

Three Possible Futures for Evangelicals in America

There are three possible futures for American Evangelicalism. These diverse destinies depend upon the moral, social and theological convictions of the communities and leaders of the different streams. They also represent patterns found in three centuries of American Evangelical history. These futures will also determine whether or not particular communities flourish economically and socially. American Evangelicalism has never been a uniform subculture. The term “Evangelical” denotes adherents of historic Christian faith within a Protestant ethos.

Remembering the Past

Synthesizing the insights of historians George Marsden and Mark Noll, the Awakenings that gave shape to the Evangelical ethos between 1730 and 1840 focused on five key attributes: (1) Biblical authority and inspiration, (2) affirmation of historic creedal theology, (3) the necessity of personal conversion, (4) commitment to local and global evangelization/missions, and (5) integration of personal piety and public charity and engagement in making the world a better place. Integrating personal faith with deliberate generosity of material and spiritual resources for the common good was normal discipleship for Evangelicals. John Wesley, founder of the Methodists, eschewed any separation of piety and public charity, insisting that members develop relationships with the recipients of their largesse. He also commended entrepreneurship and hard work, enjoining friends to “earn, save, and give” in proper proportion. The three reactions mentioned above have their origins in the 18th century. One group resisted change and rejected the affective experiences of renewed believers and their insistence that their ministers

display sufficient enthusiasm and fidelity to Scripture. These were the "Old Lights." They eventually split into two camps, with some retaining historic creedal faith and others embracing Deism and/or Unitarianism as the Enlightenment calls for eschewing old superstitions gave way to modern scientific understanding. By 1800, reactions to change are established: (1) **retrenchment** and rejection of new experiences and ideas, (2) **revision** of the faith itself, including questioning cardinal doctrines, and (3) **renewal** leading to reform and revival of biblical faith. The tragic schism over slavery in the 1840s and 1850s and the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early 20th century further complicate matters for defining Evangelical. With the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1943 and emergence of major American/ global parachurch leaders after World War II (Billy Graham and Bill Bright to name just two), Evangelicalism emerged from the shadows as a diverse movement. The retrenchment response is seen in the "fighting fundamentalists" rejection of the NAE, racial integration, and other "compromises." Revisionism is represented by liberal Protestants continuing to question Evangelical theology and many of the conservative habits and social mores of conversion-centered Evangelicals. Renewal is found in Evangelical willingness to embrace Pentecostals and Charismatics (albeit somewhat gradually) and global missionary expansion. 19th- and 20th-century fundamentalists retained a sense of private generosity, but their eschatology and sociology distanced them from engagement and the bifurcation of sacred and secular grew in some quarters. The tumult of the 1960s and 1970s further divided Evangelical believers along sociopolitical lines, with Moral Majority conservatives opposing the initiatives of anti-war, anti-capitalist progressives, represented by groups such as Sojourners Fellowship. Once again there is retrenchment, revision, and renewal as heirs of fundamentalism seek to reify a Christian America. Revisionists begin talking about "Third Millennium Christianity" and question some long-held opinions. Renewal

advocates embrace the Jesus Movement, Charismatic Renewal, Concerts of Prayer, and other revivals of piety from the late 1960s to the 1990s. There were also divisions concerning prosperity and wealth, with progressives suspicious of free markets and conservative Evangelicals defending them, with some conservatives supporting a “prosperity gospel” rooted in spiritual formulae instead of sound ethics and economics. In the last two decades, Evangelical Christianity in America has been under assault, with recent Supreme Court decisions undermining some of the last vestiges of Christian civil influence. As of 2015, it is not an exaggeration to declare the end of Christendom in the United States and the cultural “exile” of devout Christians of all traditions. The fragmentation of Evangelicalism theologically and culturally continues, along with deep cries for spiritual renewal and unity.

Looking Ahead

What are the futures for Evangelicals? Distilling history and discerning hope, there are three major pathways that mark the future. These are not armed camps in opposition, but circles of conviction and praxis that are permeable and often intersect.

