

# Everything You Know about **Evangelicals** Is **Wrong**

(Well, Almost Everything)

An Insider's Look at Myths & Realities

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**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Steve Wilkens & Don Thorsen,

*Everything You Know about Evangelicals Is Wrong (Well, Almost Everything): An Insider's Look at Myths and Realities*,  
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## Introduction

### *History, Agenda, and Caricatures*

Evangelicalism is, as William Abraham so aptly put it, a contested concept, and everyone seems to have joined the contest to define it.<sup>1</sup> Self-described evangelical Christians have engaged in attempts to define themselves for years and, as we will see below, these endeavors have yielded mixed answers. However, this process is no longer simply an intramural discussion. The growing visibility of evangelical Christians over the past couple of decades, culminating in their impact in recent elections, has caught the eye of those outside. Thus, even secular sources that are normally oblivious to the impact of religion in one of the world's most religious nations are weighing in with their own definitions of the essence of evangelicalism.

This book is about the quest to find an adequate and accurate definition of evangelicalism. As part of this endeavor, we will certainly offer our own portrait. In getting to this point, however, we will examine several characteristics commonly linked to evangelicalism, and reject them as essential attributes. These characteristics, represented by our chapter titles, are indeed present within the movement. Thus, we do not intend to say that no Calvinists, premillennialists, Republicans, or inerrantists are evangelical. In some cases, individuals with these loyalties are in the majority. Unfortunately, it is also true that other adjectives such as racist, stupid, or mean also apply to evangelicals, but we hope not to the majority. Thus, rather than denying that the attributes embedded in the chapter titles apply to *evangelicals*, as individual believers, we

want to say that these labels do not accurately capture the essence of a movement called *evangelicalism* and therefore do not belong in the definition.

In entering the fray generated by attempts to define evangelicalism, we have four audiences in view, each with a unique and often conflicting impression of the movement. The first consists of those who define evangelicalism from the outside. Secular non-evangelicals most frequently view the movement primarily from the perspective of its perceived social or political alignments. Christian non-evangelicals often share these sociopolitical perceptions but frequently combine them with theological concerns and differences as well.

The second audience consists of evangelicals who identify themselves as such and sprinkle the word throughout their websites and literature. However, when pressed to define what meaning the word conveys, they will frequently admit that they do not have a ready definition. This group says that defining evangelicalism is a bit like Justice Potter Stewart's observation about pornography: "You cannot say exactly what it is, but you know it when you see it." In other words, this group accepts the fact that evangelicalism is hard to pin down precisely, but it also wants to claim that the term has a reality to it. This reality is generally framed in terms of a commitment to Scripture's authority, the uniqueness of Jesus' divine/human nature and his atoning work and the cross, and a mandate to proclaim the gospel.

Like the second contingent, a third audience also identifies itself as evangelical. This group also says that this meaning can or should be clearly defined by adherence to certain carefully articulated doctrinal positions, social/political concerns, or lifestyle statements. This group's insistence on such specific boundaries will inevitably exclude some. Among those excluded will be members of the second and third groups who propose alternative boundaries as fundamental to an evangelical identity, and members of the first group, who are quite willing to be excluded.

However, we often find that those excluded by doctrines, social values, or ethical positions provided by members of our third intended audience are tempted to adopt a fourth approach. This group, which seems to be growing rapidly, has deep questions about whether the word itself remains useful. Given the dizzying array of definitions for evangelicalism, the battles that erupt around it, and the divisions created, many in this fourth contingent wonder whether it is advisable to forfeit the contest over evangelicalism's meaning and give up the term altogether.

Our response to each of these four groups will differ because each one has a different history that shapes its perspective toward evangelicalism and a different agenda in relationship to it. Thus each of these four prospective audiences tends toward what we take to be different caricatures of the movement. *The common element in our replies to each group will be an attempt to find a foundation in the empirical realities of evangelicalism's history, its present composition, and its trajectories toward the future.* Thus, a preliminary jumping-off point for our responses will be to take a very quick look

at evangelicalism's history and draw attention to where it is and where it is going. We will then offer a broad outline of what we take to be evangelicalism's agenda in relationship to the agendas of the four audiences identified above. From there, we will make a few tentative remarks about the caricatures of evangelicalism that have emerged in recent years.

