

by **ROGER E. OLSON**

HOW TO BE **EVANGELICAL**
WITHOUT BEING
CONSERVATIVE

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WHO'S AN "EVANGELICAL" AND WHAT DOES "CONSERVATIVE" MEAN?

As long as I can remember I've considered myself *both* "evangelical" *and* "an evangelical." As an adjective, "evangelical" means being committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is supposed to be good news. To me, it always has been unqualified, unconditional good news—that Jesus Christ shows the loving heart of God by dying on the cross so that sinful men and women can be saved and enjoy a relationship with God now and into eternity. As a noun "evangelical" means a person who belongs to a large and diverse community of people who are similarly committed to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Of course, there's more to being evangelical than that, but the gospel lies at the core of the matter. After all the wrangling over who is truly "evangelical" and "an evangelical," I'm tempted to say "anyone is an evangelical who is sincerely, passionately committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ as that is conveyed to us through the inspired narratives of the Bible." Another way of putting it is that anyone is an evangelical who is a God-fearing, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christian. I know that won't satisfy some people who want the label evangelical to mean more, but I've become satisfied with this broad definition.

Shifting Evangelical Labels

I used to think of myself as a “conservative Christian,” though I never thought of myself as a “fundamentalist.” Let me explain. In my past “conservative Christian” was part of being evangelical; if a person was committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, she was expected to take a generally traditional approach to interpreting the Bible and confessing Christian doctrines. A fundamentalist, on the other hand, was someone who elevated minor Christian beliefs and matters of opinion to the status of dogmas and defended them militantly against all “compromises” with secularity and liberal thinking. Especially after World War II, fundamentalists were those conservative Christians who considered Billy Graham dangerously liberal because he welcomed Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants to cooperate in his evangelistic crusades. Other conservative Christians, however, were simply evangelicals who embraced the ministry of Billy Graham and tended to be somewhat more relaxed in their attitudes toward doctrine and ecumenical cooperation than were fundamentalists.

I learned these categories (evangelical, conservative, fundamentalist) in college and seminary and held onto them for many years. They served me well as I attempted to categorize and describe the blooming, buzzing confusion of American Christianity.

Let me illustrate. I grew up participating in a large, interdenominational organization called Youth for Christ. There I rubbed shoulders with fellow students of many Protestant denominations and even a few Roman Catholics. We shared a common commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ and were all passionate about having a “personal relationship” with him, which included “quiet times” (daily devotions), Bible study, regular worship, and “witnessing” (sharing the gospel with others and inviting them to be saved). We were all evangelicals and, for the most part, conservative in our beliefs and morals. We didn’t talk about politics or social issues; we focused exclusively on evangelism, worship, devotions, and fun. We strictly avoided those relatively minor

doctrinal differences that separated our denominations—such as whether Jesus Christ would return before, during, or after the so-called “tribulation” and the proper way to baptize people. Well, we may have discussed such issues, but we never expected everyone to believe the same about them.

Being evangelical was important to us; we valued our evangelical identity because it set us apart from “nominal Christians”—those who didn’t take their faith seriously or allow it to affect their daily lives. Nominal Christians merely attended some church occasionally and considered themselves Christians because of some formal association with a Christian church. We evangelicals sought a “higher life” of intense personal faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.

But as much as we disparaged nominal Christians and tried to “win them to the Lord,” we also knew the difference between ourselves and the “fundamentalists” in our town. They shared many of our beliefs and commitments, but they wouldn’t have anything to do with us because we were, to them, polluted by our “compromised Christianity.” Some of us went to movies, we didn’t adhere strictly or militantly enough to what they considered a literal interpretation of the whole Bible, and we had Christian fellowship with believers of all denominations, including Catholics.

The fundamentalists were our “evangelical fringe”—the evangelicals who were always mad at someone. They puzzled and bewildered us. When an associate evangelist of Billy Graham came to our town to hold an evangelistic crusade, the fundamentalists and mainline Christians didn’t cooperate even if some of them snuck in to listen. The fundamentalists considered Billy Graham too liberal; the mainliners considered him too conservative if not fundamentalist! We thought we were just right because we were in the middle. We loved Billy Graham and looked to him as our model of being authentically evangelical because of his clear commitment to the Bible and to the gospel of Jesus Christ without narrowness, rigidity, or anger.

So, I grew up well into my mature years interpreting the Christian world around me using these three general categories:

fundamentalists to the far right, mainline Christians to the left, and evangelicals in the middle. And we thought we were the perfect conservative Christians. Yes, the fundamentalists were conservative also, but theirs was a “maximal conservatism” that made us cringe as they, for example, rejected modern Bible translations and insisted that only the King James Version of the Bible is inspired and authoritative. Anything new they rejected, and they specialized in condemning fellow Christians for their role in the things noted above.

