

What is an Evangelical?

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In his effort to separate evangelical Christians from other believers in his surveys, George Barna defines "born again Christians" as those who say they have made "a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today" and who also indicate they believe that "when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior" (see www.barna.org).

Barna sees "evangelicals" as being a distinct subset of "born again" Christians who, in addition to meeting the born again criteria, also meet seven other conditions. These seven conditions are (1) saying their faith is very important in their life today; (2) contending that they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; (3) stating that Satan exists; (4) maintaining that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; (5) asserting that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; (6) saying that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches; and (7) describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Barna and his associates make it a point not to ask survey respondents if they are "evangelical." Rather, they ask questions that relate to the above seven conditions and make that classification themselves. Further, whether or not a believer is an "evangelical" is not dependent upon or related to any church or denominational affiliation, nor is the label related to a believer's degree of involvement in a local church. Barna calculates that 7% of Americans are "evangelicals" by his definition and in light of his surveys, although those who actually live out the above beliefs in day-to-day life drop to less than 1% of Americans.

However, George Barna's definition of an "evangelical" is just one of many. For example, in *The Beliefnet Guide to Evangelical Christianity* (Three Leaves Press, 2005), Wendy Murray Zoba takes note of quite a variety of professing "evangelicals." Those who are not familiar with Beliefnet should know that it claims to be "the leading multifaith spirituality and religion website." This said, it is perhaps not surprising that Zoba's overview of evangelicalism concludes that 35% of Americans today are "evangelicals," while at the same time observing that most people, paradoxically, including those who say they are evangelicals, are uncertain of what the term actually means, not to mention what they actually believe.

Readers of Zoba's book could rightly draw the conclusion that evangelicals include Reformed believers and dispensationalists, charismatics and non-charismatics, those who baptize infants and those who baptize only adults, those who repeat each Sunday the Apostle's Creed and those who have no creed but the Bible. But Zoba's definition is much broader than this, for it includes political conservatives as well as political liberals, holiness proponents as well as those who refer to themselves as "sinning saints." In fact, the diversity is much greater than these contrasts imply, which is why today many observers of evangelicalism, both inside and outside the movement, refer to an "evangelical right," an "evangelical middle," and even an "evangelical left" in terms of theological beliefs.

The end result is that currently just about anyone in any church can refer to themselves as an evangelical, even those who don't affirm Jesus' atoning death. However, as much as George Barna's more narrow definition of "evangelical" does not include, he is perhaps on the right track in terms of separating those who are "born again" from the more narrow "evangelicals," and further observing that many of those who describe themselves as evangelicals, saying they believe in certain biblical and moral standards and the power of God to transform lives, in reality don't live any differently than the rest of the world, that is, the pagan world (see Barna's *Boiling Point*, 2001, 2003), which raises some important questions.

For example, in the closing years of the 20th century evangelical leaders were regularly raising the question as to why, on the one hand, conservative or evangelical churches were growing while, on the other hand, evangelicals were having little or no impact on American society. Although evangelical scholars have not answered this question with one voice, many agree a large part of the answer is due to the fact the vast majority of those who label themselves evangelicals - in any sense of the term - do not live out their professed biblical faith on a day-to-day basis. For many years it has been clear that the lifestyle and behavior of "evangelicals" is really no different from non-evangelicals, both Christian and non-Christian. This conclusion has not only been drawn by George Barna, but others, including Ron Sider, Os Guinness, David Wells, Chuck Colson, and Ray Comfort. In his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Baker, 2005), Sider writes:

I am convinced that at the heart of our problem is a one-sided, unbiblical, reductionist understanding of the gospel and salvation. Too many evangelicals in too many ways give the impression that the really important part of the gospel is forgiveness of sins. If we just repeat the formula and say we want Jesus to forgive our sins, we are Christians. Notice, however, how this can so easily lead to cheap grace. If all there is to accepting the gospel is receiving the forgiveness of sins, one can accept the gospel, become a Christian, and then go on living the same adulterous, materialistic, racist life that one lived before. Salvation becomes, not a life-transforming experience that reorients every corner of life, but a one-way ticket to heaven, and one can live like hell until one gets there (Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 57-58).

