THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education
The Chronicle Review


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December 12, 2010

# Among the Evangelicals

**Inside a fractured movement**

*By Timothy Beal*

In December 2003, at a national conference on religion and undergraduate life in New Orleans, a representative of a major donor to higher education asked how many of the hundred-plus professors and administrators in his audience had heard of Rick Warren. One hand started to go up, tentatively, then drew back. The rest of us were blank, including me. Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life,* published a year earlier, was already well on its way to becoming the best-selling hardcover in the country's history, having been on *The New York Times*' best-seller list for hardcover advice books for 46 weeks and at the top of the Christian Booksellers Association best-seller list for over a year. His Purpose-Driven Ministries, a church-development organization based on his 1995 Christian best seller, *The Purpose-Driven Church,* was already well known among hundreds of thousands of pastors and lay people, many thousands of whom attended the annual conferences he hosted at Saddleback Church, his Orange County, Calif., megachurch. Yet his name hardly rang a bell.

No doubt many other huge names in evangelical Christian circles—T.D. Jakes, Max Lucado, or Joel Osteen, for example—would have met similarly void looks from that audience of academics, though it was brought together by a shared interest in religion's changing role in the social and cultural landscapes of our campuses. And no doubt those names would have gotten the same nonresponses from most of our colleagues at our home institutions.

Not that scholars of religion had been ignoring roots and branches of the various revivalist, fundamentalist, and charismatic movements that feed into contemporary evangelical Christianity, a broad movement that centers on personal conversion to a "born again" experience of faith in Jesus Christ, a missionary zeal to share this faith with others, and a high regard for the authority of the Bible. For more than two decades, historians of religion like

Randall H. Balmer, Joel A. Carpenter, and Mark A. Noll had been exploring these dimensions of American Christianity. Balmer's now classic *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey Into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (1989), which explored a variety of evangelical movements and communities in a way that both historicized and personalized each, has been especially influential, reaching far beyond the rather narrow audience of American scholars of religion. Carpenter's *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (1997), which unpacked fundamentalism's sectarian withdrawal in the early 20th century and its postwar popular revival in the form of neoevangelicalism, drew our attention to the movement's rapid adoption of new media formats, like radio and television, and its imitation of popular trends in the secular entertainment industry.

Still other scholars of religion had undertaken influential social-scientific studies of particular aspects of evangelical Christianity. Nancy T. Ammerman's pioneering field studies of fundamentalist and evangelical churches in *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (1987) and *Congregation and Community* (1997), for example, not only illuminated the cultural identities, social organizations, and worldviews of particular congregations but also provided an enduring model for subsequent work in congregational studies. In a similar vein, since the late 1990s, Vincent Wimbush and collaborators at the Institute for Signifying Scriptures at Claremont Graduate University have drawn particular attention to scriptural-interpretive practices among African-American groups, even while pushing biblical scholarship more generally in the direction of sociological and cultural analysis of other "Bible believing" communities.

In another direction, Robert Wuthnow's quantitative analysis of the rise of small groups in *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (1994) demonstrated the increasing importance of evangelical Bible study and fellowship groups in the changing landscape of American religious life. And his edited collection of qualitative small-group studies in *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion,* published the same year, emphasized the ways such groups create space both for individual expressions of personal faith and for the collective process of exploring and articulating a shared experience of communal faith. Moreover, along with Wade Clark Roof, the University of North Carolina professor of religious

studies and author of *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (2001), Wuthnow emphasized the ways evangelical leaders and churches are engaged in a highly competitive market for religious consumers.

Still, such academic studies of American evangelicalism and related movements have been fairly few and far between compared with those of other religious subjects—such as early American religious history and religion and politics—and their authors have written primarily for audiences of their disciplinary peers. More recently, however, there appears to be a growing intellectual interest in the subject among nonevangelical readers and outside academe. Some of the most popular trade books on the subject are first-person accounts of non-Christians who have immersed themselves in particular evangelical or fundamentalist communities. Most notable are Jeff Sharlet's remarkable exposé, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (HarperCollins, 2008), and Kevin Roose's *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* (Grand Central, 2009), that is, Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. Sharlet is a religion scholar and journalist, and Roose is a former Brown University undergraduate and now a writer.