If you had asked me in the 1970s whether being evangelical and being conservative were inextricably linked, I would have considered the question odd. How could they be separated? So long as we weren’t excessive in our conservatism by being militant, angry, too narrow, or rigid, I gladly accepted the label “conservative Christian” and even “conservative evangelical.” Being conservative simply meant taking the Bible seriously as God’s inspired, written Word, believing in Jesus Christ as God and Savior, being generally respectful toward traditional Christian doctrines such as the Trinity (even if you didn’t know what they meant), and living by “biblical moral standards” such as the Ten Commandments. We debated “matters of conviction” (individual conscience) such as smoking and going to movies, but they weren’t litmus tests of being authentically Christian.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, the labels and categories I’ve been describing started changing and became more problematic for me and for many other Christians. One major reason was the national news media’s varying and sometimes unpredictable uses of them. Many of my friends and acquaintances no longer call themselves evangelical because they consider that term hopelessly linked forever with the so-called “Religious Right” — a movement of ultra-conservative, mostly fundamentalist Christians who use politics to dominate American social life with their blend of social and religious conservatism. This began in the late 1970s with the rise of fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell to prominence as a religious and political force to be reckoned with. He and others founded the Moral Majority in

an attempt to use government to promote what they considered conservative morality.

Falwell and people like him managed to garner the media's attention as they touted themselves as the true spokesmen for "evangelical Christianity" in America. The irony is that in the 1960s Falwell was one of those rigid, narrow, militant fundamentalists preaching on the fringes of the larger, more diverse evangelical community. At that time he eschewed the label "evangelical" and criticized leading evangelicals for being too broad and inclusive. But during the 1980s and 1990s he reinvented himself and managed to make himself and people like him the media standards of evangelicalism. Even more impressive was the way these fundamentalists claimed and cornered the label "conservative Christian" (or "Christian conservative") for themselves.

Separating "Evangelical" from "Conservative"

Gradually the impression has sunk into the American mind that being a conservative Christian, being evangelical, and being narrow, rigid, militant, and angry are the same. But more important, the media's use of these terms and categories has left the impression on the public mind that being evangelical means having a knee-jerk reaction against any and every cause considered progressive or liberal. During the 1800s there was a saying in Great Britain that the Church of England was the Tory Party (conservative party) at prayer. During the 1990s and into the twenty-first century many people feel that the Republican Party, now controlled by people who would probably have been considered ultra-conservatives in the 1960s and 1970s, is the evangelical Christian party and that evangelical churches are simply the Republican Party at prayer.

Because of this popular linkage in the media, many of my friends and acquaintances (and more than a few of my students and colleagues in traditionally evangelical universities and seminaries) have found it difficult to hold onto the label "evangelical." They want to put a distance between themselves and the Religious

Right, and the only way they know to do that is to stop calling themselves (or allowing themselves to be called) evangelical. But they don't know what new label to use to distinguish themselves from other Christians such as fundamentalists and mainline, liberal Protestants (who often seem to consider themselves the Democratic Party at prayer!). Being simply "Christian" would be nice, but it doesn't work because of the extreme diversity of Christianity in America. "What kind of Christian are you?" is the unavoidable question. Mentioning a denomination doesn't help much because either people haven't heard of it (or know little about it) or it is so diverse as to include almost anything and everything. To my friends who want to drop the label evangelical I ask, "What label do you prefer?"

I still consider myself evangelical and an evangelical. My theology is consistent with historic evangelical Christianity and I locate myself gladly within the larger evangelical Christian community. But I feel the pain of those who chafe at the label because it lands them alongside the ultra-conservative advocates of the Religious Right and/or fundamentalists. Many of us find ourselves in a quandary: how to rescue the label "evangelical" in this culture where it is so widely considered just another word for "conservative Christian" and where that label is generally identified with fundamentalism and the Religious Right.

That is the issue I hope to answer in this book. My purpose is to explain how a person can be evangelical and not conservative, let alone fundamentalist, *in the contemporary sense of that term*. I believe it is not too late to salvage the label "evangelical," but I think it is too late and simply unnecessary (if not wrong) to identify that with being conservative. Just as my parents and grandparents fought to rescue their evangelical identity from fundamentalism, so I want to rescue it from conservatism.

