

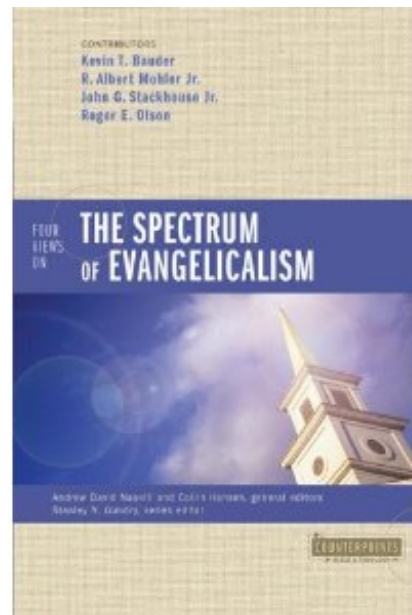
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What Makes Evangelicalism Evangelical? A New Book Joins the Argument



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The evangelical movement in America emerged in the twentieth century as conservative Protestants sought to perpetuate an intentional continuity with biblical Christianity. While the roots of the movement can be traced through centuries prior to its emergence in twentieth century America, its organizational shape appeared mainly in the years after World War II. And, as anyone who considers the movement with a careful eye understands, evangelical definition has been a central preoccupation of the movement from the moment of its inception.



The word “evangelical” long predates the coalescence of the evangelical coalition of the last century. The word has been applied to Methodism in the eighteenth century, to nonconformists and low church Protestants in Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and to a host of groups, churches, and movements ever since. As early as the nineteenth century,

frustration and confusion arose over the use and misuse of the term. The seventh Earl of Shaftesbury expressed the late-nineteenth century frustration when he declared, “I know what constituted an evangelical in former times . . . I have no clear notion what constitutes one now.”

In this light, one is tempted to identify with the late Justice Potter Stewart, who during deliberations of the U. S. Supreme Court in a 1964 case concerning pornography, simply declared: “I know it when I see it.”

In the most common usage of the term, it works in almost this very sense. An evangelical is recognized by a passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, by a deep commitment to biblical truth, by a sense of urgency to see lost persons hear the Gospel, and by a commitment to personal holiness and the local church. In any event, this is what we should hope to recognize as authentically evangelical.

But there is more to the question, of course. Honesty requires that the term be defined by its necessity. In this sense, *evangelical* has been and still remains a crucial term because we simply cannot live without it. Some word has to define what it means to be a conservative Protestant who is not, quite simply, a Roman Catholic, nor a theological liberal. While Catholics and liberal Protestants may speak of themselves in terms of an evangelical spirit (and both have), the term makes no sense as applied to a movement unless it is held to be clearly distinct from both Roman Catholicism and Protestant Liberalism. Yet, there is more to the story of course, since the evangelical movement was also born out of a deep concern to identify a posture distinct from that of Protestant Fundamentalism.

There have been attempts to replace the term with something more useful, but such efforts have met with little success. The reason for this is quite simple – the word really does accomplish what it sets out to do. It functions as a descriptor for many millions of Christians for whom no other aggregate denominator is appropriate. The word has enduring value precisely because we cannot operate without it.

That is not to say that its use is uncontroversial. Dissatisfaction with the term was evident among many of the young leaders of the “New Evangelicalism” which emerged with such energy in the years just after World War II. Driven by a determination to distinguish themselves from separatistic Fundamentalism on the one hand, and Protestant Liberalism on the other hand, these ambitious founders of contemporary evangelicalism laid hold of the only term that seemed to describe their identity and aspirations. What other term would serve so well?

During the 1970s and 1980s, laments over the word and its usage led figures such as William J. Abraham to argue that the word is an “essentially contested concept” – a

concept borrowed from the world of philosophy. Abraham, a leading intellectual figure on the evangelical left, argued that the term was almost always used in the context of theological judgment. Yet, he asserted, “There is no single essence or one particular condition that captures the achievement concerned or will be agreed upon by all evangelicals.” Of course, even in making his argument, Abraham had little choice but to use the term “evangelicals” even as he argued that the concept is “essentially contested.”

In my view, evangelical definition must be placed within three distinct but overlapping contexts. We should consider *evangelicalism* in historical, phenomenological, and normative senses. None of these can stand alone, and I will argue that all three are needed in order to understand evangelicalism and to consider the question of evangelical identity.

In its historical usage, in the English-speaking world the term goes back at least to the early eighteenth century. D. W. Bebbington traces evangelical history to the spiritual awakenings of that era and to and to the famed ministries of figures such as George Whitefield and the brothers John and Charles Wesley. In this sense, the earliest evangelicals were British Methodists and their spiritual cousins, whose infectious love for the Gospel, concern for social justice, and commitment to holy living shaped the religious life of both the British Isles and North America.

Later, the term was applied to the nonconformists and low church Anglicans who stood apart from the influence of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England and from the developing theological liberalism that had already reached into both Anglican and non-conformist churches and institutions. In this sense, a figure like Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of nineteenth century London, is seen as a paradigmatic evangelical type – and one who was already deeply concerned about theological compromise within evangelical circles.