Given what seems to be a deep impasse in finding a common definition of evangelicalism, one easily sympathizes with the impulse of the fourth group we identified. If so much confusion about opposing characterizations congeals around the term, why not count our money or cut our losses (depending on one's perspective) and walk away from the game? In reality, however, evangelicalism has a history, and we cannot simply walk away from history. It follows us, with or without our consent, and continues to define us, whether or not we can define it. While it has not always commanded the headlines it draws today, evangelicalism has been a formative force in this country's institutions, attitudes, and ideas. It has had a powerful pull on the denominations and religious organizations that are part of the United States' landscape, and in turn, evangelicalism has reshaped, reenergized, and redirected many of the denominations and parachurch organizations that have been a part of it. The irony, then, is that those who advocate abandoning the word "evangelical" are among those whose identities have been profoundly shaped by the movement. It owns us, even if we are not sure we want to own it. Although many of our chapters below will dip into various aspects of evangelicalism's history, we want to lay out an impossibly broad framework in support of evangelicalism's historical and ongoing diversity. This breadth, we believe, illuminates the problem confronting those who attempt to confine or define the movement in the categories examined between the first and last chapters of this text.

## Evangelicalism and Its History

If someone would begin a story about a Presbyterian theologian/philosopher, an Anglican open-air evangelist with strong Calvinistic proclivities, and a couple of Methodist preachers and hymn writers, then you might suspect it introduces a joke that involves this group strolling into a bar together. However, it is precisely this lineup of disparate characters—Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John and Charles Wesley—that the noted historian of evangelicalism, Mark Noll, identifies as the primary movers in modern evangelicalism.<sup>2</sup> These pioneers differed on just about everything. The Wesleys were high-church Anglicans, Whitefield was of mixed theological breed, and Edwards was the prototypical Presbyterian. The Wesleys had strong royalist sympathies and found the American Revolution a travesty. Edwards, although he died almost twenty years before that war, was the first president of a college that was, in many ways, the cradle of the American Revolution. When Edwards wrote, tightly argued theological and philosophical treatises emanated from

his pen. John Wesley expressed his theological views primarily through written sermons, letters, and (with his brother Charles) hymns. Whitefield and Edwards were strongly Calvinistic, while the Wesley brothers promoted Arminianism with a heavy dose of Catholic and Orthodox perfectionism thrown in, both of which put considerable strain on their relationship with Whitefield.

The origin of evangelicalism, of course, does not necessarily begin with Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys. They drew on Protestant roots that go back, at least, to the Reformation, and which include such evangelically formative Christians as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformers. Indeed, why go back only to the Reformation? Is evangelicalism merely a manifestation of Protestantism, or might it include adherents (past and present) of Catholic and Orthodox churches? Some would want to argue that there exists, in theory if nowhere else, an unbroken thread of evangelical Christians, going back to Jesus' disciples who first proclaimed the gospel (Greek *euangelion*, "good news") of Jesus Christ. Such historical views will be considered throughout this book; our goal is to discuss evangelicalism broadly rather than narrowly. However, in discussing modern evangelicalism, there occur high points in elaborating its history and agendas. Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys provide such a high point, and it is their diversity along with their evangelical family resemblance that make them so instructive with regard to understanding modern evangelicalism.

The areas of dissonance for Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys, to which many others could be added, did not find any resolution as evangelicalism grew. Instead, the movement became even more diverse, absorbing Lutheran pietists, anti-state-church Baptists, non-sacramentalist Quakers, pacifistic Anabaptists, tongues-speaking Pentecostals, Restorationist Stone-Campbellites, and a host of other groups. None of this seems a likely recipe for a movement that established a foundation for significant cooperative works! Nevertheless, despite the differences, individuals from these groups reached across denominational, theological, and social boundaries to start orphanages, rescue missions, missionary organizations, and other institutions. They built and ran schools and colleges across the country, including the first college in the world that enrolled African-Americans and women as full students alongside white males. Evangelicals of different theological persuasions joined forces to champion causes such as abolition, women's suffrage, and the temperance movement. They created the American Bible Society, the Sunday School Movement, the YMCA/YWCA, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Evangelicals of diverse traditions went to camp meetings together, planned revivals together, and sang each other's hymns.

It would certainly distort the picture to suggest that relationships between these disparate groups were devoid of friction. The irony of this cooperation is that it occurred at the same time many of these evangelical groups were going through wrenching denominational splits. The rancor was not simply focused on doctrinal differences, although there was plenty of this.

