

Russell Moore: Why The Word 'Evangelical' Is Meaningless

To understand how Republican front-runner Donald Trump courted and won the “evangelical” vote, one must define the word that frequents headlines, Russell Moore says.

“Part of the problem is that more secular people have for a long time misunderstood the meaning of ‘evangelical,’ seeing us almost exclusively in terms of election-year voting blocs or our most buffoonish television personalities,” writes the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

“That’s especially true when media don’t distinguish in election exit polls between churchgoers and those who merely self-identify as ‘born again’ or ‘evangelical,’” he continues.

In Alabama in 2012, 80 percent of GOP primary voters in labeled themselves as evangelicals, according to NPR; in Georgia and Tennessee, the description is at 68 percent.

Four years and another primary later, the majority of Republican voters in South Carolina and Iowa said they were evangelicals, according to NPR.

But with headlines like “Why Evangelicals are Born Again for Donald Trump” and “Donald Trump, Despite Impieties, Wins the Hearts of Evangelical Voters,” Moore says the word is now virtually meaningless.

The Washington Post’s Sarah Posner writes “evangelical” voters are drawn to Trump in the same way they are drawn to the prosperity gospel.

“That impulse, which is Trumpism in a nutshell, is the magical

thinking of how Americans get rich, whether it's by surviving a reality television show, getting lucky with an investment, winning the lottery or being blessed by God," Posner writes. "Trump is arguably the candidate most resembling a televangelist."

"For many evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatic Christians, magical thinking has found its expression through the prosperity gospel, much to the consternation of Christians who consider it a heresy and a fraud. A uniquely American contribution to the evolution of Christianity in the modern age, the prosperity gospel teaches that God wants believers to be rich," Posner says.

"It's also called the health and wealth gospel: Its adherents believe that God blesses the faithful with great wealth, keeps their health robust and cures the faithful of every malady. Successful televangelists boast of revelations received directly from God and of their ability to produce miracles.

"If you're poor or if you're sick, that's a sign of a lack of faith. Or in Trump's parlance, a loser," she says.

And in some ways, she's right. These thoughts, these "Trumpisms" that rally supporters confuse many leaders, like Moore.

"Why are many evangelical leaders, including some who pontificate on nearly everything else, scared silent as evangelicalism is associated with everything from authoritarianism and bigotry to violations of religious freedom? How can they look the other way in silence when politicians praise Planned Parenthood and demur about white supremacists and neo-Nazis?" Moore writes.

"Worst of all, what happens when evangelicalism is no longer even clear about what it takes to be saved: repentance from sin and personal trust in Jesus Christ?"

What started as a “magnificent” word representing the likes of Martin Luther King, Billy Graham, fundamental Christian values and New Testament values has basically been hijacked, but it’s certainly not without hope for the future.

“Look at the millennial pastors and church planters all over the country,” Moore writes. “Look at who is in evangelical seminaries, of every denomination. Look at who is flocking to evangelical conferences – from Urbana to Passion to Send North America to The Gospel Coalition. The future of evangelicalism is vibrant, prophetic, theologically-grounded, gospel-centered and unwilling to be anyone’s political mascot.”

If only we can remember what “evangelical” really means.