



What is an Evangelical? **by Charles J. Sigler, D.Phil.**

When measuring the social, political, religious and behavioral characteristics of evangelicals, the Barna Group found major differences between self-described evangelicals and Americans who are “evangelical” according to a nine point criteria of theological belief. Almost 40% percent of Americans are self-described “evangelicals.” But when nine basic theological beliefs are used as the criteria for who is evangelical, that number drops to a mere 8% of Americans; approximately 18 million adult Americans.

Politically, self-described evangelicals are less likely than 9 point evangelicals to say they are conservative on social and political matters; and they are considerably more likely to be registered to vote as a Democrat than as a Republican.

The most striking differences are in the theological beliefs of the two groups. Compared to the 9-point evangelicals, those who are self-described evangelicals are:

- 60% less likely to believe that Satan is real
- 53% less likely to believe that salvation is based on grace, not works
- 46% less likely to say they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs with others
- 42% less likely to list their faith in God as the top priority in their life
- 38% less likely to believe that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth
- 27% less likely to contend that the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings
- 23% less likely to say that their life has been greatly transformed by their faith

While this can be confusing as well as disturbing to many modern American “evangelicals” (i.e., an evangelical who doesn’t believe the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches), the differences can be traced back to a polarization

within American religious culture over the past two hundred years in what it means to be an “evangelical” Christian.¹

The Restructuring of American Religion

Overseas visitors to America in the 1830s were struck by the vitality of faith they saw. This was as true for the Englishman Andrew Reed as it was for a better known French visitor: Alexis de Tocqueville. Reed compared the number of churches, ministers, and communicants for British and American cities of similar size and found the Americans ahead on nearly every count (Noll 1992). De Tocqueville (1969) observed that Christianity had retained a greater influence over the life of American citizens than it did in any of the European countries of his time. “The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States” (de Tocqueville 1969, 295). In France, he had seen the spirits of religion and freedom typically opposed to one another. In America, he found them linked and working together. This pre-Civil War Christianity was largely Evangelical in the sense that much of the visible public activity, a great portion of the learned culture, and many of the dynamic organizations were products of Evangelical conviction (Noll 1992).

Although American culture was never strictly Christian, it adhered to a largely Protestant set of values. These principles held the nation together by providing a solid basis for morality amongst its citizens, as de Tocqueville had noticed. The fact that America did not follow the more philosophical basis for morality hoped for by some of its earlier leaders, such as Franklin and Jefferson, was due largely to the efforts of the vigorous Evangelical activity of the time. With a one hundred year history of religious awakenings and revivals of various intensities, American Protestantism of the mid-nineteenth century proclaimed that a Christian millennium was not far away.

Evangelical leaders kept the American culture of the nineteenth century strongly Protestant and specifically Christian despite the secular ideologies that had already begun to transform Europe. They effectively channeled the zeal of revival and voluntary religious organizations to counter any secular social drift. The heart of such a strong nineteenth-century Evangelical way of thinking in America was a belief in the absolute integrity of the Bible. It would be hard to overstate the crucial importance of this belief for Evangelicals of the time. When it was eventually shaken, major adjustments to Evangelical faith had to occur (Marsden 1991).

¹ For more information on self-described versus 9 point evangelicals, see barna.org—especially the 1/18/07 Barna update entitled: “Survey Explores Who Qualifies as an Evangelical.”

Religious Polarization

By the time of D. L. Moody's death in 1899, the rapid cultural change at the turn of the century resulted in significantly fewer people heeding an Evangelical call to Christ (Ahlstrom 1972). Moody's successors became increasingly alarmed at the growing presence of liberal theology and a fading commitment to evangelization within their denominations. A rising secular spirit in the broader American culture troubled them as well. The authority of their religiously based values along with their own status as community leaders decreased sharply, while university-trained secular professionals and liberal clergy gained power and prestige. These new "modernist" experts challenged the divine inspiration and cultural authority of the Bible and offered evolutionary models of moral progress in its place (Carpenter 1997). In 1924, Shailer Mathews² wrote that modernism was the use of scientific, historical, and social methods to understand and apply Evangelical Christianity to the needs of living persons. The Bible represented valid perceptions of how God acted, but this merely human book was not revelational in the traditional understanding of Evangelicalism. The precise, historical, or scientific accuracy of Scripture did not matter. Judeo-Christian ethical teachings and individual religious sentiments could be true beyond the facts of history and science (Larson 1997). We also see here the significance for Evangelicals to believe in the absolute integrity of the Bible; that it is "totally accurate in all of the principle it teaches." (Barna 2006)

What Mathews described as modernism was a far cry from the criteria noted below by George Marsden as the basic beliefs of nineteenth century Evangelicalism. The naturalistic assumptions that under gird the modernist position was the moral and spiritual abyss into which conservative Protestants feared America was sinking.

Many university professors in that era considered the undermining of religious faith to be a necessary byproduct of encouraging critical thought and empirical inquiry in a time of scientific positivism. Stanford University president David Starr Jordan³ represented the sentiment of many academics in his dismissal of traditional Protestant revivalism as a form of drunkenness no more worthy of respect than the drunkard in the gutter (Larson 1997). Concerned that the religious and cultural modernism of the so-called experts would ruin the nation, conservative Protestant leaders became determined to prevent America from sliding into such a moral and spiritual abyss.

² Mathews was a modernist leader from the University of Chicago divinity school. He was also one of the defense witnesses selected for the John Scopes trial.