Again, almost in as many words, this same truth has been pointed out year after year by evangelical leaders and authors. However, to date, they have largely been ignored, especially by the popular "evangelical" leaders of the mega-churches.

The fact most "evangelicals" are actually not evangelical in the classic or traditional sense of the word, either in terms of doctrinal beliefs or lifestyle, is why the term itself is often contested and why there is little consensus as to what constitutes "the defining characteristics of American evangelicalism" (see Kenneth Collins, *The Evangelical Moment*, Baker, 2005, 20). Because of the influx of popular cultural values into many conservative churches, and even the adoption of what earlier generations considered liberal teachings and practices, Donald Dayton is probably correct in saying that the term "evangelical" has lost "whatever usefulness it once might have had" (Dayton, "Some Doubts about the Usefulness of the Category 'Evangelical,'" in *Variety of American Evangelicalism*, edited by Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston, InterVarsity, 1991, 245). Indeed, Dayton goes so far as to say that, in light of the lack of orthodox theology and biblical piety in so much of the so-called evangelical church today, we should have "a moratorium on the use of the term" (Dayton, 245). In other words, despite the broadness and variety that marks what is termed "evangelicalism" today, there is no real way to tie all the varieties together.

So when we think of American evangelicalism and how it may be defined, whatever our definition, if it is based on those who profess they are evangelicals, it will necessarily be pluralistic, that is, not distinctively Reformed or Wesleyan, or even distinctively biblical. Even so, Collins argues that true evangelicalism, historic and modern, has at least four broad, enduring emphases:

1. The normative value of Scripture in the Christian life,
2. the necessity of conversion (whether or not dramatic or even remembered),
3. the cruciality of the atoning work of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity, and
3. the imperative of evangelism, of proclaiming the glad tidings of salvation to a lost and hurting world.

To these four, Collins suggests a fifth emphasis:

5. The cruciality of New Testament Christianity (Collins, *The Evangelical Moment*, 21).

Collins then goes on to list seven movements in the church that are integral to evangelicalism's identity. These are:

1. Historic Evangelicalism (the 1st century or New Testament Church, including the early church fathers)
2. Reformational Evangelicalism (the 16th century Protestant Reformation)
3. Puritan and Pietistic Evangelicalism (in England and America during the 16th and 17th centuries)
4. Awakening Evangelicalism (the 18th century Great Awakening)
5. Revivalistic Evangelicalism (the evangelistic efforts of 19th century America)
6. Charismatic Evangelicalism (20th century Pentecostals and charismatics, with roots in the 19th century American Holiness movement, though quite distinct from it)
7. Fundamentalist/Neoevangelicalism, as witnessed in 19th and 20th century dispensationalism; the fundamentalist movement beginning in the 1920s with its aggressive opposition to liberal theology, rejection of the social gospel, separation from the doctrinally unorthodox as well as those who associated with them, and emphasis on the doctrine of verbal inerrancy over against the "acids of modernity;" and followed in the early 1940s by key leaders within the fundamentalist movement discarding the label "fundamentalist" and opting for the more conciliatory term "new evangelical" or "neo-evangelical," which in time simply came to be known as "evangelicals," in contrast to liberals such as Harry Emerson Fosdick and fundamentalists such as Carl McIntire (Collins, 22-38).

Regarding this last movement or stage (neo-evangelicalism), Collins observes that it was "a coalition within fundamentalism and informed largely by the Reformed tradition" (Collins, 37). Indeed, the fundamentalist movement had moved forward chiefly through the work of J. Gresham Machen, B. B. Warfield, and Charles Hodge, all Reformed professors at Princeton Theological Seminary. Thus, Collins comments:

...the fundamentalist movement played out principally in those churches that were tied to the Reformed tradition, such as the Northern Baptist Convention, and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. And although Holiness groups, such as the Nazarenes and the Wesleyan Methodists, "found their distinctive emphases being reshaped by the fundamentalist-led movement" [George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, Eerdmans, 1991, 70], their Wesleyan tradition, rooted as it was in Anglicanism and soteriological concerns [the Wesleyan doctrine of salvation with its emphasis on making a "decision" for Christ], prevented them from becoming active participants in the movement itself (Collins, 36).