1. **Retrenchment** takes several forms. At the extremes are retreat and survivalism, with calls to go “off the grid” and detach from the larger culture. This tendency can also be found in attempts to reify a Christian America based on a narrow reading of history and nostalgia for times past. This ethos can include some heirs of the Anabaptist tradition as well. Retrenchment will also foster institutional separatism, with alternative cultural, educational, economic and social networks, along with a call to “separate” from a world awash in sin. This is similar to the “come-outism” of the Holiness Movements in the late 19th century. Believers

in this category are not uniform in their beliefs and practices and they are not misogynists or racists. They represent eschatological and ethical streams that are part of two millennia of church history. This reactive mode will also aim at creating alternative barter economies, from Wendell Barry-style local markets to networks of survivalist pitching freeze-dried food and water purifiers.

2. **Revisionists** vary from communities looking for a synthesis of historic Evangelical theology and new social mores to more radical reformulations of the faith itself. There is a serious “battle for the Bible” within these networks. Some embrace theological liberalism and argue for reading the Bible through 21st century lenses. This leads to embracing new definitions of family, gender and sexual morality. The decline of the West is embraced as appropriate justice for the sins of capitalism and colonialism. Those that wish to retain the historic faith yet demonstrate compassion and openness to other religions and LGBTQ advocates face particular challenges in biblical hermeneutics and calls for repentance. There is also an unconscious disdain for Global South Evangelicals that refuse to compromise on Scriptural authority and gender and marriage issues. Many of these folks will call for more federal government oversight and redistribution of wealth, including insisting on reparations for historical slavery and higher taxes.
3. **Renewal** movements aim for a synthesis of revivalism and reformation, an awakening of the Spirit and positive social influence. From Pentecostal and Charismatic networks to groups like the Manhattan Declaration, devout Evangelicals are aiming for biblical-historical-theological fidelity and contemporary relevance. Global expansion of lively Evangelical and Pentecostal

Christianity is viewed as a prophetic witness to the post-Christendom West. The crisis within the various renewal streams is one of discipleship, not enthusiasm. What does it mean to “make disciples” and how is maturity measured? Renewal advocates must foster deep repentance and reformation among their own ranks if they are going to persuade outsiders to (re)consider the historic Christian faith. Ecstasy without ethics only feeds the very subjectivism that undermines transcendent truth. In spite of the challenges, this broad category holds out the most hope for an Evangelical future. Like the 18th century Awakening leaders, theological diversity can coexist with evangelistic/missionary zeal. From the Gospel Coalition to the Missio Alliance, women and men with diverse views can labor for both personal salvation and social transformation. There is still basic agreement on biblical authority and morality, along with commitment to the centrality of Christ crucified and risen.

These futures are not completely divergent. Anabaptist believers can be found in all three streams and “conservative” and “liberal” labels need careful definition. Many African American churches embrace more liberal governmental policies on healthcare and welfare while retaining conservative views on abortion and marriage. Old “scorecards” must be discarded in favor of faithfulness to Christ and discernment for 21st century discipleship. Devout believers will continue to read the Bible with different lenses. Adherence to Christ crucified and risen and the clear teachings of Scripture will remain the plumb lines of living Evangelical Christianity. The precipitous decline of Mainline Protestantism demonstrates the consequences of departing from absolutes, especially the call for conversion. The limited impact of many renewal moments and movements reveals the weakness of piety divorced from sociocultural vision. The Renewal ethos presents the most hope

for the future. It will require an irenic and mature disposition so that personal piety overflows to community transformation. In the midst of the spiritual and theological debates and experiences, connecting Sunday faith and Monday work will be a vital part of the renewal movement as God's people discover that faithful churches engender flourishing communities.

A Fourth Way?

In the midst of these emerging futures is a salutary global development that will impact American Evangelicalism. The growth and persecution of Christianity around the world is fostering unity among believers of all historical streams of Christianity. Coptic believers under the thumb of jihadists and underground believers in China and Iran are brothers and sisters in need of prayer, not theological debate. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Churches of the East, Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal streams will find friends in all communities that share their heart for the gospel and passion for flourishing. The future of Evangelical Christianity in the United States may be shaped by the fidelity of believers who cling to Christ under severe conditions. Perhaps a reminder of the church under the cross in its first three centuries will be the spark of a new awakening in the 21st century. *Reprinted from the [Acton Institute](#).*