³ Jordan was a well known evolutionary biologist of the period, who would volunteer to aid in the legal defense of John Scopes.

This was not just mere rhetoric from the pulpit of conservative pastors. The new scientific methods themselves provided evidence of such a development. In 1916, psychologist James Leuba published an extensive survey of religious belief among college students and professors. He concluded that as a system of belief, Christianity had fallen apart. Among students, he found that disbelief in immortality increased proportionally from the freshman to the senior year of college. Among scientists, such disbelief was higher with biologists than physicists, and higher among scientists of greater than lesser distinction. The smallest percentage of believers in God was among the biologists, with only 16.9 per cent (Leuba 1916).⁴

World War I prompted heated quarrels between Modernist liberals and conservative Evangelicals. Each accused the other of unpatriotic or subversive activity. Modernists charged that Evangelical opposition to the war was unpatriotic. Evangelicals countered by noting the German origins of higher criticism and how a Darwinian survival of the fittest mentality seemed to underlie the German militarism. The implication was that modernists shared the theological values that had led Germany into barbarism (Larson 1997). One of the most significant steps taken by this group of conservative Evangelicals of the last century was the publication of a series of twelve small booklets called *The Fundamentals* between 1910 and 1915. A variety of pastors, scholars, and lay leaders contributed articles. The writers criticized liberal theology, defended essential Evangelical doctrines, upheld older models of Protestant theology and affirmed the importance of evangelization. In 1919, a coalition of these conservative Evangelicals formed the World's Christian Fundamentals Association to purge the ideas of liberal thought from America's churches and schools. This antimodernist federation became known as the fundamentalists, a title coined by Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the *Watchman-Examiner* (Carpenter 1997).

Initially, fundamentalism was almost as broad and complicated a coalition as evangelicalism. It included Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Disciples, Episcopalians, holiness groups, pentecostals, and various other denominations. When fundamentalism lost its initial prominence by the 1930s, the term began to take on a more limited meaning. Many fundamentalists left the mainline denominations and began to make separation a test of true faith. By the 1960s, fundamentalist usually referred to religious separatists, who were largely Baptists and dispensationalists. They were also distinguished at this point from revivalist movements such as the holiness groups and pentecostals who had initially been part of the fundamentalist coalition.

⁴ Cited in Larson 1997.

Both fundamentalists and modernists traced their origins back to the Evangelical coalition of the nineteenth century. It seemed implausible that movements with such divergent belief systems shared such a historical and theological heritage. Yet one historian identified a kaleidoscope of at least twelve different groups within historic, American Evangelicalism (Larson 1997).

In his 1991 book *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, George Marsden described an Evangelical at the end of the twentieth century as a Christian willing to affirm the basic beliefs of the old nineteenth-century Evangelical consensus. These essential beliefs included: (1) the doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based upon the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life. A fundamentalist, according to Marsden, was a type of Evangelical who was militantly opposed to liberal theology in the churches or to deviations in cultural values, such as those associated with secular humanism. Fundamentalists were religiously conservative Evangelicals who were willing to take a stand and to fight against such cultural modifications (Marsden 1991).

Barna's Evangelicals

George Barna (2006) developed a definition of "evangelical" that is quite consistent with Marsden's criteria. Barna defines an evangelical as someone who meets all of the following criteria. In parentheses are the percentages of all adult Americans within the Barna Group survey who met the given criteria for each individual item.

1. Made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today; and believes that after they die they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. [45%]
2. Believes that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today. [71%]
3. Strongly agrees that their religious faith is very important in their life. [69%]
4. Strongly agrees that the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches. [48%]
5. Strongly disagrees that when He lived on earth, Jesus Christ was human and committed sins, like other people. [42%]
6. Strongly agrees that they, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people their religious beliefs. [39%]
7. Strongly disagrees that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in Heaven. [31%]

8. Strongly disagrees that the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil. [29%]

While 85% of the adult Americans surveyed view themselves as Christian, only 45% consider themselves to be “born again”; the first of the above noted criteria. A mere nine percent of the Americans adults surveyed were evangelical, meaning that they met all of the above criteria defined by the Barna Group. Being “Christian” in modern American society is more of a cultural label; and has very little to do with adhering to the basic Evangelical beliefs of the past 150 years.

Even if we limit our examination to just three “essentials” of Christian belief, we see some disturbing trends among American Christians. Beginning with the orthodox view of God as an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today, there were about 14% of adult American Christians who **did not** believe this! Only 48% of American Christians strongly agreed that the Bible is totally accurate in all the principles it teaches. And 42% thought that Jesus committed sins like other people when He lived on Earth; 7% weren’t sure (Barna 2006). Paradoxically, it seems possible that a small percentage of American Christians who believe the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches are not strongly convinced that Jesus led a sinless life while on Earth.

The heart of Evangelical, Christian thinking is a belief in the absolute authority of Scripture, what Francis Schaeffer has referred to as “the objectively inspired Bible.” And we must speak this truth in love, as Scripture commands us.

What we must ask the Lord for is a work of the Spirit . . . to stand on a very thin line: in other words, to state intellectually (as well as understand, though not completely) the intellectual reality of that which God is and what God has revealed in the objectively inspired Bible; and then to live moment to moment in the reality of a restored relationship with the God who is there, and to act in faith upon what we believe in our daily lives. (Schaeffer 1985, p. 82)

This is what it means to be an Evangelical.

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