WHO ARE AMERICAN EVANGELICALS?

Robert W. Caldwell III*

It has been four decades since Southern Baptist scholars vigorously debated whether they should be categorized as evangelicals or not. Back in those days the debate surfaced amid the massive struggle within the Southern Baptist household over the theological direction of the Convention. While the SBC had been known as a conservative Baptist denomination that stood firmly on the inerrancy of the Scripture, there were signs that this commitment was beginning to erode. Throughout the 1950s to the 1970s Southern Baptist seminaries were hiring biblical scholars who advocated newer, more liberal theories of the Bible—its inspiration, authority, and interpretation. These progressive theories, furthermore, had a lengthy track record of turning every other mainline Protestant denomination liberal during the first third of the twentieth century. Those who welcomed these changes underscored the uniqueness of the SBC and thus tended to downplay the connections between the SBC and the broader evangelical world. Those alarmed by these changes countered that the SBC was indeed an *evangelical* denomination, one that emphasized a high view of Scripture like all historic evangelicals, and one that would forfeit its evangelical credentials if it continued down the path it was following. Clearly, the term evangelical—how it is defined and how it is employed in constructing the identity of a group—can generate significant discussion, tension, and controversy among committed Christians. After James Leo Garrett, the extraordinary historical theologian from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, penned his superb series of essays "'Evangelicals' and Baptists—Is There a Difference?" in 1983, it was hard to deny—no matter what side one was on—that Southern Baptists have always been members of that broad movement in American religious history known as evangelicalism.[1]

---

[1]James Leo Garrett, Jr., "'Evangelicals' and Baptists—Is There a Difference?" in *Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals"*? (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 31-128.

*Robert W. Caldwell III serves as professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Today, that controversy is largely in the rear-view mirror; most Southern Baptists, both laypersons and leaders, own the label evangelical if they are familiar with a basic definition of the word. Yet in the broader culture the term has become controversial for different reasons, mainly due to the fact that in an increasingly polarized political climate, the word is increasingly taking on the meaning indicating a "religious white Republican voter." Note, this popular definition of the term—employed largely by pundits, journalists, and politicians—is largely a non-religious rendering on a word that has classically referred to a religious grouping of Christians that share overlapping theological commitments and deep historic roots. This shift in definition has generated considerable confusion and has led many sincere Christians, who otherwise might be identified as an evangelical according to a classic definition of the term, to reject the label as applying to themselves. Sober reflection on the history of evangelicals in American culture can clarify some of this confusion and hopefully resolve some of the tensions related to employing the term. With that in mind in this article I would like to address the question "who are American evangelicals?" I will argue history gives us a clear understanding of the term, more so than contemporary polemics. In the following pages we will define the term and explore current evangelical demographics in America, statistics which surprisingly reveal the continued strength of evangelicals in today's American religious landscape. Before looking at those issues, I would first like to consider why it is appropriate and even advantageous to utilize the concept evangelical in the first place.

I. WHY "EVANGELICAL?"

Every denomination has its purists who eye the concept of evangelicalism with a bit of suspicion. There is good reason for this: the concept often refers to a "mere" sort of vital Protestantism, a kind of basic born-again-ism that is devoid of the denominational identity markers which are necessary for an ecclesiastical tradition to operate in the real world. To emphasize the concept of evangelicalism, it is sometimes observed, almost necessarily commits one to deemphasize denominational specifics. This indeed can be a problem that accompanies the utilization of the concepts of evangelical and evangelicalism.

In response, it should be said at the outset that if it is wise to employ the concept, and I believe it is, then we must always do so *as a committed member of a denomination*. As C. S. Lewis noted long ago, the concept of

Mere Christianity might be good for the apologist who is helping unbelievers see the truth of the Christian faith, but it is not helpful for taking new converts and developing them into mature Christians.[2] No one matures in the "Church of the Mere Evangelical." Christian sanctification, rather, is done in the context of a denominational congregation where there are biblically informed traditions on Christian growth, prayer, Bible study, evangelism, service, and a host of other means of grace which have stood the test of time.

If it is true that Christians are better off as committed members of a denomination, then is it not better to do away with the concept of evangelical altogether and simply speak in terms of one's denominational affiliation? This is an honorable option that has been argued by respectable Christian intellectuals throughout the generations.[3] I do believe, however, that there is such an entity in the broader Christian world that we can call evangelicalism, and that defining it is helpful and serviceable to Christians for at least two reasons.