Every major denominational church body in this country, with the exception of Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism, split into factions over slavery. Most of them did not reunify until the last half of the twentieth century, and a couple of them are still divided. This led to political divisions that resulted in evangelicalism being split for decades between the Democratic South and the Northern and New England Republicans. (My, how things change!) Card-carrying evangelicals throughout the history of the country have been on the opposite sides of major social and political issues from the Revolutionary War to the Scopes Monkey Trial.

In short, then, one obvious reason for the contested identity of evangelicalism is that it has a messy history, the sort of messiness that makes it impossible for any one doctrinal distinctive, theological tradition, or social orientation to stake exclusive claims to naming rights. Tucked into the folds of the brief historical sketch are at least three additional factors that lend support to our contention that evangelicalism has been a “big tent.” First, in addition to the impressive diversity found in the history of this motley conglomeration called evangelicalism, one is struck by what we do not find for most of its story. Inerrancy does not arise as a major tension point between evangelicals until the middle of the twentieth century. Second, premillennialism had a minuscule following prior to the twentieth century. Evangelicalism had been in full swing for quite some time before the dispensationalist variation of this doctrine came into existence. Third, in terms of general popularity, Calvinism was on the ropes during much of the nineteenth century. However, our point is not that there is anything wrong with any of these views. Our argument is that none of these positions has been definitive of the movement. Evangelicalism did just fine before these positions emerged or when they were distinctly minority positions. The tides of favor have ebbed and flowed for various views and theological groups within the evangelical family. If we do not keep close tabs on this history, however, we can mistakenly conclude that certain ideas in ascendancy are constants of the evangelical identity. In several cases below, we will see how some of these mistaken conclusions have morphed into caricatures of evangelicalism.

A second feature of evangelicalism’s history is that it reminds us of elements that are far too often missing today. The major impulse for the abolition of slavery in both the United States and Great Britain came from evangelicals. The tip of the spear for women’s equality and educational opportunities has the same origin, and it should be noted that the mainline denominations that view themselves as front-runners in the ordination of women got around to this only many decades after it was common practice among Holiness and Pentecostal groups. In the nineteenth century, social service organizations of all kinds—rescue missions, hospitals, literacy programs, nursing organizations, and numerous other groups that ministered to those on society’s fringes—were dominated by evangelicals moved by their faith.<sup>3</sup> This is a real irony, because for much of their history, the criticism of evangelicals has been that they have

been *too accepting* of people of different races, *too egalitarian* in the matter of women's rights, and *too compassionate* toward the poor and those who live on the margins of society. Some of that criticism, by the way, came from fellow evangelicals. (I did mention that we were a rather diverse lot, didn't I?)

Our third observation has to do with a chapter in this book that has to this point escaped mention—the idea that evangelicalism can be stereotyped as rich and American. As the paragraph above notes, not only has evangelicalism's focus been directed at society's underclass, but a disproportionate number of evangelicals were, and still are, from that social stratum. Moreover, it is incorrect to view evangelicalism as an American phenomenon, specifically a phenomenon of the United States of America. Its presence in our culture is, rather, testimony to the enduring missionary impulse of a movement that predates the founding of the United States. Evangelicalism was in large part imported from Great Britain, but it also received immigrant missionaries from quite a number of European countries. To be sure, evangelicalism found a congenial environment in the New World, and soon this country, originally a missionary-receiving nation, became the world's most prolific missionary-sending country. These outreach efforts have been so successful that two-thirds of the world's evangelicals now live outside the Western Hemisphere, primarily in Africa, Asia, and Latin America! Evangelicalism is not exclusively a story centered on the United States. It is a global narrative, and trends strongly indicate that it will be increasingly so. The future history of evangelicalism will be a worldwide story, and the United States is and will be only one chapter in the broader text. In essence, then, two things are clear. First, evangelicalism is not a movement characterized by wealth, nor is it primarily a United States phenomenon. Second, when evangelicalism is viewed from a global perspective, many caricatures of this group, beyond the idea that it consists primarily of rich Americans, shatter into shards. For example, global evangelicalism certainly is not a purely Republican movement. Global evangelicalism, which may already include more Africans and Asians than Caucasians (with Hispanic numbers rising rapidly), can hardly be characterized as racially monolithic or ethnically exclusive. (Even in the United States, the percentage of the African-American population identified as evangelical is higher than the percentage among Caucasians. Hispanic-Americans will soon have a greater proportion of adherents than either group, if demographic trends continue.) A very small percentage of non-Western evangelicals are Calvinists, or even know what that means. Issues such as evolution rarely show up on the radar of Two-Thirds World evangelicals. In sum, then, many of the caricatures of evangelicalism noted in this book tell us more about our parochialism in the United States than about evangelicalism itself.

