Evangelical or Reformed?

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Evangelicalism has become the dominant form of Protestant Christianity in the United States. It is the nation's largest and most actively committed form of Christianity. Its influence is significant on church and nation and is likely to continue for some time. It has also made an impact abroad, especially in Africa and Central and South America. Due to evangelicalism's visible presence, its public involvement in the affairs of the nation, and its emphasis on the uniqueness of the Gospel, it is regarded with hostility by many people. Because evangelicalism is intent on remaining faithful to the Gospel, evangelicals remain one of the last social groups in the United States that people can speak disparagingly about in public and get away with it. They are victimized by mockery and prejudice. Many secular "elite" have such a negative view of evangelicals that it approaches religious bigotry. Mention anything positive in the name of the God of the Bible, and someone will immediately mention something negative. According to one survey, "nearly one out of three academics said that Evangelicals are a "threat to democracy."

Definition of Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is hard to define. It is actually an "extraordinarily complex phenomenon." The story of American evangelicalism is rich with a great variety of theologies and cultural traditions. The modern "evangelical" movement emerged from fundamentalism by the 1930s and early 1940s. New leaders arose, who wanted to reform Protestant fundamentalism and smooth its rougher edges. They reacted to the fundamentalist withdrawal from the world and the intellectual ghetto in which they had boxed themselves in before World War II. In so doing, they opted for a new label – evangelical instead of fundamentalist.

What is evangelicalism? *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984) describes it as "the movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency." Evangelicalism is not a church, nor a theological system, nor a religious society. It is a movement without a specific address or residence. It is more a mood or a mind set than a systematic whole. It is noted for its activities in evangelism, foreign missions, campus ministries, aid organizations, and political and social issues. It affirms the central beliefs of historic Christianity. In his *The Old Religion in a New World*, Mark A. Noll argues that the term is broadly used to mean all non-modernist Protestants, or all Protestants who retain belief in the Bible as the revealed Word of God, who share their Christian faith, and who trust in Christ alone for their salvation.

George M. Marsden calls evangelicalism "a religious fellowship or coalition of which people feel a part." It has its adherents in evangelical denominations such as the Free

Methodist Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Church of the Nazarene. In his *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (2002), Randall Balmer includes in evangelicalism both staunch Calvinists in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, who believe that speaking in tongues ended when the last apostle of Christ died, and members of the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination that makes such Spirit-filled language a sign of genuine Christianity. But many evangelicals also belong either to independent churches or to mainline denominations in which they are a distinct minority.

Neo-Evangelicalism

Many new leaders in the evangelical movement preferred to call themselves "neo-evangelical." The new term was first introduced by Dr. Harold John Ockenga, the first president of the National Association of Evangelicals. He countered the oft-repeated charge of anti-intellectualism levelled at fundamentalism by an emphasis on scholarship, participation in politics and a stand on social and moral issues. He said that "The new evangelicalism breaks with ...three movements. The new evangelicalism breaks first with neo-orthodoxy because it declares that it accepts the authority of the Bible... He [the new evangelical] breaks with the modernist, however, in reference to his embrace of the full orthodox system of doctrine against that which the modernist has accepted. He breaks with the fundamentalist on the fact that he believes that the Biblical teaching, the Bible doctrine and ethics, must apply on the social scene, that there must be an application of this to society as much as there is an application of it to the individual man." One of the early prominent neo-evangelical leaders was Carl F. Henry. In his *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, he issued a stinging rebuke to fundamentalists in 1947. He argued that fundamentalists were too otherworldly, anti-intellectual, and unwilling to bring their faith to bear upon culture and social life. He wanted to unite personal depth with social breadth, the importance of conversion with the necessity of social reform. In 1956, Henry became the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, an influential magazine that has served as a guide, a forum for neo-evangelical theological thought, perspectives on social issues, education, and so on.