First, a definition of evangelical is useful for Christian churchgoers individually because it helps them to identify (1) who to share the gospel with and (2) who to help support financially in gospel endeavors. Take Sarah, for instance, a young Southern Baptist university graduate who has been teaching grade school for several years. Sarah recognizes there are other born-again believers beyond the walls of her church and denomination. How does she determine who to share the gospel with among her family, neighbors, and coworkers? At work, Sarah works closely with a nominal Presbyterian friend who rarely attends church services and lives with her partner. Sarah also works with a woman who is a Missouri Synod Lutheran who is open about her faith and is deeply active in a local Bible study. Sarah has begun to pray that God will open the door for her to speak to her nominal Presbyterian coworker about the Lord; she does not, however, pray the same for her Lutheran friend because she believes this woman is an authentic believer in Christ even though she may differ with Sarah over several areas of doctrine.

Sarah also desires to use her financial resources to support gospel ministries around the world. She tithes to her local Southern Baptist church which channels a portion of her money to the International Mission Board.

---

[2]C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (1952; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2009), xiii-xiv.

[3]For an excellent example, see D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

In addition, she supports a couple working with a non-denominational collegiate ministry at the local state university where she attended, a group that was enormously influential in her own Christian life. A mission trip to Haiti in high school also gave her a heart for that nation, and consequently, she supports a child through a non-denominational ministry that ministers to children in areas of extreme poverty around the world. Lastly, Sarah also sometimes supports her local fire department since her father was in that profession, and she believes in the value of supporting that institution. Are all these charitable actions considered "kingdom work" even though they do not directly support her church and denomination? Sarah believes that in the case of the collegiate ministry and supporting the child in Haiti, they are, whereas her giving to the local fire department is not gospel work. The point to be made here is that with each of these decisions—determining who to evangelize and who to support financially—Sarah is operating with a nascent definition of evangelical; she has employed a set of criteria when determining how to pray, who to evangelize, and who to support financially with gospel causes. In short, having a clear definition of the term evangelical can help Christians like Sarah, and churches like the one she attends, make decisions related to how to live out the Christian life on the ground in the real world.

Second, having a clear definition of evangelical can help Christians from many denominations understand the religious landscape of our nation better and one's place within it. Compared with the SBC, many evangelical denominations are small, representing only a fraction of a percentage of the overall population of the United States. For instance, the Evangelical Free Church of America has 357,000 adherents, and the Christian Reformed Church of North America has 224,000.[4] Both of these denominations comprise a fraction of a percentage of the American population, a small number indeed. This number becomes even smaller (psychologically) in light of the frequent news reports declaring that "traditional religion is dramatically declining in America." Yet when considering that members from each of these denominations share quite of bit of overlapping beliefs—an affirmation that Scripture is God's Word, that God is triune, and that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, that salvation is by faith alone—as well as practices—a desire to spread the gospel message and mobilize for

[4]See "U.S. Membership Report (2010)," The Association of Religion Data Archives. https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?t=4&y=2010. These stats are for 2010 and will soon be updated once the 2020 US Religion Census is published later in 2022.

missionary efforts—then it becomes clear that, despite their many theological differences, there is a broad coalition of similarly-minded Christians out there in the United States which form the basis of *something* identifiable, something that is tangible and empirically measurable. That something has been termed evangelicalism, and as we will see below, it amounts to a sizable group in America's religious landscape. In sum, having a clear definition of evangelical can help many Christians in the United States come to see that, though they may be part of a denomination whose numbers may be small, they are actually part of something much larger than they realize.

II. DEFINING EVANGELICAL

It is one thing to know why it is advantageous to define the term evangelical, it is quite another thing to define it. Part of the difficulty in defining the term stems from the fact that language changes; what evangelical meant in 1960 is not exactly what it means today. In the last forty years since the rise of the Religious Right, and especially in the wake of the 2016 election, the term evangelical has increasingly been associated with "white religious Republican voters," a shift no doubt propelled by the dramatic political polarization which has enveloped the United States in recent years.[5] Unfortunately, this shift in definition inserts politics directly into the definition of the term. This needs to be resisted because the word has historically related exclusively to a religious identity. While political allegiances have always been very important to evangelicals, their particular political persuasions should not become a central feature in defining the term. A simple trip down memory lane reveals why this is the case. Consider for a moment the evangelicals of the First Great Awakening: images of the preaching of George Whitefield, the revival theology of Jonathan Edwards, and the conversion of thousands across the colonies probably comes to mind. What probably does not come to mind are the political leanings of any these individuals. This is for good reason, because when we reflect upon these early evangelicals we do not think of their politics, but their work as ministers, preachers, and evangelists. Politics thus forms no part of our conception of these First Great Awakening evangelicals. Similarly, it is well-known that during the period