If nothing else, this brief historical glance at the jumble known as evangelicalism should conjure up a great deal of sympathy toward anyone who attempts to offer a definition of the movement. Our history reminds us that the struggle to define evangelicalism is nothing new, something we might be



more aware of if evangelicals paid more attention to history. The term has always been contested, the boundaries fluid, and often the main characters in the story have been at one another's throats. This naturally gives rise to an impulse to tidy things up by closely defining the term. The danger that attaches itself to cleaning up the meaning of a word is that we frequently inject our own agendas into the definition. We now turn to this matter.

## Agendas and Hyphenated Identities

One key motivation behind engaging the concept of evangelicalism is that it is an agenda-shaping term. While “agenda” often carries negative connotations, we use it here in its neutral sense: an agenda is a list of things we intend to do in pursuit of goals we find valuable. If the pursuit of goals is an important part of our lives (and we assume it is), then those ends will be promoted or hindered by the way “evangelical” is defined and who gets to define it. If some evangelicals become disenchanted by the efforts of others to constrict the boundaries and opt out of the discussion, then their agendas will be co-opted by those who do the job in their absence.

We will return to a discussion of what we think is lost when evangelicalism's agenda is co-opted by those with more narrow agendas. Before we get there, however, we want to say that it is altogether proper and necessary that Christians have both theological and sociopolitical agendas that are more sharply defined than the broader evangelical agenda. Theologically, the willingness of many to think of themselves in a hyphenated way—as Reformed-evangelical, Charismatic-evangelical, Holiness-evangelical, Baptist-evangelical, Catholic-evangelical, and so on—reveals something important. Despite the fact that the “evangelical” side of each equation indicates a sense of commonality with Christians outside one's specific theological tradition, the left side of each hyphenated pair clearly indicates that an individual finds a great deal of value within a particular theological tradition. In reality, it cannot be otherwise.

With apologies to churches that identify themselves only as evangelical, this designation—because of its ambiguity—gives little guidance about a multitude of issues they must face. For example, a church should not and cannot expect its evangelical identity to tell it whether, how, whom, or when to baptize, nor will it provide a straight answer about the salvific effects, or lack thereof, in baptism. Churches have to make a decision on this issue, but evangelicals are all over the theological map on the nature and meaning of baptism. Their guidance is going to have to come from somewhere else. Evangelical churches will respond that Scripture guides their doctrine, but that still leaves a lot up in the air. All evangelical churches claim biblical support for their baptismal theology, whether they are dunkers or sprinklers, infant baptizers or adult baptizers. Evangelical Anglicans worldwide draw a very close link between baptism and salvation; Evangelical Friends (Quakers) and those

in the Salvation Army reject the practice altogether. Both sides ground their positions in Scripture. Differences do arise in how we interpret Scripture, and those differences are generally transmitted through some sort of theological or denominational tradition.

Baptism is only one of the more obvious examples we could cite as evidence that the evangelical tradition is too vague to offer direction for doctrine or practice. Whether a church will ordain a female, choose its own pastor, use creeds in worship, speak in tongues, practice confirmation, or serve beer at the church picnic cannot be answered by appeal to an evangelical identity. You are much more likely to predict what someone believes about the Lord's Supper by knowing whether they are Presbyterian, Four-Square Pentecostal, American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, or Episcopalian than you are by knowing whether they are fundamentalist, evangelical, or liberal. One important value of these different theological belief systems, then, is that they provide a framework and rudder for a church's theology and practice in a way that generic evangelicalism cannot. The specific doctrines and practices of various denominations establish the specific means by which congregations pursue their agendas.