At the same time, field researchers in the social sciences, both within and without departments of religion, are becoming more interested in things evangelical. Particularly striking are the number of books by first-time authors, most of whom are indebted to the pioneering work of senior scholars like Ammerman and Wuthnow. It appears that American evangelicalism is finally coming into its own as a subject of social research and academic attention well beyond the scope of those who identify with it as insiders. It seems we now realize there is more to know than what we learned from the Simpsons' neighbor Ned Flanders.

Yet as soon as evangelicalism becomes a subject, it splinters and splits. Indeed, taken together, recent studies by more-or-less outsiders show there is no such thing as evangelicalism. The term represents a broad range of significantly different theologies, practices, and religious movements within Christianity, and there are often tensions among and within them. Which is no revelation at all to most more-or-less insiders, who call themselves evangelicals, however qualified, and who argue as much with others who do the same as with those of us who don't.

*Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual*

*Marketplace* (NYU Press, 2009), by Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, turns critical attention to five of today's most well-known celebrity "evangelical innovators," namely T.D. Jakes (the subject of Lee's first book), Brian McLaren, Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, and Paula White. Heirs of the religious-economy approach of Roof, Wuthnow, and others, Lee and Sinitiere—an associate professor of sociology and African diasporic studies at Tulane University, and a visiting assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University—see these five figures as supply-side free agents who succeed not because of their status within a particular ecclesiastical hierarchy but because they are able to market their content, indeed themselves, in ways that embody changing American sensibilities.

Their approach challenges the "strict church thesis" of earlier sociologists of religion, which argued that conservative, hard-line suppliers of religion (fundamentalists, conservative evangelicals) thrive, while lenient ones (liberals, progressives) decline. On the contrary, these five profiles suggest that the key to success is not theological or political strictness but effective marketing. Indeed, part of what allows these evangelical innovators to be so successful is that they find ways to "overtly avoid (yet subtly address)" potentially controversial issues among their constituents, Lee and Sinitiere write. One of the big take-aways from their research is that the evangelical movement is, they say, "far more elastic, far more complex, and far more contradictory than what popular accounts reveal."

A hallmark of American evangelicalism, at least since the 1940s, has been its ready willingness to adapt its theological content to new media technologies and popular trends in the entertainment industry. Implicit in that openness is an evangelical counterdeclaration to Marshall McLuhan's: The medium is not the message; the message, or the Word, transcends whatever media are used to convey it. But in the long run, is the constant evangelical adaptation of the Word unwittingly proving McLuhan right? I think so. That is partly why we find so little coherence within and among the various groups and movements and productions that pass as evangelical.

Indeed, it's impossible to imagine the likes of Osteen or Warren or Jakes without the teams of creators, editors, and marketers who publish them beyond their home churches, in books and on the radio, television, and Internet. It is not too much to say that their media producers actually create and sustain them as pop-culture

icons. Their relationships with their publishers in the production of both medium and message are not unlike those of pop-music stars with their labels. Lady Gaga has Universal Music and Max Lucado has Thomas Nelson.

In that light, Jonathan L. Walton's social-historical and theological-ethical study of African-American religious broadcasting in *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (NYU Press, 2009) is an especially welcome recent study. Since the early 20th century, black evangelists have often been on the cutting edge of media history, adopting and creatively adapting new electronic technologies in keeping with trends in the entertainment industry. Yet they have been largely ignored by African-American religious historians, who have treated them as unworthy of serious attention, and by media theorists, to whom they have been virtually invisible. Walton, an assistant professor of African-American religions at Harvard University, draws critical attention to this important yet often ignored aspect of black religious history and media studies. As a theologian and cultural critic, he offers rich semiotic analyses of three contemporary black televangelists (T.D. Jakes, Eddie L. Long, and the married team of Creflo and Taffi Dollar) and their television shows as rituals in and of themselves, rather than simply as audio-video recordings of actual, "real" services.

The megachurch service, he argues, cannot be separated from its broadcast. The mass-media production of the megachurch event is not supplemental to the event itself but symbiotic with it. The worship experience resides as much in the editing and production of the show—in the "slow-motion images of a pastor laying hands on the heads of parishioners and zoom-in shots of a parishioner feverishly taking notes during the sermon"—as it does in the service or the evangelist. Indeed, the megachurch event is rendered an "incarnation" of the television show. The event is designed to approximate the show even as the show is designed to create an idealized reproduction of the event—a McLuhanian illustration if there ever was one.