In the United States, the term was often applied as it had been in European contexts – as a synonym for Protestant. The heirs of the Reformation were simply described as evangelical as a way of stressing a positive identity other than just being known as non-Catholic.

In the early twentieth century, the term was often applied to a spirit of evangelism and Gospel energy. But, as the nation was rocked by the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy in so many churches and denominations, the word caught the attention of some conservative Protestants who steadfastly opposed theological liberalism, but who also wanted to distinguish themselves from Fundamentalism.

The controversies and church battles between the Fundamentalist and Modernist forces in the early decades of the twentieth century revealed rival understandings of the Christian faith. The Modernists claimed to be saving Christianity by accommodating Christian

theology to the anti-supernaturalism that increasingly shaped the thought life and worldview of the intellectual classes. They adopted higher-critical approaches to the Bible and its interpretation, revised virtually all of Christianity's core doctrines, and transformed the life of denominations, institutions, and churches that had formerly held to far more conservative beliefs. They relativized the creeds and gained control of the organizational infrastructures of most of the mainline Protestant denominations.

The Fundamentalists pledged themselves to oppose this theological revolution and return to the "fundamentals of the faith." They sought to resist and to reverse the liberal trends within their churches and denominations, and battle after battle ensued. The Fundamentalists mounted a massive movement, holding Bible conferences and establishing networks of preachers and laypersons. But, in the end, battle after battle was lost. The governing structures of the mainline denominations were filled with either liberals or their "moderate" supporters.

In the years between the two great wars, the Fundamentalists generally separated from the established denominations, forming their own universe of Bible colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, and even denominations. After the public humiliations of the Scopes Trial and other developments, Fundamentalism began to drop out of the nation's intellectual conversation. Liberals controlled the denominations, the established denominational colleges and seminaries, and the prestigious pulpits. The Fundamentalists were relegated to a constellation of Bible colleges, newspapers, Bible conferences, and publishing houses. They also seized upon new technologies, particularly radio, in order to get their message to a mass audience.

After World War II was over, a movement of young leaders, pastors, theologians, evangelists, and organizers came together in an effort to create a new conservative alternative to Fundamentalism. They were, in fact, the founding fathers of modern evangelicalism – men such as Billy Graham, Harold John Ockenga, Carl F. H. Henry, and Charles Fuller. Some, such as Carl Henry, E. J. Carnell, Gleason Archer, and Kenneth Kantzer, pursued doctoral degrees at prestigious universities in order to gain access to the larger intellectual conversation. These "New Evangelicals," as they styled themselves, were determined to maintain a clear and unquestioned commitment to theological orthodoxy and to oppose theological liberalism in all its forms. Yet, they also wanted to distinguish themselves and their movement from Fundamentalism, which they identified with anti-intellectualism, a lack of serious theological engagement, a withdrawal from social responsibility, and an eccentric list of theological preoccupations.

Over time, these leaders created their own constellation of churches, evangelistic associations, colleges and universities, theological seminaries, publishing houses, and mission agencies. They sought to unify conservative Protestants into a coherent and credible movement. In their view, the movement should appeal to conservatives still remaining within

the liberal denominations, as well as to Fundamentalists who had grown weary of the debates and factionalism of the Fundamentalist movement. They established a central periodical, *Christianity Today*, launched in 1956 as a conservative alternative to the liberal *The Christian Century*. As founding editor Carl F. H. Henry made clear, *Christianity Today* would engage the issues of the day from a posture of intellectual engagement and credibility.

Over the last half of the twentieth century, these leaders and their heirs had built a massive evangelical movement that, by the last quarter of that century, had captured the attention of the larger public, even if it failed to make much headway toward the recovery of the mainline denominations. Through their colleges and seminaries, publishing houses and periodicals, media empires and extensive networks, the evangelicals created a major “third force” in American life, distinguished from both a newly-assertive Catholicism and the mainline Protestant denominations even then in marked numerical decline.

By the 1970s, it was impossible to speak knowledgeably about religion in America without acknowledging the existence and influence of the Evangelicals. This did not mean, however, that observers of the movement had a clear grasp of what constituted evangelical identity. Frankly, it did not even mean that the leaders of the movement shared a common understanding of evangelical identity among themselves.

The challenge of defining evangelical identity remains one of the most important challenges for the movement — and one that entails no small amount of controversy. This much is clear — there is no way for any responsible evangelical to avoid this challenge. To do so is to consign the word to eventual meaninglessness, and to deny evangelicals the right and responsibility to define themselves in theological terms. That is far too high a price to pay.

I am pleased to be one of four contributors to the new book, *Four Views On The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, edited by Andrew Naselli and Collin Hansen. The other three contributors were Kevin Bauder, John Stackhouse, and Roger Olson. Like other books in this Zondervan series, this volume allows each contributor to set his main argument in a major essay, and then to respond to the other essays. It makes for a lively and timely debate on one of the most important issues facing evangelicals today. The book will be released on September 26. This essay is adapted from the opening section of my essay.