So who really is an evangelical? Who is a fundamentalist? What does it mean to be conservative as a Christian? The plain fact is that these are shifting categories and terms in dispute. They are essentially contested concepts. They don't work as absolute descriptors. The media have contributed to their elasticity

by calling fundamentalist leaders like Jerry Falwell evangelicals and moderate evangelicals like C. S. Lewis fundamentalists. (I have actually seen articles in secular publications calling Lewis an Anglican fundamentalist!)

In other words, I intend to challenge one major, almost undisputed category. Most people assume that to be evangelical is to be conservative socially, politically, and theologically. The label "conservative evangelical" seems like a tautology (a case of unnecessary repetition). Aren't all evangelical Christians conservative even if not fundamentalists? In a day and time when the old division between fundamentalism and evangelicalism is breaking down, I want to suggest that authentic evangelicalism is not even necessarily conservative (let alone fundamentalist). But I admit up front that all these terms and categories, labels and concepts are fluid and relative. None of them has an absolute meaning. Each is tied to some context and slips away when the phenomenon being described is viewed from a different angle.

What was Jerry Falwell? He called himself a fundamentalist and then an evangelical; he was treated as a spokesman for conservative Christians and evangelicals generally by the media. What is Billy Graham? He's criticized by some fundamentalists as liberal, but his own beliefs are conservative overall. Real liberals consider him (along with C. S. Lewis) a fundamentalist! In all this confusion many religious leaders and scholars have settled on one label as most useful: conservative evangelical. It seems to describe many fundamentalists and evangelicals well and many of them gladly embrace it for themselves. That worries me.

It worries me because words use us as much as we use words. Although the label conservative has no absolute meaning, it tends to signal a certain stance with regard to the past and tradition. It enshrines them as sacred. I find the juxtaposition of conservative (in that sense) and evangelical (in my sense, at least) filled with tension. I gladly call myself evangelical in a time when many who think and live like me are dropping it as useless or worse. It has come to be so closely associated with the likes of Jerry Falwell and others of the Religious Right in America that many who are not

so conservative find it problematic. I am not able to discard the label evangelical even though I wear it at times uncomfortably. By contrast, I am not so dedicated to the label “conservative” and even feel that it contradicts the true spirit of being evangelical in the best sense.

This sense of tension between “evangelical” and “conservative” first hit me during a potluck dinner at church. I was sitting across from the wife of a retired Baptist minister. She and her husband were most certainly not fundamentalists of the militant style. But in response to an unremembered comment nearby she declared most emphatically, “But we are a conservative people, you know.” I heard myself say, “I’m not so sure we should be.” I wasn’t certain what I meant, so I couldn’t adequately explain to her and others around the table why I said that. Later my reasoning became clearer to me: “conservative” sounds defensive of the past and the status quo. Even some dictionaries define it that way. “Evangelical” sounds both radical and open to new things. Not open to anything and everything, of course, but willing to venture out of comfort zones and risk vested interests for the sake of the gospel and biblical fidelity.

Let me explain. If I heard a fellow evangelical declare among a group of real theological liberals who deny the supernatural inspiration of the Bible, “We are a conservative people, you know,” I’d probably agree with her. Context matters. In a room full of Christians who are more than open to anything and everything new and who question all the doctrines so hard won by the church fathers and Reformers, I’d identify as conservative. But I rarely find myself in such contexts.

In a room full of evangelicals, however, I am reluctant to identify as conservative because that only reinforces the already prevailing pull of our fundamentalist past and the tug of resurgent fundamentalism among us. It also tends to quench the spirit of forward, progressive, and radically biblical thinking and living. It usually means favoritism toward what has always been thought and done by us; it usually signals a knee-jerk negative reaction to anything innovative, creative, and progressive even if it is

thoroughly biblical, God-honoring, and Jesus-glorifying. And, of course, it tends to identify one as a sympathizer with, if not participant in, the Religious Right in America.

I would like to suggest that it is possible to be more evangelical by being less conservative in the sense of "conservative" just described. That's because to me "evangelical" means being radically open to the gospel in all of its implications, including challenges to our comfort zones and vested interest in upholding the status quo and reiterating the past. To my understanding "evangelical" includes placing the cross of Jesus Christ over and above all our precious previous thinking and being ready and willing to think again. The cross relativizes our traditions. It condemns all idolatry—including worship of the past, of institutions, of comfort zones. It calls us to die to all of that and take risks for God. That's not conservative or liberal; it's radical, extreme, and progressive.