This same process of hyphenation applies to our social and political loyalties. Hyphenations such as Republican-evangelicals, creationist-evangelicals, and anti-gay-rights-evangelicals dot the demographic landscape. As a result, action items on certain evangelical agendas include the promotion of a particular candidate for government office, carrying the banner against teaching evolution in public schools, or championing the cause against health benefits for same-sex domestic partners. If you are a convinced advocate for any of these causes, we have no beef with that. Make your case, raise money, and win as many converts as you can by honest engagements and persuasion. We do not even have a problem with those who come to these positions as a result of their theological convictions. That is what theological convictions are for. If people do not call upon their Christian identity to shape an agenda, it does not count for much. Our point is that we should not confuse the social agendas of particular evangelicals with *evangelicalism's* agenda.

The paragraphs above focus on the left side of the hyphen, which highlights our distinctive theological and social commitments and goals. To put it another way, the left side of the hyphen points toward our quest for orthodoxy (right doctrine) and orthopraxy (right practice). Since our attempts to adopt the correct Christian beliefs and practices are directed by our theological traditions and not by evangelicalism, many ask why we need the right side of these hyphenated pairs—evangelicalism—at all. If evangelicalism spans such a hodgepodge of doctrinal positions and practices, many believe it represents an unacceptable descent toward the lowest common denominator.

The problem with this position is that while orthodoxy and orthopraxy are ideals of evangelicalism, no particular doctrinal formulation or set of social positions has ever been enshrined as an essential of evangelicalism. To be sure,

many students of evangelicalism have compiled lists of basic doctrinal ties or emphases that bind evangelicals together. There are two noticeable features of all these lists, however. The first is that they are *basic* doctrines, generally centering on the primacy of Scripture, the centrality of the cross, the full humanity and divinity of Jesus, and the mandate to proclaim the good news to all the earth. These basic beliefs, as we have stated above, are inadequate for setting the agenda for a full-orbed Christian life. The second observation is that our catalog of “what evangelicalism is not” is hardly radical. With only a few exceptions, those who study evangelicalism exclude them as definitive for the movement.

### Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Orthopathy

While evangelicalism does possess certain core doctrinal emphases, it is only when they are placed alongside something else that we catch a glimpse of evangelicalism’s essence. This “something else” might be called orthopathy (right feeling or pathos), orthoaffectus (right affection or disposition), or orthokardia (right-heartedness, or correct heart). This impulse sometimes has been referred to as pietism. The Pietist Movement in seventeenth-century continental Europe emphasized the experiential dimension of Protestantism, which in turn influenced British and American Christianity. Regardless of the designation, we see it from the beginning of evangelicalism. Despite the vast theological gulf between them, orthopathy is front and center in Jonathan Edwards’s focus on “religious affections” as well as in John Wesley’s appeal to “heart religion.” This impulse, which draws heavily from the pietism that followed closely on the Reformation’s heels, is the thread that can be traced from the beginnings of evangelicalism, through the Second Great Awakening and the revivalist/social reformist evangelicalism of the nineteenth century, and into the “Neo-Evangelicalism” of the middle twentieth century, and is present in the global explosion of Two-Thirds World evangelicalism in the early twenty-first century.

The difficulty in talking about orthopathy is that many jump to the conclusion that we are talking about mushy emotionalism superimposed on our spirituality, and evangelicalism is admittedly susceptible to this.

Orthopathy is a tricky term to define, and the reason for this stems from something that distinguishes it from the other two “orthos.” Orthodoxy and orthopraxy require a certain distancing and neutrality. They require that we stand back and reflect on our beliefs and actions to determine whether they conform to some standard of truth that is external to us. We want to discern whether our doctrines and activities are *correct* in view of this standard. Orthopathy, however, seeks the *right* rather than the *correct*. *Rightness*, in our use, is not the sort of thing that can be discerned through detached reflection or action. Orthopathy, or pietism, refers to a relational rightness; it is something

dynamic and personal. Thus at its best, evangelicals have thought of orthopathy as the righteous internal orientation in our relationship to a responsive and personal God. Because it cannot be infallibly detected by conformity to objective standards in the way that orthodoxy or orthopraxy can, it does not yield easily to measurement. But you know it when you see it.

