



American Evangelicalism Explained

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What Is American Evangelicalism?

American Evangelicalism is not a Church or denomination, and it is not a political party or single group with one opinion. Instead, it is an ecumenical Protestant movement from the 18th century, and its membership is quite diverse and more than just conservatives. There are liberal Evangelicals such as President Jimmy Carter, who support things like gay marriage and legalized abortion. There are also moderate Evangelicals like Dr. Francis Collins, who leads the National Institute of Health and supports the teaching of evolution. The movement is also more than Europeans or Whites Americans, and some of its founders and early leaders were men and women of Color; two examples of this are:



LEMUEL HAYNES

(1753-1833)

The first Black person to be ordained in the United States. He fought against England in the War of Independence and pastored all-White Puritan congregations.



JARENA LEE

(1783-1864)

The first woman licensed to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She walked over 3,000 kilometers a year to visit different Churches, and gave 178 sermons.

Though American Evangelicals are racially, politically, and theologically diverse, they all have one thing in common and that is an emphasis on the Gospel of Jesus. In fact, the name “Evangelical” comes from the Greek word *euangelion* (which means Good News), and the early Protestants used this name during the Reformation period. One could say that American Evangelicalism is a Reformation Movement, and like the early Protestants its members have four core beliefs which are:

1. **BEING BORN AGAIN** – Salvation through believing the Gospel of Jesus.
2. **DISCIPLESHIP** – Serving other and seeking justice through imitating Jesus.
3. **HUMBLE ORTHODOXY** – Serious theological reflection and faithfulness to the Bible.
4. **LIBERTY** – All Christians are free to choose their political, theological, and social views.

In summary, American Evangelicalism is a diverse ecumenical Protestant movement that seeks to be Gospel-centered in faith and practice.

Where Did American Evangelicalism Come From?

Before the War of Independence in 1765, the United States was a series of European colonies. These colonies had established Churches like their mother countries in Europe, and free Churches that immigrated to escape persecution (e.g., Quakers, Baptists, and Mennonites). Overtime the colonial Churches became formal and lost their Gospel focus, and concerned pastors began to call for spiritual renewal. Some of them had even come from Europe as missionaries, and they represented four traditions of Protestant renewal.

1. **PIETISM** – A Lutheran tradition from Germany which came from Philipp Spener in the 17th century. It taught that faith should be warm and personal, and that God should be worshipped with joy and celebration.
2. **PRESBYTERIANISM** – A Reformed tradition from Scotland which came from John Knox who studied under John Calvin. It taught that Christians should balance faith with reason, and that God should be worshipped with the heart and the mind.
3. **PURITANISM** – A Reformed tradition from England which came from English Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries. The first American Colony (Jamestown) was founded by Puritans, who taught that people should examine their faith and have a conversion experience to join the Church.
4. **HIGH ANGLICANISM** – A Protestant tradition from England which came about during the Reformation period. It taught that Churches should be flexible in membership and innovative in organization and outreach.

As pastors in the colonies worked for spiritual renewal, they brought these four traditions together and started a revival called the “Great Awakening”. This revival went from 1730 to 1755 and it had large gatherings where people sang and prayed with joy, listened to long emotional sermons, cried about their sins, and committed to personal holiness and public service. In response to this revival, Churches became active in society, and pastors began addressing social problems and working to correct them. One of the biggest social problems was alcoholism (the average person drank three times the amount that people do today), and out of love and support for those who suffered from it some Christians gave up alcohol. Christians also built schools, started charities, and worked to improve things like healthcare.

In addition to the Great Awakening, the colonial pastors’ work gave birth to American Evangelicalism and in it one can see the four traditions of renewal from Europe. When one goes to an American Evangelical Church they will often hear joyful words and happy songs, and this comes from German Pietism with its warm spirituality. On the website there will be a statement of faith and articles about what the Bible says, and this is from Scottish Presbyterianism with its call for worship with the mind. During the service there will be a chance to pray for forgiveness and “get saved”, and this comes from English Puritanism with its focus on conversion. And one will also find a simple process to join the Church or new projects and classes, and this comes from English High Anglicanism with its flexibility and innovation.

Another thing that one will see in many American Evangelical Churches is people raising their hands, and this comes from John Calvin and the Reformed Church of Geneva. While praying the early Calvinists would lift their hands to heaven, and this was also done by the English Puritans in services and family prayers. Lifting hands was a symbol of surrender to God and being open to accept His will and receive His grace and forgiveness. When modern

Evangelicals lift their hands is not something they have made up; it is an old form of Protestant prayer that goes back to the Reformation.



Puritans family lifting their hands in prayer.
(17th century woodcut)



Re-enactment of Puritan prayer during a
Thanksgiving worship service.
(Colonial Church of Edina, 2015)

In conclusion, American Evangelicalism comes from four European traditions (Pietism, Presbyterianism, Puritanism, and High Anglicanism) that were brought together to renew the colonial Churches.

What Has Happened To American Evangelicalism?