Walton goes on to reveal how the "constructed spaces" created by televangelists and their production teams play host to ritual events that embody deep religious tensions between liberation and repression in the lives of participants. On the one hand, as "rituals of self-affirmation," the events speak directly to the realities of unjust suffering endured by African-Americans. On the other hand, as "rituals of social accommodation," they distract participants

from critical examination and transformation of those unjust systems, encouraging them instead to find hope in common cultural myths, namely: American success and the self-made man, black victimology in a supposedly postracist society, and the "strong black man" as the savior of black family and society.

Those pervasive, broadly popular myths, the author argues, not only "anesthetize" participants to systemic social injustice but also "flatten internal contradictions" among African-American Christians, thereby creating a false sense of commonality within and among otherwise diverse communities. Here again, as in *Holy Mavericks,* the closer we look, the more contradictions emerge, and evangelism begins to seem at least as much about playing down tensions and avoiding potential conflicts as it is about spreading the Word.

Still other, more ethnographically minded studies are revealing similar diversity and tension within much tighter, seemingly coherent cultural forms of everyday evangelical belief and practice. In *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (NYU Press, 2009), for example, James S. Bielo, a visiting assistant professor of anthropology at Miami University, offers a window on to such differences in a most particular context, the small-group Bible study, which, along with weekly worship and prayer, forms the most common core of evangelical Christian life. Bielo observed 324 Bible-study meetings of 19 groups of evangelicals over more than a year and a half. Within those meetings, he often noticed tensions among different readings of particular biblical passages, as well as different understandings of the Bible itself, that potentially threatened group identity and coherence.

Bielo found that successful group facilitators were able to inculcate certain "textual practices" with the Bible and "textual ideologies" about the Bible that played down those differences and fenced the table, so to speak, from participants who could not conform. The strongest textual ideology was the idea of the Bible as the only absolute, infallible authority for faith and life. While studying Proverbs 11-12, for example, a participant in one group questioned the text's proclamations that the righteous always prosper while the wicked suffer: "I see faithful people take it on the neck. How do you square that?" Without dismissing or directly challenging the question, the facilitator steered the discussion back to the group's agreed presupposition of biblical authority: "I don't have all the

answers. All I'm saying is that this is a book of promises from beginning to end. ... We have life, and a better life, by claiming all the promises in this book as ours." Although the man's experience may appear to contradict scriptural authority in that moment, the leader suggests, continuing to claim that authority as such will in the long term be a blessing—not only to the individual but to the group. That man, Bielo later notes, quietly quit attending the group.

A similar lack of internal cohesion is discovered among Christian anti-abortionists, the vast majority of whom identify with evangelicalism. In *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), Ziad W. Munson, an associate professor of sociology at Lehigh University, reveals a much more complex web of relationships among beliefs and actions within this movement than most of us on the outside would presume. Based on close study of 32 anti-abortion organizations in four cities, as well as intensive interviews with more than 100 people with anti-abortion theological beliefs (some activists and some not), Munson identifies four stages of mobilization: first, direct contact with the movement at a personal "turning point" in life that makes the person open and available; second, an initial experience in the movement through participation in a rally, counseling session, or other activity; third, the development of anti-abortion beliefs; and fourth, full movement participation. Even in the final two solidifying stages, Munson found no single, commonly shared belief system. In fact he discovered "a surprisingly broad spectrum of ideas" that "fracture the movement into different social movement streams, consisting of mutually exclusive sets of organizations, people, and activities." Munson argues that those differences are central to an individual's motivation to join one activist stream over another. Differences and tensions both drive and fracture the movement.

Likewise within the Christian home-school movement, according to Robert Kunzman, author of *Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling* (Beacon, 2009). Over the course of two years, Kunzman, an associate professor of education at Indiana University, conducted close studies of six home-schooled families in five states. To be sure, the movement has been able to present a uniform political front, thanks especially to broad participation in the evangelical Home School Legal Defense Association. The organization's

chairman and co-founder is Michael P. Farris, who is also chancellor of Patrick Henry College, the first college for Christian home-schoolers and the subject of Hanna Rosin's *God's Harvard* (Harcourt, 2007). Yet Kunzman's intimate profiles of these six families reveal a great deal of diversity in terms of both educational methods and curriculum content. Their shared sense of distinction from secular public-school systems tends to mask such internal distinctions.