The interplay of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy in evangelicalism can be illustrated by its relationship to fundamentalism and liberalism. Evangelicals often find a great deal of common ground both doctrinally and practically with fundamentalists in their own traditions. The dividing point between the two groups is not, therefore, orthodoxy or orthopraxy, but differences in the attitude toward orthopathy. On the other hand, liberals and evangelicals often have broad swaths of agreement on orthopathy, but differ significantly on questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Evangelicalism, as we conceive it, does not pit the head, hands, and heart against each other, but endeavors to bring them into a proper balance. Without striving for doctrinal or practical correctness, faith wanders astray. However, absent the proper orientation of the heart, orthodoxy turns cold and sterile while orthopraxy becomes legalism and empty ritual.

If this is anywhere close to true, evangelicalism can be considered a descent toward the lowest common denominator *only if* it is assumed that one's internal, passionate faith commitment falls lower on the scale of importance than proper doctrine or practice. Our interest in writing this book springs from the conviction that just the opposite is the case. A right-hearted desire to have one's life redeemed and mobilized toward ministry to the world has been an essential aspect of evangelicalism throughout its history, even if manifested imperfectly and often unconsciously. We cannot explain evangelicalism by appeal to doctrinal agreement or sociopolitical uniformity, and certainly not by ecclesiastical unity. Disagreement in these spheres is precisely what must be overcome in order for evangelicalism to exist. The means by which these differences have been mitigated, we believe, is the unity offered in a pietist impulse that expects that lives changed by the good news will give external as well as internal expression of this transformation.

To say that orthopathy is essential to evangelicalism's agenda is not to say that this characteristic cannot or should not be integrated to one's specific theological tradition. Nevertheless, even when this occurs, it does not eliminate the desirability of maintaining our hyphenated loyalties. First, by acknowledging that Christians of other theological stripes share similar evangelical impulses, we are reminded of the dangers of insularity and a prideful arrogance that tends toward making our theological distinctives absolute. Moreover, our evangelical identity can remind us that the winds of theological favor undergo significant shifts. For example, if you had lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, you had to search far and wide to find an evangelical premillennialist. Today they run in herds, to the extent that many identify premillennialism with evangelicalism. The point is that those who now find

premillennialism deeply convincing and enriching to their faith should be thankful that a small remnant of evangelicals kept that view alive when it was viewed with deep suspicion by the vast majority of their evangelical relatives (and called a heresy by a significant segment of them). The theological diversity of the evangelical family serves as a necessary sounding board against which we can continually test our own tradition's agendas and avoid the arrogance of doctrinal absolutism.

A second reason for maintaining hyphenated identities as Pentecostal-evangelicals, Methodist-evangelicals, Democratic-evangelicals, African-American-evangelicals, or any other dual citizenship we may claim is that, despite the differences highlighted by the first member of each pair, the “evangelical” counterbalance has provided some sense of unity. While most evangelicals will acknowledge that sincere and thoughtful Christians can disagree about many things in Scripture, one biblical teaching that seems crystal clear is that division within Christ's body, the church, is nothing short of sinful. Our evangelical identities, albeit in an imperfect way, have provided a vital link across social and denominational lines.

The cooperative ventures of evangelicals have (often unwittingly) provided an ecumenical vision that is easily overlooked. While mainline Christianity thinks of ecumenicity primarily in terms of denominational unification, evangelicals have created a plethora of institutions and organizations outside denominational boundaries. Moreover, many have been remarkably “bottom-up,” with the impetus coming mainly from engaged laity rather than church officials. These organizations range across a broad spectrum of religious activities—missions, education, evangelism, politics, social justice, discipleship, just to name a few. This more pragmatic approach to ecumenism (evangelicals are, ironically, more comfortable with being called pragmatic than ecumenical) means that one's denominational affiliation or social stances rarely stand as an obstacle for participation in evangelical organizations. In a sense, evangelicalism's pragmatic desire to accomplish its agenda of evangelizing and discipleship has often been more of a spur to ecumenicity than any theological impulse. While Protestant evangelicals are prone to forget that division is sinful and that they have been the worst offenders when it comes to denominational schism, they have also offered some of the best examples of what can be done when we step across theological boundaries to work together.