Radical Evangelical History

"Liberal" in today's marketplace of ideas means accommodation to the spirit of the modern or postmodern age. That's why liberal churches are dying; they are little more than clubs to reinforce Enlightenment-based thinking and living. Most people know intuitively that Christianity must be more than that. But Christianity is also more than conservation of traditions, including "the American way." Were the early Christians conservative? Even a quick reading of the book of Acts in the New Testament or the writings of the second-century church fathers will disabuse anyone of that notion! So why should twenty-first-century Christians be conservative? Linking conservative and evangelical in the way many people do tends to suggest that evangelicals take a defensive posture toward values and habits and customs of the past. Is that why twentieth-century evangelicals were notoriously slow to embrace movements for social justice in contrast to their nineteenth-century counterparts?

Even a cursory study of evangelical history reveals that nineteenth-century evangelicals were not conservative. They

rejected the majority liberalism and dead orthodoxy of the mainline churches in favor of radical conversion and transformation of life. That flowed over into their social attitudes. In England a leading evangelical named William Wilberforce led the movement to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain and its empire. In the United States evangelical evangelist and college president Charles Finney was a radical abolitionist who also advocated for full equality of women in society and churches.

As another example, B. T. Roberts was a Methodist who founded a new denomination called the Free Methodist Church, which still exists. He was a social progressive who promoted redistribution of wealth through social mechanisms such as inheritance tax. In fact, he was the first person to suggest it. Roberts also eliminated the practice of renting church pews (whence the “Free” in Free Methodist). Moreover, he believed in the full equality of women, including ordination of women to be pastors of churches. The Free Methodist Church was the first Christian denomination to ordain women and it was most definitely evangelical. The story of radical Christianity among nineteenth-century evangelicals has already been told by scholars such as Timothy Smith and Donald W. Dayton (*Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage* [Harper & Row, 1976]). Experiments in nonconservative, progressive evangelicalism have gained some notice in the media, but they have generally been treated as something less than authentically evangelical or as quirky and marginal.

Most notable of all exceptions to the rule that all evangelicals are socially and politically conservative as well as traditionalist is the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C., which publishes *Sojourners* magazine (earlier called *The Post-American*). Its leader, Jim Wallis, occasionally appears on television talk shows as the poster child for an anomaly of nonconservative evangelicalism. Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia, is another experiment in postconservative evangelical life, a group where racially integrated evangelical Christians work together to fight poverty. Among theologians, a group of postmodern evangelicals has become controversial for rejecting conservatism in favor of

radical Christian faith. Among them are Clark Pinnock, Stanley Grenz (now deceased), Henry Knight, John Franke, and John Sanders. The focus of this network is the Evangelical Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion.

My point is that nonconservative, or what I prefer to call post-conservative, evangelicalism has a history; it is not something I'm advocating for the first time. I explained it in detail in *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2007). My intent here is to show readers the way forward with postconservative evangelicalism. How is it possible now to be both authentically evangelical and nonconservative or postconservative?

On Being Postconservative without Being Postevangelical

Before I launch into that project, however, I ought to explain further what I mean by evangelical. Why am I so reluctant to give up that label? Why not simply opt for being postevangelical? Isn't the attempt to disentangle "conservative" and "evangelical" a Quixotic campaign like the famous Don of fiction jousting at windmills? I hope not. I think there are enough people out there who fit the mold of authentic evangelical faith that there is hope for the concept; I want to rescue it from the hands of those who would fold it into being conservative and to breathe new life into it.

So what do I mean by evangelical? I've tried to describe that in some other books I've written. If you want a fuller account than is possible here, I suggest you look at my *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Westminster John Knox, 2005) or the smaller *The Pocket History of Evangelical Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 2007). Both focus on theology and doctrine; in this book I want to expand that to social attitudes and habits of the mind and heart. I will argue that it is possible to be more evangelical by being less conservative in these habits and attitudes.

By evangelical I still mean what I meant in the books mentioned above. And I mean what is meant by most scholars of

evangelicalism minus the frequent element of social, political, and theological conservatism. Evangelicals are mostly Protestant Christians who display four characteristics: *biblicism* (belief in the supreme authority of Scripture for faith and life), *conversionism* (belief that authentic Christianity always includes a radical conversion to Jesus Christ by personal repentance and faith that begins a lifelong personal relationship with him), *crucicentrism* (piety, devotional life, and worship centered around the cross of Jesus Christ), and *activism* (concern for and involvement in social transformation through evangelism and social action).

These are the four hallmarks of authentic evangelicalism identified by evangelical historians David Bebbington and Mark Noll, and they have achieved almost canonical status among evangelical scholars and scholars of evangelicalism. (See Bebbington and Noll's book *Evangelicalism: Studies in Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond, 1700–1990* [Oxford University Press, 1994].) I will be referring to these hallmarks, plus one more, throughout this book. That added hallmark is *respect for the Great Tradition of Christian doctrine*.