In November of 2016, Donald Trump became President, and the group that gave him the greatest support identified as Evangelical. Many asked how such people could endorse Donald Trump for office, when he did not match the heart of their historic Christian movement. Though of German and Scottish descent he lacked the warm faith of Pietism and the deep theological reflection that is found in Presbyterianism. And despite him claiming the Puritan colonists as ancestors, he lacked their self-examination and emphasis on conversion. One could say that he might have had the marks of High Anglicanism, but his innovation and organization were meant for different purposes.

Donald Trump did not match up with American Evangelicalism in general, and this made people wonder what had happened to the movement. Furthermore, after the Washington Riot earlier this year, many wondered how it went from people like Haynes and Lee to a guy with horns on Capitol Hill.

**HOW DID EVANGELICALISM GO
FROM THIS**



TO THIS?



The majority of Trump supporting Evangelicals were White Americans, and this must be considered as one asks what has happened. It is also important to remember that there are different types of White Evangelicals (e.g., liberal and moderate), and most who endorsed Donald Trump identified as conservative. One last thing to consider is that not all conservative Evangelicals supported Donald Trump, and one of them is Russell Moore, a former theologian

of Southern Baptist Convention. So a better question to ask is, “**What has happened in conservative White American Evangelicalism?**”, and the answer lies in 1976 with the election of Jimmy Carter.



Jimmy Carter

Before the 1970's American Evangelicals were not politically organized, and many were not registered to vote and saw politics as a dirty business. For them what was most important was sharing the Gospel of Jesus, and they had no tradition of racial justice like the liberal mainline Churches. This is why White Evangelicals said little about and resisted the Civil Rights Movement, because its leaders got political and, from their perspective, had no Biblical support. Just like the Great Awakening, their focus was on conversions and when this happened, they believed that society would be transformed through people following Jesus. In short, White Evangelicals had no vision or desire for political engagement, but all that changed when Jimmy Carter won the nomination as President.

Carter was an Evangelical, from the Southern Baptist Convention, and he used Evangelical language that the country had never heard before (e.g., he made it respectable to be born again). Suddenly American Evangelicalism found itself in national the spotlight, but it also found that its focus on the Gospel alone was not enough. Evangelicals would avoid divisions through their common salvation in Jesus, and in disagreements they would often say, “Well at least we all are saved”. But when Carter became president and showed liberal convictions, this angered many White Evangelicals whose convictions were conservative. Carter believed in racial justice and legalized abortion, and he invited homosexuals to public discussions at the White House; this disappointed many of his conservative White supporters and brought about a sense of fear that made them get political.

For many years there had been a group of Fundamentalist Evangelicals know as the “Religious Right”, who believed that America was a Christian nation that had lost its way and needed to be saved. In the 1960's and 70's there were several social crises and conflicts, such as the new AIDS virus, the desegregation of schools, the loss of prayer in public schools, and the breakdown of American homes and families. These problems, with the Carter Presidency, were evidence that the country was on a slippery slope, and it would take more than conversions to get it back on track. The Religious Right believed that Christians had to get in government, and elect politicians who would pass laws that were socially conservative. For White Evangelicals disappointed with President Carter the Christian Right had the answer to save the soul of America; this answer was a political organization called the “Moral Majority”, which was founded by a Fundamentalist Evangelical pastor named Jerry Falwell Sr.



Jerry Falwell Sr.

Upon joining the Moral Majority, White Evangelicals entered the “Culture Wars” or a conflict between liberals and conservatives to dominate the values, beliefs, and practices of America. Since the election of Jimmy Carter, White Evangelicals have fought for dominance through politics, and have lost sight of the original goal of their movement from the Great Awakening. Instead of seeking to renew the Church and reform society through the Good News of Jesus, they have tried to gain political control and make a Christian nation. This loss of their original goal made them vulnerable to demagogues and allowed them fall for Trumpism and its promises of greatness. This is why, despite all of his issues, Donald Trump’s language resonated with them, for he promised to “take the country back”, “protect Christianity”, and “restore old glory”. White Nationalists also found these promises appealing, and this had led to an unholy partnership between some conservative White Evangelicals (not all) and White Supremacy.

WHERE SHOULD AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM GO?

In the end, American Evangelicalism is what is on a slippery slope, and there are many who have left the movement and even Christianity. Nevertheless, there are groups within the movement calling for change, and leaders that are working hard to fix and heal the damage. Like a company gone corrupt, American Evangelicalism has lost its grounding, and I believe the solution is to look back to its original mission. To be clear, this looking back is not “colonizing the past” or returning to the former days as certain Evangelicals have tried to do. Even at the Great Awakening American Evangelicalism had serious problems, such as leaders supporting slavery and segregated worship. Evangelicals must look back to their four mother traditions, which require them to be people driven by the Gospel of Jesus in word and deed.

A people with the warmth and joyful faith of Pietism.

A people with the careful thought of Presbyterianism.

A people with the humble heart of grace from Puritanism.

And a people with the selfless innovation for justice in High Anglicanism.

Evangelicals must look back and remember who they are, and they are not builders of a glorious earthly Kingdom in the United States. They are followers of a humble King Whose Way is constant service and love for all people that the world might by made better.

I believe that this is where Evangelicalism should go, and it’s the reason that, despite many reservations, I still call myself “Evangelical”.

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