## Caricatures

As with all forms of humor, caricature can be a very honest form of communication. Sometimes caricatures convey brutal honesties, and these realities come back to bite us if we ignore them. Poll results that gauged public opinion about certain groups in American society illustrate the impact of caricatures on evangelicalism and may offer hints on how we might move for-

ward. This survey, taken by the Barna Group a few years back, discovered that when non-Christians were split off from the broader sample, their responses ranked “evangelical Christians” tenth out of eleven groups in terms of positive impressions. Evangelicals were viewed more favorably than prostitutes, but less favorably than real estate agents, movie and TV performers, lawyers, and lesbians! To be fair, the groups listed above were still within the margin of error for evangelical Christians, but this should not obscure an important fact: among those outside the Christian fold, evangelicals do not have a very positive public profile. The label “evangelical” clearly does not evoke images of “good news” to the very people evangelicals most want to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. To put it in marketing terms, the evangelical brand name is pretty much on a par with Yugo and Enron.

In case you are inclined to dismiss this as a generalized attitude of non-Christians toward Christians, this survey also had a category for “born-again Christians.” They came in third highest in positive impression. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that disapproval of evangelicalism centers on concerns we deal with in this book— notions that evangelicalism is essentially racist, homophobic, mean-spirited, dogmatic, hostile to science, and a host of other characteristics that the majority of non-Christians find repulsive. We hope that evangelicals will object to this characterization and call it, as we have, a caricature. But this is precisely where the honesty of caricatures shines through. Like all caricatures, the mental picture lodged in the minds of most non-Christians is not pulled from thin air. Instead, caricatures exaggerate what is there to some degree. They gain no traction without some connection to reality.

The problem is that evangelicalism is not fighting a poor public image on just one front. As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many who embody evangelical beliefs and impulses just do not want to own the label either. Again, we have to ask why, and we do not have to dig very deep to discover why. They will tell you that if the price of admission to the evangelical party is affirmation of some particular view on scriptural authority, eschatology, or divine sovereignty, or a single political affiliation, they prefer to stay home.

If individuals place themselves outside the borders of evangelicalism because they cannot affirm that which is essential to it, that is one thing. It is an entirely different matter, however, when the obstacles to inclusion are caricatures rather than realities. The latter is nothing short of tragic in our view. Therefore, even though many will be disappointed if we cannot provide a photo-perfect portrait of what evangelicalism is, our endeavor to say what evangelicalism is not has merit. If evangelicalism is not, in its essence, mean, sexist, Republican, or any of the other attributes we address, then we have a better chance of removing barriers between nonbelievers and evangelicals and, more importantly, between nonbelievers and the good news of Jesus Christ. If one can be a real, honest-to-goodness evangelical without becoming a pre-millennialist or an inerrantist, then we think that all will be deeply enriched if reluctant evangelicals willingly show up at the party.

The good news is that we can go a long way toward clearing up some of the misleading caricatures of evangelicalism by relying on one of the essential characteristics of the movement—orthopathy. Let us be honest: those who equate evangelicalism with meanness, racial exclusion, monolithic political loyalties, or dogmatism usually do not form these impressions because of failures in orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Instead, these caricatures arise because of orthopathic breakdown. Negative images of evangelicalism often emerge precisely because we allow differences to become divisive and we depersonalize (even demonize) those who disagree with us. Again, we do not want to imply that evangelicalism is something as insipid and amorphous as mushy religious sentiment chained to kindheartedness and mindless universal acceptance. Evangelicalism does say no to any attempt to minimize the unique authority of Scripture, relegate Jesus exclusively to the category of inspiring symbol or metaphor, or undermine Christianity's evangelistic mandate. When evangelicals must draw the line, however, orthopathy should guide how we do it. In sum, one of the most effective ways for evangelicals to overcome wrongheaded and damaging cartoon images of the movement is to start acting like evangelicals.

While we believe that evangelicals could do a lot for their cause by cleaning up their own house, an alliance such as evangelicalism will forever be highly susceptible to caricature because of its very nature. It has no formal membership process, standardized belief statement, centralized organizational headquarters, or official spokesperson. As a result, any pronouncement by a particular evangelical individual or group can be perceived (or explicitly claimed) as indicative of the entire movement. This is why we endeavor to maintain a clear distinction between *evangelicalism* and *evangelicals*. When the two are confused and statements of individual evangelicals are taken as definitive of the entire movement's agenda, caricatures come into existence. We could avoid much of this confusion if evangelicalism would morph into something that had closely defined theological borders, official spokespeople, and a single organizational center. However, such attempts would fall into the category of successful surgery that kills the patient. On balance, the fuzzy boundaries of evangelicalism have been a positive element that has facilitated its power and effectiveness rather than hindering it. Thus, while some may fret about the imprecision of the term, this imprecision has opened up room for the movement's vitality and spirit.