Evangelicalism's Theology

Since evangelicalism is not "uniform", it is difficult to describe its theology. Evangelicals disagree about baptism, the character of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, about predestination and human freedom, and about church polity. But most evangelicals in the twentieth century recognized areas of agreement to be more crucial than the disagreements that had utterly divided Christians in the past. What is clearly evident, though, is the influence of Arminianism with its overt emphasis on man's action in conversion, and too little on God's. Randall Balmer notes that American evangelicalism in general has abandoned Calvinist notions about predestination in favour of Arminian doctrines that exalt the individual's ability to "choose God" and thereby take control of his or her spiritual destiny. In evangelicalism in general, there is a high priority not only on the role of the individual in the salvation process, but also on the assertion of popular rights against the role of historic creeds, confessions, and historical theology. If the

language of popular sovereignty became the accepted norm in America, it was no less so for popular theology. But despite the many internal differences, the bricks and the mortar of the movement have four enduring emphases: (1) The normative value of Scripture in the Christian life. Scripture is the ultimate authority in matters of spirituality, doctrine, and ethics. Evangelicals defend the doctrine of inerrancy of Scripture against the inroad of modernism and the modernistic spirit.(2) The necessity of conversion of the individual. Some believe one should know the date of his or her conversion, others claims it does not matter when or how one is converted. You don't have to know the date of your conversion as long as you know you are converted. (3) The cross of Christ is central in the evangelicals' gospel proclamation. The atoning work of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity is stressed. Jesus Christ is the only way to God the Father. (4) Because Christ is the only way, evangelism and missions are imperative. In obedience to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), the glad tidings of salvation to a lost and hurting world must be proclaimed. As Marsden observed, evangelicalism is simply marked by "a zeal to proclaim the biblically revealed gospel of salvation through the atoning work of Christ." But its zeal for outreach has also its critics. The historian of religion, Martin Marty, notes that evangelicals have typically "accented personal piety and individual salvation, leaving men to their own devices to interpret the world around them." Marty argues that we are living for the first time in history where Christianity has been boxed into the private sphere and has largely stopped speaking to the public sphere. In his *The Evangelical Moment: The Promise of an American Religion*, Kenneth J. Collins offers a similar critique. He asserts, "Though American evangelicals are well known for leading sinners to Christ, and the altar call in some churches has virtually become a sacrament, many are less adept at leading Christians into serious and costly discipleship, the kind of discipleship that is marked by patient suffering and sacrifice over time as men and women are led into the fulness that is Christ."

Loss of tradition

Critics of evangelicalism claim that it suffers from historical amnesia due to a faulty interpretation of the Protestant notion of sola scriptura, the Bible alone. Because evangelicalism claims the sovereignty of the individual in interpreting Scripture, which is a move that is about as modern and anti-traditional as can be, it has lost its appreciation for the great traditions of the church. While conservative evangelical Christians believe American culture needs to return to its historic traditions, they think the church needs to abandon hers. Consequently, they play fast and loose with the Bible and its theology, even while maintaining inerrancy and inspiration. Furthermore, most American evangelicals consider themselves loyal foot-soldiers in the culture wars while embracing the tenets of their secular culture in the church.

The hostility towards traditions and the historical roots of the church have led to a cavalier rejection of the past, which stripped the church of the rich resources of centuries worth of theological reflection, Scriptural meditation, and spiritual experience. Many evangelicals have lost the intellectual riches of two millennia of theological reflection. Their attitude implies that there is nothing to be gained from grappling with

the thought of the great minds of the past such as Augustine and Tertullian, Bernard of Clairveaux and Thomas Acquinas, Martin Luther and John Calvin. In *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, Nancy Pearcey points out that the great figures in church history are our brothers and sisters in the Lord, members of the Body of Christ extended across the ages, and we learn much by honing their minds on the problems they wrestled with and the solutions they offered. But when one rejects Christian history and attempts to start anew, one is doomed to failure. It leads to anti-intellectualism and theological shallowness.