[5]For example, see Ryan Burge, "Why 'Evangelical' is Becoming Another Word for 'Republican,'" *The Salt Lake Tribune*, October 27, 2021. https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2021/10/27/ryan-burge-why/

of the American Revolution, die hard evangelicals were found on all sides of the political spectrum: there were evangelical Patriots who prayed for the success of the Revolution and sent off their sons to join in the effort; there were evangelical Loyalists whose biblical convictions (Rom 13:2–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17) prevented them from rebelling against George III; and there were other evangelicals who refused to take sides on the issue altogether.[6] In short, evangelicals across history have shared many common religious instincts, the specifics of which we will expound below, but these commonalities have not always led them to affirm the same political positions. It is thus ill-advised today to attach a specific political persuasion to the definition of the term evangelical.

The most widely-used definition of the term evangelical employed in the last thirty years has been the one crafted by British historian David Bebbington in his groundbreaking book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: 1740–1980*, published in 1989.[7] There he defines evangelicals as Protestant Christians who exemplify four central characteristics: they are *conversionistic*, that is, they believe true Christians must be born again; *bibliocentric*, they have a high view of Scripture; *crucicentric*, they highly value Christ's atoning death on the cross; and they are *activistic*, they practice evangelism, missions, and other mercy ministries.[8] This definition, which has come to be known as the "Bebbington quadrilateral," offers several advantages when trying to distinguish between evangelical Protestants from Protestants in general. First, it provides a stable set of identifiable religious activities that can be applied to a diverse set of Protestants, a point which resists the definitional fluctuations that may occur with the passage of time. Second, it is also an academic definition that accords with the standards of modern historical inquiry. The Bebbington quadrilateral does not utilize theological criteria for determining who is "in or out" of the evangelical fold. Its goal is more modest: namely, to identify a set of empirically discernable characteristics that are shared by a diverse group of Protestant Christians throughout the centuries, and then apply that set to determining whether a group of Christians is evangelical or not. This point most likely accounts for the appeal of Bebbington's definition to the

[6]For the varieties of evangelical responses to the American Revolution, see Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 288-307.

[7]David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, 1740-1980* (1989; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

[8]Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1-19.

broader, secular community of journalists, sociologists, and pollsters who are merely concerned with mapping the religious landscape of the nation.

One problem with the Bebbington quadrilateral, however, is that it can mis-identify individuals as evangelical who are not evangelical according to the classic, historical sense of the term. Committed Roman Catholics, for instance, might have no problem affirming conversion, the Bible, the cross, and evangelistic activism and thus technically could be categorized as an evangelical by this definition even though they do not identify as such. Similarly, Mormons, Oneness Pentecostals, and other groups historically related to Christianity yet who embrace unorthodox notions of God and Christ, also could be placed on the evangelical spectrum based upon this four-fold criteria.[9] Thus, the Bebbington quadrilateral struggles to identify what the term has classically referred to in American religious history.

To remedy this, I would argue that a definition of evangelical requires the inclusion of both theological and historical aspects. Theologically, evangelicals have always seen themselves as belonging to Protestantism which is firmly orthodox in its understanding of God and Christ. Historically, evangelical origins almost always are thought to be rooted in, or closely related to, the great revival movements which occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (i.e. the First and Second Great Awakenings in America, and the great evangelical revivals in Great Britain during the same period). Surely these issues, which factor prominently in the self-identity of many evangelicals, should form a part of our definition of evangelical. Several evangelical historians, like Timothy Larsen and Douglas Sweeney, have put forth excellent definitions with these considerations in mind.[10]

Building upon these insights, and at the risk of oversimplification, I submit the following definition for use in this essay: evangelicals are "orthodox Protestant New Lights and their descendants."[11] At first glance this definition might seem somewhat cumbersome, but it really is not if we unpack its key components. First, evangelicals are "orthodox" in that they generally affirm doctrines which were identified to be faithful to Scripture

[9]To illustrate these problems, see Mark A. Noll, "Introduction: One Word but Three Crises," in *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 5-7.