Have I just turned back toward conservatism as a hallmark of authentic evangelicalism? I don't think so. First of all, by "respect" I do not mean slavish adherence. All thinking evangelicals are generally respectful of the achievements of the church fathers and the Reformers in terms of carving out the major doctrines of Christianity. Second, in today's church culture being respectful of Christian doctrines as they have been hard won by the church fathers and Reformers goes against the status quo insofar as that is reflected in a popular folk religion. Folk Christianity often emphasizes finding happiness and fulfillment in Jesus Christ without the cross or doctrine. I am an evangelical in the sense of all five hallmarks together—and so are most or all evangelicals whether they identify themselves as conservative or not.

Another way of explaining who's an evangelical is to say we all respect and admire Billy Graham. It sounds less than scholarly to say so! But, in fact, I've been in scholarly meetings where experts were trying to pin down a common evangelical identity and

finally agreed that it comes down to admiration for Billy Graham. Of course, that is only a contemporary definition of this religious phenomenon. It doesn't work for past evangelicals or future ones. But it does seem that today, in 2007, the label evangelical is shared by people who admire Billy Graham and think his preaching is true while those who are not so enamored with him and his message tend not to call themselves evangelicals. I am an evangelical in both senses, sharing the four historical and social hallmarks described by Bebbington and Noll (to which I have added a fifth) and admiration of Billy Graham.

So, in short and in essence, my claim is that being evangelical is not so much a matter of adherence to a set of doctrines, although evangelicals are generally respectful of the basic doctrines of Christianity, as it is of a matter of an experience and a spirituality centered around the Bible, Jesus Christ and his cross, and conversion, devotion, and evangelism. Likewise, "conservative" is not so much a matter of adherence to a list of causes as it is a habit of the heart. Conservatism values tradition and tends to be suspicious of anything that goes against tradition. What constitutes tradition depends on the context, of course, but conservatism is protecting and defending perceived traditional values, beliefs, and practices.

Yes, in today's society, because of the media, conservatism also tends to mean sympathy for, if not active promotion of, the causes of political and social conservatives. To many people it means favoring small government and states' rights. And it may also mean opposing abortion and homosexual marriages. The media has created a list of such "conservative causes." My use of "conservative" here, however, is not like that even though I acknowledge that use as legitimate and probably inescapable. When I claim that it is possible to be more evangelical by being less conservative, I mean by "conservative" that habit of the heart that reacts against anything nontraditional and tends toward an idolatry of some perceived past "golden age" when church and society were good and not yet corrupted by forces of secularity and liberal thinking.

Similarly, by “evangelical” I mean a religious and spiritual habit of the heart that values having a healthy, growing, personal relationship with Jesus Christ manifested in a “conversional piety.” Conversional piety is the network of interrelated beliefs and practices that include repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as God, Lord, and Savior; commitment to the Bible as God’s inspired, written Word as uniquely authoritative for Christian life and practice; daily devotions and regular worship and Bible study; cross-centered devotion that regards Jesus’ death on the cross as the turning point of history and personal life; and active participation in social transformation through evangelism and charitable caring for the poor and oppressed.

Of course, not everyone will agree with my delineations of “conservative” and “evangelical” here. However, I think they are broad enough to ring a bell with most people who have ever considered what these labels mean. And I think most people will recognize how intimately connected they have become in contemporary American social, political, and religious life. To a certain extent, they have been connected for most of the twentieth century. But this was not always so—and it doesn’t need to be so today. I hope that as we progress into the twenty-first century more and more people will consider the possibility of being evangelical without being conservative. Here I want to map out the way forward for those of us who want to be evangelical and wish to continue using that label for ourselves without being considered conservative or wearing that label.

In the process what will become apparent, I hope, is my desire to disengage being evangelical from any particular social or political ideology, party, or platform. To a great extent people in the early twenty-first century consider evangelicalism a conservative political movement as well as a conservative spiritual and religious one. Others have already challenged that. I want to go beyond that to even challenging the idea that being evangelical includes a conservative habit of the heart. Not only should we as evangelicals eschew any close relationship with a political movement or list of causes; we should also avoid a backward-looking,

traditionalist approach to discovering the good, the true, and the beautiful. We should become more open to finding those in the new, the innovative and creative, the radical and cutting edge. Evangelicalism should be an "edgy" religious and spiritual attitude and habit of the heart. As an evangelical I think I should be open to risk without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I don't want to discard everything of the past, but being radically biblical is more important to me than being orthodox or traditional. I think many evangelicals share that vision with me. It is for them that I write.