

Church & Faith Trends



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Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism

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Evangelicals more and more frequently make the news nowadays, particularly because of their prominence in American politics, but also because of their increasing profile in Canadian life as well. Many people fear Evangelicals as reactionary and imperialistic, crusading to impose their viewpoints on everyone else. Indeed, the most common term for such frightening people is “fundamentalist.” So what is Evangelicalism, particularly the Canadian variety, and how is it related to fundamentalism?

By the time of Confederation, Evangelicalism was the main form of Protestantism and set the terms for Anglophone culture in the Maritimes, Ontario, and points west. Then in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a complex set of social, technological, and theological changes gained ascendancy and provoked a split in this Canadian evangelical Protestant consensus.

Mainline Protestantism—seen especially in the big, diverse denominations, such as the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches—increasingly emphasized the priority of modern learning over tradition, whether tradition was understood as the Bible, ancient creeds, or doctrinal formulations of later centuries. In its most extreme form, this tendency to conform Christianity to the best of current thinking became known as “modernism.” It maintained the evangelical emphasis on cultural transformation and social service while reformulating and even jettisoning traditional theology. The “social gospel,” championed in the United States by Walter Rauschenbusch and in Canada by J. S. Woodsworth and Tommy Douglas, pressed evangelical Christianity’s concern for justice and compassion for the needy while sometimes assuming, but in many cases neglecting, spiritual themes of repentance from sin, conversion, and the promise of eternal life.

Fundamentalist Protestantism, both within those mainline denominations and in some smaller ones beyond, sought to maintain faithfulness to traditional beliefs and mores, and increasingly opposed departures from these patterns within the churches and in society at large.

Controversies between fundamentalists and modernists in the early twentieth century saw the mainline denominations yield to liberal Protestant control and the fundamentalists separate to form their own churches, educational institutions, and other parallel organizations. In some cases, fundamentalists formed their own denominations, such as the Conservative Baptist Association in the United States and the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada. Separatism, in fact, became the defining posture of the fundamentalist attitude. Furthermore, many fundamentalists practiced “second-degree separation: separation not only from those who compromise the faith (‘first-degree separation’), but also from those, admittedly fully orthodox, who none the less do not themselves separate from the unorthodox.”¹ Toronto Baptist preacher T. T. Shields was the best known fundamentalist on this side of the border.

¹John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993): 11.

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By the middle of the twentieth century, a new generation of American fundamentalists began constructively engaging the culture under the leadership of theologian and journalist Carl F. H. Henry, evangelist Billy Graham, and others. Maintaining the concerns of nineteenth-century Evangelicals, these new *Evangelicals* (as they called themselves) departed from the isolationism and anti-intellectualism of their immediate fundamentalist forebears. Evangelicalism quickly engendered a wide array of new churches, denominations, and ministry organizations in order to re-assert the broad world-shaping and world-serving agenda of previous evangelical movements. These developments in the United States then connected with like-minded Christians in other countries such as Canada, Britain, and Australia, many of which had only small and relatively inconsequential fundamentalist movements. This international network of Evangelicals took organizational form in the World Evangelical Alliance and its constituent organizations, such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), which began in 1964 in Toronto under the leadership of Pentecostal pastor Harry Faught. The EFC went on to blossom under the presidency of Pentecostal Brian Stiller in the 1980s and 1990s.

Evangelicals can be defined by the following characteristics:²

- **Orthodox and Orthoprax:** Evangelicals subscribe to the main tenets—doctrinal, ethical, and liturgical—of the churches to which they belong.
- **Crucicentric:** Evangelicals are Christocentric in their piety and preaching, and emphasize particularly the necessity of Christ's salvific work on the Cross.
- **Biblicist:** Evangelicals affirm the Bible as God's Word written, true in what it says, and functioning as their supreme written guide for life.
- **Conversionist:** Evangelicals believe that (1) everyone must trust Jesus as Saviour and follow him as Lord; and (2) everyone must co-operate with God in a life of growing spiritual maturity.
- **Missional:** Evangelicals actively co-operate with God in his mission of redeeming the world, and particularly in the proclamation of the gospel. Thus Evangelicals are active in a wide range of social engagement, from education to health care, from relief and development agencies to campaigns for human rights, from evangelism to addiction counseling.
- **Transdenominational:** Evangelicals gladly partner with other Christians who hold these concerns, regardless of denominational stripe, in work to advance the Kingdom of God. Thus Evangelicals can be found both in homogenous denominations that are wholly aligned with Evangelicalism (such as the Salvation Army, Mennonite Brethren, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and most Baptist and Pentecostal groups) and in those pluralistic denominations that embrace people of quite diverse convictions (such as the Anglican, Presbyterian, and United churches).

²John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Defining 'Evangelical,'" Church & Faith Trends 1 (2007): 3.

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Fundamentalism nowadays, therefore, is a subdivision of Evangelicalism and is marked off from the broader evangelical movement by the following:³

- strong opposition to certain aspects of modernity—especially modern ideas seen to be threatening to traditional faith (liberal theology, some forms of Biblical criticism, and the theory of evolution chief among them);
- use of martial metaphors in rhetoric and playing hardball in politics in both church and society, although almost never resulting in actual violence (contrary to the common equation in the mass media of “fundamentalist” with “terrorist”);
- separation from all who are not wholly pure in their convictions and associations; and
- binary thinking (“black/white,” “us/them,” “right/wrong,” “God/devil,” “all or nothing”).

Since the later 1970s, however, this definition of fundamentalism has become somewhat blurred by the emergence in the United States of the Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, and other versions of the so-called Religious Right. Separation is now something to be only selectively maintained, within their familial and ecclesiastical relationships (insisting on endogamous marriages of those who share fundamentalist beliefs or in the doctrinal purity required of leaders of fundamentalist churches and other organizations), while political alliances with people of other forms of Christianity and even of other faiths are welcomed in order to advance the fundamentalist social agenda. Again, however, both militancy and binary thinking—which reinforce each other—are the striking characteristics of fundamentalists over against the broader evangelical movement. Fundamentalists continue to be numerous and to exercise considerable influence in the United States (Bob Jones University is one of their best-known institutions), while they continue to occupy only the social and ecclesiastical margins in Canada, Britain, and similar societies.

Since the 1970s, furthermore, the broader evangelical movement has embraced a wide social agenda. The Lausanne Covenant of 1974 marked the agreement of international Evangelicalism to return to the broad concerns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that sought both social reform on behalf particularly of the poor as well as the preaching of the gospel to the whole world. Since then, Evangelicals have poured vast resources into relief and development agencies (such as World Vision and Compassion International), a wide array of vocationally related organizations (from businesspeople to physicians), and a plethora of ministries (from prison fellowships to human rights advocacy to banks for microbusinesses in the developing world).

Evangelicalism today, then, has returned to the holistic agenda of its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forebears, even as it seeks to contribute what it can to Canadian culture, neither in control of nor on the sidelines of contemporary life. 

³Stackhouse, *Canadian Evangelicalism*, 12.