[10]See Timothy Larsen, "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Trier (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-14; Douglas A. Sweeney, "Evangelicals in American History," in *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, ed. Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 122-24.

[11]To put it another way, we might say, that evangelicals are "revivalized, orthodox Protestants."

during the great theological controversies of the Patristic era: the doctrines of the trinity, the full deity and humanity of Christ, and the affirmation that salvation is the result of God's supernatural grace transforming fallen sinners. Second, evangelicals are "Protestants" who affirm that salvation is by faith alone, through grace alone, and wrought by Christ's sacrificial work alone (*sola fides, sola gratia, sola Christus*). They affirm *sola Scriptura*, and consequently reject many of the beliefs and practices that emerged in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy which do not have a firm basis in Scripture (i.e. purgatory, transubstantiation, and patterns of devotion related to the saints, their relics, and Mary). On both points—the fact that they are orthodox and Protestant—evangelicals proudly stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before them, mainly because they believe that these earlier Christians were affirming the central teachings of Scripture.

Third, evangelicals are a specific kind of orthodox Protestant; they are "New Light" Protestants. The New Lights, we may recall, were those colonial-American Protestants during the First Great Awakening (early 1740s) who welcomed the revivals of the period, supported the evangelistic ministries of itinerants like George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, and others, and were opposed by the Old Lights who believed that revivals were unnecessary emotionalistic intrusions into the ordered rhythms of normal congregational life. In addition to their affirmation of *right belief* (i.e. orthodoxy), New Lights also shared in what one theologian has called similar patterns of *right feeling* (orthopathy) and *right action* (orthopraxy).[12] With regard to right feeling, the New Lights shared some version of a convertive spirituality (i.e. conversionism) which asserted that authentic Christianity begins when one repents of sin, believes in Christ alone for salvation, and is born again by the Holy Spirit into new life with Christ. With regard to right action, the New Lights shared a common set of religious activities which is fairly consistent across proponents in many denominations: personally, they sought to live their lives as authentic Christians; ecclesially, they often became committed churchgoers; relationally, they desired to see others experience the blessing of the new birth and thus practiced personal evangelism, prayed for revivals similar to the ones they took part in, and supported evangelistic and missionary

[12]John G. Stackhouse Jr., "Generic Evangelicalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. by Andrew David Naselli and Colin Hansen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 124-26. Stackhouse does a great job defining evangelicalism, yet I would take issue with the way he applies the term to various groups and individuals.

endeavors for the sake of extending God's kingdom. It is the union of these beliefs (orthodoxy), this spirituality (orthopathy), and these actions (orthopraxy) that set apart New Light evangelicals from other orthodox Protestants during the First Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening forged a transdenominational renewal movement that touched the lives of thousands of Christians and hundreds of churches throughout the mid-1700s. Historians generally associate the birth of evangelicalism with the emergence of these New Light Protestants in North America and their confreres in Great Britain who were also experiencing similar revivals under the leadership of itinerant evangelists like Whitefield and John Wesley. Today, those post-Great Awakening New Lights have long since died, yet there are Christians, traditions of Christians, and entire denominations who trace their spiritual lineage directly back to these New Lights. They look back with fondness on the great eighteenth-century revivals in general, and they share similar spiritual instincts (orthopathy) and actions (orthopraxy) that the original New Lights did in the eighteenth century. It is these descendants of orthodox Protestant New Lights which I am calling evangelicals today.

Defining evangelicals in this manner—as "orthodox Protestant New Lights and their descendants"—provides us with numerous advantages. It allows us to use Bebbington's quadrilateral with a more narrow lens, one that is more theologically definite (orthodox Protestantism) and historically rooted (they descend from the network of Christians related to the New Light renewal movement of the First Great Awakening). It also prevents us from confusing evangelicals with Roman Catholics (who are not Protestant) and Mormons (who are not orthodox).

Needless to say, the definition does have drawbacks. While we might use it to identify solidly evangelical denominations and groups, there will be organizations on the margins of the definition which may or may not fit neatly into the evangelical camp. Consequently, different individuals will draw the boundaries of evangelicalism differently. Nonetheless, our definition is useful in trying to answer the question of this essay, "who are evangelicals?"