Anti-Intellectualism

The word "evangelicalism" continues to evoke images of anti-intellectualism. Secular academics often stereotype evangelicalism as anti-intellectual and devoid of significance for thinking people. What happened to the evangelical mind? Why did the evangelical movement become largely anti-intellectual with little sense of how to relate to the mainstream culture? The populist – revivalist – style of evangelicalism downplayed doctrine and appealed to "ordinary" folks. But there is also the scholarly style of evangelicalism – united in evangelical fervour with traditional emphasis on theology and scholarship. It shows that it is capable of holding its own when challenged in the marketplace of ideas. For example, the Evangelical Theological Society, founded in 1949, tapped a wide circle of scholars who hoped to develop an evangelical perspective in Biblical and theological studies. The Evangelical Philosophical Society, founded in 1974, is an organization of professional scholars devoted to "excellence in both the church and academy." Both societies have Reformed scholars as members.

The Doctrine of the Church

The doctrine of the Church is not on the priority list of evangelicalism. Many evangelicals uncritically absorbed the individualism that dominates American culture, and simply transferred it to the church. They view the church as a collection of equal, autonomous individuals committed together by choice. The church is no longer an organic community into which one is received, and certainly not a spiritual authority to which one submits him or herself. The evangelicals' attitude toward personal choice enables them to move rather easily from one denomination of one community church to another. In today's consumer's culture, the customer is in charge. John G. Stackhouse Jr., theology professor at Regent College, argues that contemporary evangelicalism "has fragmented a thousand ways." He observes: "Loyalty to a group, especially a local denomination and denominational tradition, is now regarded as a quaint heirloom from Grandma and Grandpa's day. We are loyal to those organizations that suit us individually...And when they don't suit us any longer, we move on to another option, another 'brand' or 'product.'"
In his *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*, D.G. Hart notes: "To be a Christian is not to be a part of a movement but to be a member of the body of Christ. This is a lesson that the evangelical movement has not learned." Evangelicals became conscious of themselves as a movement as well as a network of like-minded individuals and organizations. They all shared basic similarities,

similar doctrine, similar concern for piety and evangelism. Eventually, in the late twentieth century, they replaced the church with the parachurch. They established a number of parachurch structures and organizations with the goal of fostering interdenominational cooperation, especially in the area of evangelism. Some examples of the multitude of parachurches are InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, World Vision International, and the Navigators. Put simply, evangelicalism thrives on parachurch "ministries" that function as sources of communication and recruitment not tied to a particular congregation or denomination.

Postmodern Evangelicalism

The prominence of individualism and consumerism, combined with the latest marketing techniques continues to shape America's religious landscape. The populist branch of the evangelical movement gave rise to the mega-churches with leaders who are celebrities, entrepreneurs – pragmatic marketeers – who are willing to do whatever works to get the numbers and enlarge their churches. They show a willingness to tailor their message, their worship, and their theology to the consumer demands of the religious marketplace. They have become performers, stringing together stories and anecdotes, often from their own life to offer advice for practical daily living. Expository sermons on Biblical texts have given way to topical sermons on the felt needs of the congregation. In these mega-churches, you won't see crosses, nor hard pews, nor pipe organs, nor Sunday finery, nor collection plates. Churchly language is avoided. Drama is also featured. And Praise and Worship has became embodied and institutionalized. Many people attending mega-churches may be church hoppers or perennial visitors, considering themselves free-floating Christians without accountability and commitment – and they like it that way. They apparently believe that salvation is separable from accountable church membership. Noll describes mega-churches as "spiritual shopping malls designed intentionally to provide religious resources for people caught in the tense circumstances of modern life." Two of the new celebrities in what is now called "postmodern evangelicalism" are Joel Osteen and Rob Bell.

