Conservative Evangelicalism
Safeguarding Theology and Transforming Society

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Introduction: Defining Evangelicalism

Conservative evangelical Christianity expanded rapidly between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Explaining the terms “evangelicalism” and “conservative” sets the stage for interpreting contemporary evangelicalism's common characteristics and regional variations. This chapter argues that evangelicalism attracts and retains adherents by combining theological conservation with personal and social transformation.

The category ‘evangelicalism’ embraces considerable diversity. The term can be traced to the New Testament. The Greek euaggelion and the Anglo-Saxon godspel, or “good news,” refer to preaching the gospel message of salvation from sin and death through Jesus Christ. The Protestant Reformation, and the beginning of modern evangelicalism, is often dated to October 31, 1517, the day when the German monk Martin Luther (1483–1546) nailed his “95 Theses of Contention” on a church door in Wittenberg. The Reformers sought to restore the Bible, as opposed to extra-biblical traditions, to a position of unique authority in guiding church teachings and practices. The Reformers interpreted the Bible as teaching that forgiveness and reconciliation with God is by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in the Bible alone: sola gratia, sola fides, solus Christus, sola scriptura (Brown 2004: 2).

Luther's followers in Germany adopted the name Evangelische Kirche, or Evangelical Church. The terms 'evangelical' and 'Protestant' were used interchangeably. By the eighteenth century, 'evangelical' denoted a sub-set of revivalistic Protestants who distinguished themselves from High Churchmen who emphasised tradition and sacraments above the Bible, and also from rationalists who privileged reason above 'heart religion'. Evangelical Christianity spread rapidly across Europe and North America through revivals described by scholars as the Great Awakening (1690s–1770s) and Second Great Awakening (1780s–1840s) (Brown 2004: 34).

The most influential definition of evangelicalism is that articulated by the British historian David Bebbington. The ‘Bebbington quadrilateral’ highlights biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, and activism. Evangelicals are those
who believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God; individuals need conversion to Christ; God provided forgiveness through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and Christians should encourage non-Christians to become Christians. The U.S. historian Mark Noll popularised Bebbington's definition and added a complementary definition of evangelicals as “culturally adaptive biblical experientialists.” Put differently, evangelicals use the Word of the Bible to transform the world, while appropriating from culture non-Christian resources for Christian purposes (Bebbington 1989: 2–17; Noll et al. 1994; Noll 2000: 2; Brown 2004: 1–7).

In the United States, most Protestants were evangelicals until the 1870s; they expressed conservative theology and promoted revivals and social reform. Protestants responded to modernity in divergent ways, with some—known as modernists—reinterpreting the Bible in light of new, university-generated knowledge of evolutionary biology and higher biblical criticism, and others—known as fundamentalists—mistrusting new scholarship and conserving historic Christian doctrines (such as the divinity and personal return of Christ) considered fundamental to the Christian faith. Modernists took control of mainline Protestant denominations, and fundamentalists withdrew to create rival institutions. Formation of the U.S. National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942 marked the birth of neo-evangelicalism. The NAE stood for conservative theology combined with social engagement, as opposed to theological modernism or fundamentalist separatism (Brown forthcoming).

The zeal for purity that birthed the Reformation repeatedly split evangelicalism into multiple denominations. Each of the four major divisions of the sixteenth century—Lutheran, Reformed (Congregational, Presbyterian), Tudor (Anglican), and Radical (Mennonite, Amish)—generated off-spring. Eighteenth-century denominational theorists conceptualised a single Christian Church divided into branches, each necessary to growth of the whole (Brown 2004: 34).

Both ‘Calvinists’, theological heirs of John Calvin (1509–1564) who hold that God predestined some to be saved and others to be damned, and ‘Arminians’, theological progeny of Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) who affirm that God created everyone with free will, belong to the evangelical family. Calvin developed the doctrine of ‘cessationism’, that miracles ceased after the apostles, in response to Catholic demands that Protestants defend their doctrines with miracles. Cessationism exerted a lasting influence on evangelicalism in Europe, North America, and Oceania. By contrast, most evangelicals in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have been ‘continuationists’ who affirm on-going gifts of the Holy Spirit (Brown 2011).