III. EVANGELICAL DEMOGRAPHICS IN AMERICA

Having given some thought to the definition of evangelical, we turn our attention to demographic questions related to evangelicals in American society today. Many evangelicals today find themselves alarmed by the

rapid changes that have taken place in American society: the growing rates of "nones" in the United States,[13] the increasing secularism of our nation's major institutions, and the deepening marginalization of committed religious belief (usually committed Christian belief) from the public square.[14] This sense of alarm may lead to the conclusion that evangelicals are severely on the decline throughout the United States, a flickering wick whose light is just about ready to be snuffed out. In this situation, reliable statistics are required to help us distinguish fact from fiction. When we examine data on the religious landscape in the United States, we find a picture that is not as dire as alarmist news reports might suggest.

In 2018, when Gallup asked a group of Americans if they self-identified as "born again or evangelical" 41 percent answered in the affirmative. Furthermore, Gallup has asked this question since 1991, and they have found little change among these numbers over the decades. "The 42% of Americans who on average identified as born-again or evangelical in 1991-1995 is little different from the 41% over the past three years [2016–2018]."[15] Even more striking is that these numbers remain constant even as the rest of America's religious landscapes reveal significant shifts. For instance, in 1991–1995, 7 percent of Americans professed to have "no religious identity" while that number grew by a factor of two-and-a-half times, or 18 percent, by 2016–201.[16] At the very minimum, these numbers tell us that those who profess to be "born again or evangelical" has remained constant for much of the last generation even though the rest of America's religious landscape has shifted significantly.

Yet scholars have pointed out a problem with polls based upon self-identification: persons who say they have been born again or are an evangelical might not be recognized as such by authentic evangelicals themselves. The way around this has been to reconfigure the polling in one of two ways: (1) ask more detailed questions about actual religious beliefs and

---

[13]The "nones" are persons who see themselves as having no religious affiliation or identity.

[14]For a provocative article on the marginalization of evangelicals from the public square, see Aaron M. Renn, "The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism," *First Things* (February 2022): 25-31.

[15]Frank Newport, "5 Things to Know about Evangelicals in America," Gallup, May 31, 2018, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/235208/things-know-evangelicals-america.aspx.

[16]Newport, "5 Things." See also Candy Gunther Brown, "Introduction," in *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 4-5, where she notes that while the total number of self-identifying Christians dropped significantly between 2007 and 2014 (78% to 71%), the number of evangelicals dropped much less (26.3% to 25.4%). She observes that during this period "the absolute numbers of evangelicals may have climbed from 60 million to 62 million adults" (5).

practices and (2) count the numbers of persons among the evangelical denominations.[17] When these factors are taken into consideration, we gain a better picture of the strength of evangelicalism in the United States. While there are numerous research groups out there which conduct polls and analyze data regarding the makeup of American religion, I will base my comments in this section largely upon the Pew Religious Landscape Study completed in 2014.[18] This study was based upon a large survey of over 35,000 individuals from all 50 states and it asked questions related to the basic religious beliefs and practices of Americans.[19]

Pew found that 70.6 percent of Americans identify as "Christian." The four largest subgroups of this category were evangelical Protestant (25.4% of the U.S. population), Roman Catholics (20.8%), Mainline Protestants (14.7%), and historically black Protestants (6.5%).[20] The number of evangelical Protestants (~25%) is lower than the Gallup number (~40%), but it still reflects solid evangelical strength in the United States.

Furthermore, when we consider the fact that the historically black Protestant denominations share both similar historical origins and similar beliefs and practices with those identified as "evangelical Protestants," then a solid case can be made to include them under the evangelical umbrella since they too are descendants of "orthodox Protestant New Lights." Pollsters, sociologists, and historians have routinely counted the historically black Protestant churches as a separate category because these denominations emerged as separate entities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and have largely operated outside of what Pew identifies as the evangelical Protestant mainstream. In addition, many members of the historically black Protestant churches do not embrace the evangelical label, opting instead for the term "born again Christian."[21] Yet the vast

[17] For the various ways of counting evangelicals, see Mark A. Noll, "Evangelical Constituencies in North America and the World," in *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now*, and Could Be, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 74-6.

[18] "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/. The data I discuss below is drawn from the online pages of this study.

[19] Furthermore, this was the second study Pew Research conducted like this in seven years; their earlier study was from 2007.