Therefore, from the very inception of modern evangelicalism, there was a certain cooperative spirit and inclusiveness. Collins further observes:

...at the organizing conference of the National Association of Evangelicals held at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago in May 1943, Harold Ockenga delivered the presidential address and thereby laid the groundwork by which the first three

emphases of fundamentalism, noted above, would be basically repudiated. To illustrate, both J. Elwin Wright, who had been instrumental in founding the NAE at a conference in St. Louis the year before, and Ockenga himself, rejected the militancy of the fundamentalists. Moreover, demonstrating a much more cooperative and less separatist spirit than the fundamentalists, Wright and Ockenga welcomed Pentecostals and Holiness folk into the new coalition [Donald Dayton claims that one-third of the member denominations of the NAE are "holiness," and another third are "Pentecostal" in an article appearing in *Ecumenical Review*, January 1988, 99. For an explanation of the distinction between Holiness and Pentecostal, see the July 2005 issue of the *Bulletin of Evangelical Ministries* on "The American Holiness Movement.]. Billy Graham, whose evangelistic career was to take off in 1949 when William Randolph Hearst told his reporters to "puff Graham," was equally eager to be rid of the bellicose and exclusive nature of the "fighting fundamentalists." In fact, during his crusade in New York in 1956, Graham welcomed the support of nonfundamentalists, a gesture that came with a price exacted by his conservative critics. Yet Graham remained undeterred, for the key theme of the new movement was "cooperation without compromise" (Collins, 37).

But if today's modern "evangelicalism" is not evangelicalism in the classic or traditional sense of the word, we need to understand what characterizes historic or classical evangelicalism. The term "evangelical" was first widely-used during the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther insisted that the light of the gospel teaching of justification by faith had been too long hidden by the teaching of Roman Catholicism. Luther's teachings, of course, were viewed negatively by Catholics such as Erasmus, Thomas More, and Johannes Eck, even though Erasmus had sympathy for some of Luther's criticisms of Catholicism. These leaders in the Roman Catholic Church used the term "evangelical" to refer to those who accepted and followed Luther's teachings. Luther reacted negatively to this label, primarily because he felt that "evangelical" could be used of all Christians who simply accepted the biblical teaching of God's free grace. Eventually, "evangelical" did come to be broadly used of all the Protestant churches. Later, the Methodist revival under John Wesley in England was characterized by the term "evangelical."

But the term was given more specific content when the Evangelical Alliance was formed in London in 1846. The Alliance was a voluntary association of "evangelical" Christians of different Protestant churches (including Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Reformed, and Moravians) and countries (including Great Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland and the United States), who came together to manifest and promote the union of Christians and advance the cause of religious liberty. The Alliance adopted a set of nine doctrines as representative of their understanding of the meaning of "evangelical." These were:

1. the divine inspiration of the Bible
2. the right and duty of [informed] private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture
3. the unity of the Godhead and the Trinity of the Persons therein
4. the depravity of man in consequence of the Fall
5. the incarnation of Christ, the Son of God, His work of substitutionary atonement for the sins of mankind, and His mediatorial intercession and reign
6. the justification of the sinner by faith alone
7. the work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion and sanctification of the sinner
8. the immortality of the soul, the physical return of Christ, the resurrection of the body, the judgment of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, with the eternal blessedness of the righteous and the eternal punishment of the wicked
9. the ministry of the word (the divine institution of the Christian ministry) and the perpetuity of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper

In the time since this more narrow definition or description of "evangelicalism," it has broadened in both Europe and America, on the one hand being used to refer to neo-orthodoxy at one end of the theological spectrum, and to fundamentalism on the other end, with its more specific teaching on items such as the timing of Jesus' second coming. In his book, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Eerdmans, 1973), Donald Bloesch defines the hallmarks of evangelicalism as being ten in number:

1. the sovereignty of God
2. the divine authority of Scripture
3. the total depravity of man
4. the substitutionary atonement of Christ
5. salvation by God's grace and
6. salvation through faith alone
7. the primacy of preaching/proclaiming the gospel
8. Scriptural holiness
9. the church's spiritual mission
10. the personal return of Christ

We might note at this point that the above items are yet very broad. For example, both Wesleyans and Reformed believers agree on the sovereignty of God, but each group would define that sovereignty differently, especially in terms of its outworking or implications. For this reason, many scholars speak about "evangelical essentials," that is, broad or general biblical doctrines on which all evangelicals can agree. We provided the table on the next page in a previous

issue of the Bulletin many years ago. Since it is often still requested, and pertinent to this discussion, we print it here again.

