new evangelical interest in political participation, which subsequently gave birth to a new generation of "Religious Right" organizations, such as the Christian Coalition.

The reasons for this resurgance are many, including: a natural desire to have a positive impact on culture and society (a subtle indication, perhaps, of the decline of some types of evangelical prophetic interpretations that emphasized an imminent Second Coming); concern over abortion and changing sexual mores in society; and dissatisfaction with the content, direction and power of the mass media and popular culture. However, what seems to have been the single overarching factor has been the post-WWII expansion of

the Federal Government into areas and responsibilities that were previously the domain of the state and local government, the individual, the family, and the church.Yet, it must be made clear that there is no monolithic consensus among evangelicals on politics, any more than there is on theological matters. While the movement is conservative in many regards, there are many evangelicals who would identify their political orientation as liberal and some, like the Sojourners community in Washington D.C., which are leftist in nature. In terms of party affiliation, the movement has been traditionally perceived as Republican. This impression, however, reflects a bias that centers on the Northern, midwestern evangelicals of the NAE "card-carrying" variety. When the huge numbers of Southern white and black evangelicals are factored in, it is probably more accurate to say that in the years before 1970 the "average" evangelical was more likely to be a Democrat. With the defection of large numbers of white Southerners to the Republicans in recent decades, the political make-up of evangelicalism has changed. Today the *overall* political tenor of the movement could be described as moderately conservative and predominantly Republican.

Evangelicals and the Media

The media connections of many prominent evangelicals associated with the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Dobson, Falwell, Robertson, Robison) along with the lurid headlines connected with the televangelist scandals (Popov, Roberts, Swaggart, the Bakkers) of the late 1980s has created a pervasive connection in the popular mind linking evangelicals with the electronic media. The world of big-time televangelism is hardly reflective of the style, theology, or ethos of all evangelicalism. However, it does reflect the importance of the movement's revivalistic heritage as well as the very real fact that evangelicals have traditionally placed a major emphasis on the utilization of print, broadcast-and now satellite and computer-technology to reach others with the Gospel. Beginning in the late 18th-century evangelicals successfully harnessed the printing press to flood America with inexpensive tracts, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, books and bibles. The arrival of electronic-based media in the late 19th and early 20th-centures proved more problematic, however, as phonographs, motion pictures, and radio cut perilously close to the heart of traditional evangelical reservations about worldly entertainments. As time passed, most evangelicals were eventually satisfied that these devices could be used to teach their own and evangelize non-believers; a plethora of evangelical films, records, and radio programs ensued.

But, the public dimension of radio brought with it a set of unique problems. Because of the dynamics of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, protestant liberals' control of denominational hierarchies and the Federal Council of Churches made them the primary recipient of free "public service" time from major urban stations and the national radio networks. Largely excluded from free airtime, fundamentalist broadcasters like Chicago's Paul Rader and Los Angeles' Charles E. Fuller were forced to develop alternative strategies that relied on their listeners to provide the funds that would enable them to purchase airtime and create independent "networks" for distribution of their programs. This strategy proved extremely successful and was applied directly to the

television media. With the gradual reduction of radio and television stations' "public service" airtime that began in the late 1950s, evangelicals increasingly dominated the nation's religious programming. By the 1970s most liberal protestants-unable or unwilling to compete with evangelicals in a "free market" media environment-had abandoned radio and television to conservative Protestant broadcasters (many represented by the evangelical National Religious Broadcasters). This set the stage for the success, publicity, controversy, and scandal that surrounded the "Electronic Church" from the mid-1970s on.

Evangelicals and the End Times

From the Millerite controversy of the mid-19th century to the phenomenal sales of books like *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (overall best-selling book of the 1970s) and *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Occur in 1988* (over 4 million copies sold that year), to the popularity of the *Left Behind* series of end-time novels, interest in the apocalyptic has been a highly-visible aspect of the evangelical subculture. Through most of the 19th-century, however, nearly all American evangelicals were convinced of the postmillenial interpretation of the Bible: the decidedly "calmer" belief that the church--through the exercise of its mandate to teach and preach the Gospel--would gradually usher in the Kingdom of God in preparation for Christ's return. Buoyed by the advent of republican government, the seemingly boundless economic promise of their new country, and the impact of movements to reform society, such a possibility seemed likely to American evangelicals of the 1840s and 1850s. However, the disappointments associated with the War Between the States and Reconstruction, the problems associated with urbanization and industrialization, and the influx of millions of non-Protestant immigrants made many late 19th-century conservative evangelicals take a less optimistic view of the future.

As a result, evangelicals gravitated toward a set of teachings known as dispensational premillenialism. Unlike the optimistic views of postmillenialism, dispensationalism was a system that emphasized decline: rebellion in Israel, apostasy in the church, and growing chaos in the world at large. The major systematizer of this viewpoint was John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), one of the early leaders of the Plymouth Brethren movement. Darby was convinced that most of the biblical prophecies related to Christ's return were yet to be fulfilled. Intrinsic to his views was the "postponement theory," which saw God in the midst of his divine timetable turning away from a rebellious Israel which had rejected the Messiah to create, build, and then miraculously evacuate (or "rapture") the church immediately before the Great Tribulation. At that time, God would resume the eternal countdown and his dealings with Israel and the unfolding of the last days-the rise of the Antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, the Second Coming, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God-would come to pass.

The doctrine has experienced fluctuations in its popularity over the years, often coinciding with times of national and international crisis. The key role which the nation of Israel plays within the dispensationalist scheme has been particularly important in this regard over the years as events like the development of the Zionist movement, the

creation of the state of Israel, and the seizure of Jerusalem in the Six Days' War excited speculation about the imminent "rapture" of the saints. The advocacy of this system by some of the movement's most visible personages (D.L. Moody, C.I. Scofield, Charles E. Fuller, Billy Graham, and Pat Robertson to name but a few), along with the urgency and interest attending prophetic speculation among their rank-and-file followers has led many outsiders-and not a few insulated insiders-to view these beliefs as characteristic of all evangelicals.

On the contrary, not all, or even most, contemporary evangelicals adhere to dispensationalism or know it well as a system. As one might expect with such a diverse movement, there are a wide variety of beliefs within the evangelical community over these issues. A general premillenialism and amillennialism (the view that the millennium is strictly a symbolic reference to the current age leading up to the Second Coming and the last judgment) are held by many evangelicals. If one must search for a "typical" view on the end times among contemporary evangelicals, it is probably best to say that they share a firm attachment to the Scriptural promise that Christ will return to Earth one day. As a saying in the African-American church puts it: "Jesus may not come today. He may not come tomorrow. He may not come when you want Him to but when He does, you can bet He'll be right on time!"