[20] Other smaller groups Pew identifies under the "Christian" umbrella are "Mormon" (1.6% of the United States population), "Orthodox Christian" (0.5%), "Jehovah's Witnesses" (0.8%), and "Other" (0.4%).

[21] Candy Gunther Brown notes that there are numerous "historical and cultural reasons that black and white Christians who share much in common theologically have different experiences and priorities—which lead many theologically conservative African Americans to reject

majority of historically black Protestants are associated with the Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal traditions, each of which have deep roots in the New Light Protestantism of the eighteenth century.[22]

As we press deeper into the Pew data, we find more evidence of genuine evangelicalism than what we might find based merely on the criteria people use to self-identify. Pew asked respondents numerous questions related to their basic religious beliefs and practices. Their questions do not drill down thoroughly into specific theological affirmations that evangelicals would like to see asked—for instance, questions related to inerrancy of Scripture or the substitutionary atonement. But their questions were structured in such a way to determine basic convictions about Scripture, belief in God, Heaven and Hell, and practices related to prayer, church attendance, and the reading of Scripture, features which collectively align with evangelical attitudes, convictions, and behavior.

On the question related to the "importance of religion" in one's life, both evangelical Protestants and historically black Protestants answered that it is "very important" (the highest category) in significantly higher numbers (79% and 85% respectively) than found among Roman Catholics (58%) and mainline Protestants (53%). Similar numbers can be seen with reference to the frequency of "attendance at religious services" as evangelical Protestants (58%) and black Protestants (53%) attend church "at least once a week" in higher numbers than Roman Catholic (39%) and mainline Protestants (33%).

With regard to the practice of prayer, both evangelical and black Protestants claim to pray "at least daily" and attend a "prayer group" (where those gathered pray together and study Scripture) at least "once a week" in roughly the same numbers (79-80% for praying daily, 44% attendance at a prayer group once a week) while the numbers are considerably less among Roman Catholics (59% pray daily; 17% attend prayer group once a week) and mainline Protestants (54% pray daily; 19% attend prayer group once a week).

Similar numbers are found regarding practices and attitudes related to Scripture. Evangelical and black Protestants read Scripture "at least once a week" in similar numbers (63% and 61% respectively), numbers which are higher than those found among Roman Catholics (25%) and

---

the label 'evangelical.'" See Brown, *The Future of Evangelicalism*, 3. Also see Noll, "Evangelical Constituencies," 78, and Newport, "5 Ways," for similar observations.

[22] The Pentecostal tradition, which appeared in the early twentieth century, came out of the Methodist tradition and shares many of the same evangelical instincts as its parent group.

mainline Protestants (30%). Pew also had a question related to "interpreting Scripture" which asks participants how they understand "holy Scripture" to be the "Word of God." The strongest answer possible—Scripture is the "Word of God" and "should be taken literally"—was affirmed by 55% of the evangelical Protestants and 59% of historically black Protestants, numbers which again are higher than found among Roman Catholics (26%) and mainline Protestants (24%).

Stepping back for a moment, we can make two brief observations based upon this data. The first is basically a restatement of what was mentioned earlier: from the standpoint of our historical-theological definition of evangelical, we may safely include the historically black Protestant churches in with the evangelical Protestants when assessing the strength of evangelicals in American society today. Both groups have similar historical roots, possess broadly similar convictions, and live out their faith in similar ways. If this is the case, then second, we can observe that evangelicals form a sizable religious subgroup in American society. They are not a faintly smoldering wick on the verge of extinction but represent roughly 30 percent of the American population.[23] More recently, Ryan Burge, a political scientist and Baptist pastor has noted the same thing. Looking exclusively at evangelicals (not historically black Protestants) he notes that the "more honest reading of the data is that evangelicals constitute just slightly less than a quarter of Americans in an average year, and there is little reason to think that this will substantially shift in the next decade."[24]

IV. TAKEAWAYS

What can we make from these observations? Three things. The first is that as we push deeper into the twenty-first century evangelicals can take encouragement that their numbers are still strong throughout the United States. The fall of "traditional religion" throughout much of the West is a well-known narrative. Only 10 percent of Canadians are evangelical (compared to ~30% in America).[25] Only 5 percent of citizens of the United Kingdom attend a church of any kind on a given Sunday (compared with

[23]Pew's numbers from their 2014 study have evangelical Protestants at 25.4 percent, and historically black Protestant churches at 6.5 percent. This amounts to 31.9 percent, just under a third of American population.