America's largest non-denominational mega-church, Lakewood Church, is led by Joel Osteen, televangelist and best-selling author. It boasts an average attendance of 32,500 in the first quarter of 2005. Osteen's book *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living Your Full Potential*, has sold almost 3 million copies. This 42-year pastor did not go to seminary and never preached a sermon until his father's death in 1999, former pastor John Osteen. Critics of Osteen argue that he downplays the sinful nature of humanity and the need for repentance. Absent in his new church building are a cross or other traditional religious symbols.
In 1999, Rev. Rob Bell founded the Mars Hill Bible Church, which now has 10,000 attendants in a former Grandville shopping mall. Recently, he released his first book *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. Bell gives the impression that he is the first one ever who struggles with theological questions. As he doesn't place any value on the history of doctrine, he raises questions without offering answers or solutions. He doesn't draw the lines between believers and unbelievers, or church members and

nonmembers. He argues that the lines are arbitrary and that we are all on a journey. He suggests we ought to replace the word missionary with tour guide, because we cannot show people something we haven't seen. This "tour guide" shows people that wherever they go, Jesus is already there.

Rob Bell wants a "fresh picture" of Jesus for those who have trouble with the traditional portrait. While calling Christ's way the "best possible way to live", Bell writes that Jesus did not claim that His way is better than another. He argues that a follower of Jesus is free to claim the truth wherever he finds it. The individual reins supreme. "Everybody's interpretation is essentially his or her own opinion. Nobody is objective." Consequently, Bell reduces religious truth to a "matter of individual choice" or preference. He encourages readers to question their beliefs and church teachings. He believes that the Bible is a narrative, a book that constantly must be wrestled with and re-interpreted. "I think sometimes the Bible can become the new golden calf," said Bell. He calls for a faith that fights poverty, injustice and suffering – to make this world the kind of place God can come to. He is eager to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Heaven comes to earth. "For Jesus, the question wasn't, 'how do I get into heaven?' But 'how do I bring heaven here?'" In other words, in Bell's postmodern church, it doesn't matter whether a religion is objectively true but only whether it performs a beneficial function for those who believe it.

Reformed or Evangelical?

Many church historians mistakenly identify Reformed tradition with the very substance of American evangelicalism. We have some fundamental differences with the evangelical, but we should learn from their missionary passion, the joy in their salvation, their personal devotional life, warmth in preaching and worship. Although we share basic Biblical doctrines of evangelicalism, the conservative Reformed share a commitment to the centrality of God's grace for the salvation of individuals. They also strongly believe that church membership cannot be separated from salvation. They believe that Christ builds His church as a house - a home for the Holy Spirit for parents and their children. And a house is not a movement. They rest in the grace of God and resist the appeal of individual choice and the restlessness of evangelical activism. They share confessional traditions such as the three forms of unity, the Heidelberg Catechism (or the Westminster Catechism), the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. They share the Calvinist picture of the fallen human condition, of merciful divine sovereignty in redemption, and the self-authenticating dignity of God's law. Calvin says that the goal for believers is conformity "between God's righteousness and their obedience." Unlike many evangelicals, Reformed believers emphasize the whole of Scripture and not just one or more of its parts. The reality of a life inflamed with a passion for God and accustomed to communion with God is given a central place. This passion may be shown with "an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8). The Reformed tradition is above all preoccupied with God and His glory. God rather than man is the focus of attention. The heart of the Reformed vision is "the sovereignty of the triune God over the whole cosmos." Reformed Christians do not believe they can bring heaven to earth. Nowhere does the Bible speak of the kingdom of God as a human achievement. The

Kingdom of God is God's rule which He and He alone establishes. In conclusion, for the sake of the Gospel and the future of our covenant youth, I urge Reformed Christians to prize and value their own tradition. As John Bolt observed in *Christian and Re-formed Today*: "If Christians no longer value their own tradition, often because they do not know its true genius, they cannot be convinced of its being the purest and truest expression of Christianity."

Johan D. Tangelder
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