In light of all this difference, contradiction, and tension within evangelicalism, how has the "evangelical bloc," or the "Christian right," composed largely of self-described evangelicals, managed to muster such remarkable political power and influence in the United States? That is a central question for Jon A. Shields in *The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right* (Princeton University Press, 2009). Based on extensive fieldwork among conservative Christian political leaders and their organizations in six different cities, Shields, an assistant professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, calls for a reassessment of the Christian right's contribution to American democracy. Whereas many outside the movement presume that its effectiveness derives from a common, relatively narrow ideological-theological worldview and value system, seen by many on the political left as borderline fascist, what Shields found was in fact much more diverse and heterogeneous. He argues that Christian-right leaders—whom he is careful to distinguish from militant Christian extremists who have abandoned the democratic process (white supremacists, militant anti-abortion activists, etc.)—have successfully mobilized conservative evangelical Christians not by appealing to a commonly shared ideology but by inculcating the very "deliberative norms" that are idealized by political activists across the spectrum, including the New Left. Those norms, which include the practice of civility, the cultivation of dialogue, the use of moral reasoning, and the rejection of appeals to theology, enable the Christian-right movement to maintain a degree of effective unity despite the many theological and political differences among its adherents.

Evangelism is at root about telling a good story. The Greek word behind it, *euangelion,* means "good news" or, more literally, "happy message" (*eu,* "happy" plus *angelion,* "message"). Whence comes our word "gospel" via the Old English godspel, "good spell" or "story." In that light, it can be argued, as it often is, that all forms of Christianity, including those way on the left, are essentially

evangelical, insofar as they are about proclaiming the Christian gospel, the good story. Disagreements quickly emerge, of course, in the often radically different interpretations of what that gospel is and means.

Growing up conservative evangelical in the 1960s and 70s, I learned to see it primarily in terms of personal sin and salvation. The most popular version of that gospel message was the Four Spiritual Laws, created as an evangelism tool in 1952 by the late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. They are: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life; sin separates you from God; Jesus on the cross paid the price for your sin; you need to accept Jesus as your personal lord and savior. (My mom occasionally pulls out an old reel-to-reel tape of me, age 5, singing, "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! Oh, precious is the flow, that can make me white as snow.") Most nonevangelicals assume that is the one and only gospel among all evangelical Christians. But that's far from true.

When I left home in Anchorage in 1982 to attend Seattle Pacific University, an evangelical Christian college, I discovered a very rich and intellectually stimulating theological community in which a diversity of evangelicalisms were arguing with one another. Some looked like the highly personalized Four Spiritual Laws, but others, especially those promoted by my professors, were quite radical, both socially and theologically, bearing the influences of liberation theology, feminist theology, and universalism, among other things. Embracing those influences, I came to call myself a "liberal evangelical," a term that may seem oxymoronic to many people these days but was in heavy circulation back then.

Why has there been such a lack of familiarity, indeed, of interest, among academics in the cultural depth and complexity of American evangelicalism until so recently? Perhaps we don't do as much book browsing as most people do in Wal-Marts and Targets, and so are less likely to encounter evangelicalism in everyday life. Being among the least-churched populations in the United States, moreover, most academics don't hear about it on Sunday mornings, when we're more likely to be reading *The New York Times* than listening to a sermon. Beyond that, I wonder if there is a sense among many of us that the whole world of evangelical Christianity represents academic culture's other, the antithesis of who we are as scholars and educators. As Shields suggests, many of us see it as representing the opposite of liberal democratic ideals, perhaps even

a theological aberration of intellectual history in the way Walton shows black televangelism to have been among historians of African-American religious history.

One of the greatest values of social-scientific research is its power to defuse our tendency to see unfamiliar cultural beliefs and practices as totally foreign; it helps us recognize ourselves in the stranger and the stranger in ourselves. These recent studies do just that, drawing broader and deeper attention to American evangelicalism in all its complexity. In the process, they help bring to life the lively differences and tensions that have always energized the evangelical movement, even while threatening its coherence.

*Timothy Beal is a professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University and author of The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book, forthcoming from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.*

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037