## What Should We Expect?

It should be obvious by now that we find a great deal of value in evangelicalism. If it is, in fact, something worth preserving and promoting, what should we expect from it? If one approaches this question only from the perspective of doctrinal uniformity or a clear-cut social or political agenda, then the answer

is “not much.” Evangelicalism cannot tell you what to believe about significant theological issues such as predestination or atonement theory, whether apostolic succession legitimizes the church, or whether the gift of divine healing is operative today. It cannot tell us whether we should support advocates of intelligent design for the local school board, nor does it offer clear direction whether we should vote Green, Democrat, Republican, or Libertarian. Some would have us believe that evangelicalism gives unambiguous signals on these and similar questions, but its history, its current manifestations, and its future trajectories tell us otherwise. The imprecision and lack of theological definition offered by evangelicalism indicate why our expectations should be set low in these areas, and this helps us understand why some find the entire evangelical project dispensable.

Our reasons for advocating evangelicalism’s preservation, however, are not grounded in any guidance it offers in theological or practical correctness, although it would not be evangelicalism if it was inconsistent with the essentials of historical Christian doctrine. Instead, we value the movement because it offers empirical evidence of something that looks impossible in theory. If orthodoxy and orthopraxy are our only filters, it seems hopeless that non-sacramentalists such as the Salvation Army or Friends could span the gap that doctrinally separates them from evangelical Episcopalians. Many forms of inerrancy do not accommodate themselves easily to other views of scriptural authority within evangelicalism. Reformed perspectives on the spiritual gifts are anything but compatible with Pentecostalism’s views of glossolalia or healing. Given the chasm that separates them, it is hard to know why wealthy conservative Baptists in the United States host impoverished female Chinese pastors in their homes and establish deep spiritual connections. In theory, these differences should polarize us, and sadly, they often do.

Nevertheless, it is sheer craziness to say that Christians with these differences, and a multitude of others, cannot bridge such chasms to work and worship together in significant ways. In evangelicalism today, we find Pentecostals at dispensationalist colleges. A rainbow of denominations shows up at Billy Graham crusades and have used *The Purpose Driven Life* in their Sunday school classes and home Bible studies. Through high school and college parachurch ministries, at Women of Faith conferences, in rescue missions and revival meetings, and across continents in missionary endeavors, millions have experienced the saving work of Jesus Christ through the efforts of evangelicals. All this is at the heart and soul of evangelicalism, and it happens without requiring that one be an inerrantist, Calvinist, premillennialist, Republican, or a well-to-do citizen of the United States. While evangelicalism does not ignore the fact that Christians will take different sides on postmodernism or traditionalism, creationism or theistic evolution, acceptance of homosexuals in worship or exclusion, ordination of women or submission, or Democrat or Republican, the evangelical spirit does not allow these differences to become absolutes.



The higher the stakes in any human endeavor, the more polarizing that endeavor is likely to be. One's religious commitment is most certainly a high-stakes endeavor, and history is littered with the tragic results of religious warfare that results from this polarization. Such warfare is inevitable when we absolutize our quest for conformity with an insular orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Evangelicalism has made its mark across history and around the globe because, in its better moments, it has recognized that its identity and agenda cannot be reduced to either of these. Thus, when we impose any of the doctrines, social positions, or attitudes treated in the chapters that follow as litmus tests for inclusion in the evangelical family, we do not project an accurate portrait of evangelicalism. Instead, we create caricatures that rob evangelicalism of its essence. Evangelicalism's concern for right-heartedness says, as Wesley put it, "If thine heart is as my heart,' if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: 'Give me thine hand.'"<sup>4</sup>

When evangelicals throughout history have reached across theological and social boundaries to grasp the hands of other warmhearted Christians, they have participated in a slowly unfolding miracle. Legions of laity have been mobilized for ministries of all types by an inner transformation that cannot easily be quantified or defined, but its results are increasingly difficult to overlook. Our expectations for evangelicalism's future are no less than what we have seen in the past, and with God's grace we pray that the fruit will exceed all precedents. But we fear that evangelicalism's future is endangered by various attempts, conscious or unconscious, to impose alien definitions on it.