[24]Ryan P. Burge, *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 15.

[25]For the number in Canada, see Noll, "Evangelical Constituencies," 79-80. The number for the United States is based upon the combined Pew number of evangelical Protestants and historically black Protestants (see note 24 above).

37% in the United States).[26] Furthermore, Christianity (often in one of its Pentecostal varieties) is exploding across the global South (South America, Africa, and Asia). One might be tempted to conclude from these facts that "God has given up on the West and has moved on." Yet surprisingly, the United States appears to be resisting the trend to shed its Christian heritage altogether, at least at present. Evangelicals continue to endure as a sizable subgroup in American society. It is true that they are embattled and are increasingly marginalized. But it is often observed that this is the place—i.e. "embattled" and "on the margins"—where they have thrived the most throughout history. Historian Brian Stanley has observed that, based upon the way evangelicalism has survived massive changes in the past two centuries, that "the movement has the capacity to survive significant secessions from the margins and even realignments of the center without succumbing to the disintegration that its most pessimistic adherents or unsympathetic critics have predicted."[27] The encouragement one can take from this observation should in no way give rise to an obnoxious evangelical triumphalism. But hopefully it lifts those who may, for whatever reason, have come to believe that the evangelical light has receded from North America, when the numbers appear to point to a different conclusion.

A second takeaway from the study is that we should recognize the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of American evangelicalism. The churches that make up evangelicalism in America today are reflecting the increasing complexity of the broader society. If we look specifically at the evangelical Protestant churches Pew identifies, we do not find them to be exclusively populated by white Americans of European descent. Rather, almost a quarter (24%) are comprised of "non-whites," namely Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans and mixed races.[28] Furthermore, Pew notes that the number of non-whites grew significantly in evangelical Protestantism from 2007 (19%) to 2014 (24%), a fact which seems to indicate that non-whites are increasingly finding a religious home in the broad family of evangelical Protestant churches.[29] This is good news

[26]For the UK (in 2015), see "Christianity in the UK," Faith Survey, https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html. For the US (in 2013) see "What Surveys Say about Worship Attendance," Pew Research Center, September 13, 2013, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/.

[27]Brian Stanley, T*he Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013).

[28]"Religious and Ethnic Composition," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/.

[29]"America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, https://www.

indeed: it demonstrates that God's Kingdom is indeed expanding through every nation, tribe, and tongue. It also helps counter the myth that modern evangelicalism is merely the religion of white middle-class Americans. It would be wise for pastors, churchgoers, and denominational leaders to take note of these trends and find ways to accommodate the new data in our local congregations.

A third and final takeaway is a challenge: as we press further into the twenty-first century, American evangelicals will increasingly need to rely upon each other and find ways to stand together in light of the increasing secularization of the United States. As noted earlier, a big surprise in the last generation has been the rise in the nones, or those who are religiously unaffiliated. Current trends suggest that this group may grow to 35–50% of the population in the next fifty years.[30] An increasingly religiously unaffiliated society means that many of the institutions of our nation—legal, commercial, educational, financial, entertainment, etc.—will increasingly be dominated by religiously unaffiliated individuals who possess little or no concern for organized religion. How does the church survive in the post-Christian America that appears to be coming? Christian writers have already begun exploring ways to prepare for this reality.[31] In the face of these trends, evangelicals would only benefit by finding ways to stand together and present themselves to the world as a "gospel people." They may not agree on every matter related to soteriology, ecclesiology, or eschatology, but they share common attitudes related to life, the family, religious liberty, and righteousness—attitudes that make a difference in the world and should be contended for if we desire the semblance of a just and flourishing society. Furthermore, evangelicals are a significant segment of the American population as noted above, and they are not going anywhere soon. In such a situation, it would only behoove evangelicals in the years to come to find ways to pray for each other, and link arms and support each other on issues of common concern. This could only

pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[30]"Modeling the Future of Religion in America," Pew Research Center, September 13, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=c8e24a8670-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_09_14_02_36&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-c8e24a8670-401278785.

[31]The most popular of these in recent years has been Rod Dreher, T*he Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017). For a historical study outlining another, more radical approach, see Crawford Gribben, *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

help strengthen the church, its witness, and further its mission well into the twenty-first century.