Again, although most evangelicals do not agree on which doctrinal beliefs are "essential" or primary and which are "non-essential" or secondary, this list, which is not necessarily exhaustive, contains "essentials" all evangelicals would agree with or accept. However, the items listed under non-essentials are different. Almost all modern evangelicals would view one or more of these items as being essential, which explains not only the disunity and variety which exists among evangelicals, but which exists throughout the larger church.

An often-asked question raised in this kind of discussion is: What is the major difference between fundamentalism and evangelicalism? As far as doctrinal beliefs are concerned, there is hardly any difference at all, except fundamentalists see certain beliefs in the non-essential column of the table on the next page as definitely being essential, such as the timing of Christ's second coming (premillennialism). Remember, fundamentalism emerged in response to the rise of liberal theology (in the early 20th century) which, among other things, denied the traditional doctrine of original sin and built on Darwin's dogma of evolution.

- ESSENTIALS

- Authority and inspiration of Scripture - the sole rule for faith and practice
 - Trinuneness of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit equally God
 - God created the universe
 - Sin separates man from God. Man cannot save himself
 - Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper which, with baptism, are the church's two ordinances
 - Jesus is fully God and fully man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary
 - Jesus' death on the cross makes forgiveness of sins possible, of which baptism is the outward and visible sign
 - Jesus physically rose from the dead and ascended into heaven
 - Jesus will physically return again to resurrect the dead, judge all men (hell), and rule the new heavens and the new earth
- NON-ESSENTIALS

- Scripture without error of any kind vs. infallible only in matters of faith and practice
- God is absolutely sovereign vs. man is granted some measure of freedom by God
- Young earth vs. old earth
- Global flood vs. local flood
- Jesus died only for the elect vs. Jesus died for whosoever will come
- Meaning of the Lord's Supper
- Fate of the unevangelized
- Eternal security of the believer based on continuing faith vs. God's sovereign election
- Baptism: when, for whom, how, and why it is significant
- Use of charismatic gifts
- Ordination of women
- Millennium views (at least 4)
- Hell: unending torment or total annihilation

In its response to liberal theology, fundamentalism placed stress on the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith, particularly the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, the physical resurrection of Christ, and His physical return. These doctrines were widely-dispersed in 1909 by Lyman and Milton Stewart's funding of three million copies of twelve paperback books known as The Fundamentals, mailed to every minister in America. Prominent writers in the series included James Orr and W. H. Griffin Thomas.

Fundamentalism, as noted above, began within the ranks of well-known academics at Princeton and other theological schools, who employed what might be termed a "scholarly apologetic." But as fundamentalism developed, it became so separatist in its thinking, that many of its spokesmen were sharply critical of all academics and higher education, fearing young fundamentalist ministers would naively accept liberal ideas and thinking. Fundamentalists leaders were also highly critical of what they perceived as "social tolerance" in liberalism, and its proclamation of the "social gospel," which was an effort to apply biblical principles to the growing problems of an emerging urban-industrial culture.

Further, as the movement continued and founded its own schools, many of its chief leaders were influenced by the eschatology of Clarence Larkin and C. I. Scofield (dispensationalism), and saw the many aspects of dispensationalism (God dealing with man in different time periods in distinctly different ways, with all except the last ending in failure; a secret rapture or removing of the church from the earth so God can resume His original plan of establishing a Jewish, earthly kingdom, etc.) as being essential to being a true believer.

Modern fundamentalists, typically demand a very literal interpretation of Scripture, are usually quite skeptical of modern translations of the Bible, not to mention modern biblical scholarship in general, and many adhere to strict behavioral and lifestyle practices, such as women wearing only dresses, no pants. On the other hand, evangelicals are more accepting of modern biblical (evangelical) scholarship and modern biblical translations, while at the same time rightly criticizing

what they perceive to be weaknesses in that same scholarship and many modern translations of the Bible. For example, a well-schooled evangelical knows there is no such thing as a perfect translation of the Bible. Even though he or she may regularly use the NIV, RSV, or NASB, they know that at certain points these translations have weaknesses.

Further, unlike fundamentalism, modern evangelicalism has been more willing to deal with the societal problems that the fundamentalists simply evaded or denied. As already noted, fundamentalism condemned the preaching of what it termed the "social gospel." Indeed, even today, those who apply biblical teaching to social injustice are usually viewed as being part of the "evangelical left" (i.e., Ron Sider, Jim Wallis).

Both fundamentalists and evangelicals have their own weaknesses. We have noted some of the problems of modern evangelicalism. As for fundamentalism's inherent weaknesses, the reader should turn to Philip Yancey's *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church* (Doubleday, 2001). Yancey grew up in a fundamentalist church in north Georgia. On the inside front flap of the book there is this blurb from the publishers:

Philip Yancey, whose explorations of faith have made him a guide for millions of readers, feels no need to defend the church. "When someone tells me yet another horror story about the church, I respond, 'Oh, it's even worse than that. Let me tell you my story.' I have spent most of my life in recovery from the church."

The "church" Yancey has in mind is the fundamentalist church he grew up in, which was marked by, among other things, a significant amount of racism and legalism, two of the weaknesses that tended to plague fundamentalist churches in the early and mid-20th century, and are all too often still found in many fundamentalist churches today.

The link between fundamentalism and modern evangelicalism is well-illustrated in the life of Wilbur Smith. In *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, edited by Kenneth Kantzer (Thomas Nelson, 1978), Harold J. Ockenga notes in his essay that Smith moved from fundamentalism, to evangelicalism, and finally to neo-evangelicalism, without deviating from his original doctrinal beliefs. Smith taught at Moody Bible Institute, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. But in light of the continuing theological weakening of modern evangelicalism, Smith was the exception to the rule.

Thus, from one perspective, all seems to be well with modern evangelicalism. For example, in the 2002 work of James Penning and Corwin Smidt, *Evangelicalism: The Next Generation* (Baker), the authors summarize their studies of students at nine evangelical colleges, concluding their evidence strongly indicates the younger generation of evangelical college students "continue to express a relatively high level of orthodoxy with regard to historic tenets of the Christian faith" (66), while at the same time acknowledging the diversity that "has always been present with American evangelicalism" (172).

But from another perspective, all is not well with modern evangelicalism, not according to observers like George Barna, Ray Comfort, and Ron Sider. One of the reasons Ray Comfort wrote *How to Bring Your Children to Christ* (Genesis Publishing, 2005), was basically the same reason Donald Sloat wrote *The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home* (Thomas Nelson, 1986), namely, the fact that the vast majority of children raised in evangelical churches and homes do not continue to walk with God. Comfort says in his book currently 88% of children raised in evangelical homes leave church at the age of eighteen never to return. In *What Did Jesus Do?* (Genesis Publishing, 2005), Ray Comfort once again affirms what many evangelicals have experienced is false conversion in their response to a "message of salvation with no reference to repentance or future punishment, calling sin 'faults, shortcomings, and bad behavior'" (Comfort, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 13).

Ron Sider flatly states "the gospel of individual self-fulfillment now reigns" (Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 85) in modern evangelicalism, and near the end of his most recent book, *Above all Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Eerdmans, 2005), the fourth and final volume in his commentary on modern Western culture, David F. Wells critiques contemporary evangelicalism, saying churches that market themselves as relevant and seeker-sensitive, may in fact be growing in size, but they are doing so "at the expense of the truth of the gospel." Regrettably, many modern evangelicals don't seem to be aware of the theological consequences of reducing the "offense" of the gospel in order to gain worldly (numerical) success.

Thus, Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, Bruce Wilkinson and many others like them may fall into the outer bands of the so-called diversity of evangelicalism, but on closer examination, their theological foundations are definitely not classic or traditional evangelicalism. Further, if Sider, Comfort and others are right, we should be concerned about our children and youth in terms of passing on our doctrinal heritage and beliefs.