



The Methodist camp meeting depicted in this painting (1839) occurred during the Second Great Awakening.

Evangelical Christians

by Jeffery P. Dennis

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Evangelical comes from the Greek *evangelion*, meaning "good news," and in its most fundamental sense an evangelical Christian is simply someone who wants to spread the "good news" about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Evangelical churches teach that everyone must make a specific, conscious decision to reject Satan and follow Christ, rather than depend on church membership or infant baptism, as might occur in other denominations. Even those who grow up in evangelical churches must make a specific, conscious decision to follow Christ, usually during late childhood or adolescence. After this decision, the individual has been cleansed of sin and saved from the ultimate fate of an eternity in hell, and is now referred to as "saved" or "born again."

"Born again" Christians constitute a large constituency in the United States, including not only members of denominations especially noted for their evangelism, but also members of mainstream Churches.

Evangelical Christians, who tend to be fundamentalists and socially conservative, have not been welcoming to glbtq people, and have indeed campaigned against glbtq rights, often as members of New Right political coalitions, such as the Moral Majority or Christian Coalition.

Evangelical History and Denominations

The importance of the specific, conscious decision to follow Christ has been emphasized by many Christian denominations since the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and is evident in denominational names such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Evangelical Mennonite Church. During the United States' Second Great Awakening (1830-1860), however, a group of American Protestant denominations, including Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists, began to emphasize *evangelism*, that is, the dedicated, systematic attempt to convince others that they must make decisions for Christ.

They targeted not only unbelievers and the unchurched, but also active members of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and other denominations that emphasized infant baptism and communal sacraments instead of individual decisions, and even members of other evangelical churches, who might deviate in some small area of doctrine or practice and therefore "fall short of the glory of God."

By 1880, many Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist denominations had moved away from evangelism to emphasize social justice issues, leaving evangelization largely to the Baptists. However, two new groups of denominations soon arose in response to fears that mainstream churches were no longer providing the message that the world needed to hear, that one must be born again or spend an eternity in hell.

Since minor differences in doctrine or practice have often produced schisms, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of evangelical denominations, independent churches, and ministries, but they can be divided

into three large families.

Baptist churches, spiritual descendants of the Anabaptists (re-Baptizers) of sixteenth-century Germany, require baptism in water as an outward sign of salvation, and teach that salvation is permanent (that is, one cannot accept Christ and then "backslide" into sin again). Leery of church hierarchy, Baptists have historically tended to gather in highly autonomous churches loosely organized into conventions or associations, though more recently church discipline has been vigorously enforced by the largest association of Baptists, those gathered in the Southern Baptist Convention.

An extremely informal liturgy and simple, easy to understand theology attracts many working-class and poor persons to Baptist churches, especially in the American South.

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, but there are dozens of other Baptist groups, ranging from the relatively liberal American Baptist Church to the extremely conservative Baptist Missionary Convention and Primitive Baptist Convention. A large percentage of African Americans (26% according to the American Religion Identity Survey) are members of Baptist churches.

Holiness-Wesleyan churches arose after 1880 in reaction to increasing liberalism in the Methodist church. They teach that the salvation experience is contingent (that is, one can accept Christ and then backslide); therefore, in addition to salvation, one must experience "sanctification" or "Christian perfection." Sometimes salvation and sanctification can be accomplished in the same step.

Holiness-Wesleyan churches follow their Methodist roots in their insistence that the Christian be noticeably distinct from "the world." They often mandate every detail of the believer's clothing, hairstyle, jewelry, church participation, and leisure activities, with special attention paid to observing the Sabbath (refraining from work on Sunday) and practicing temperance (that is, abstaining from alcohol).

Like Baptists, many Holiness-Wesleyan believers tend to be working-class, poor, or otherwise disenfranchised. Major denominations include the Wesleyan Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Salvation Army, and the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

Pentecostalism arose in 1900 and 1901, when members of Holiness churches in Kansas and California independently experienced glossolalia or "speaking in tongues," the ability to speak in unknown languages presumably enjoyed by first-century Christians. Though glossolalia is regarded by other evangelical churches as silly, unscriptural, and sometimes even Satanic, some Pentecostal churches require it of all believers as a sign of salvation, sanctification, or "baptism in the Holy Spirit," and others revere it as a special gift that occurs only occasionally.

Enthusiastic, uninhibited worship practices, including not only speaking in tongues but spontaneous singing, shouting, testifying, and being "slain in the spirit" (that is, fainting in ecstasy), have made Pentecostal churches popular among the disenfranchised, especially African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. Moreover, Pentecostals tend to be urban rather than rural. Among the most important Pentecostal denominations are the Assemblies of God, the United Pentecostal Church, the Church of God, and the Church of God in Christ.

Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is a social movement within Christianity and other religions that combines a literal interpretation of sacred texts with authoritarian leadership and an anti-modernist philosophy. While many fundamentalists are not evangelical and many evangelicals are not fundamentalist (and bitterly resent the use of the term), the two are highly correlated: for instance, 93% of Assemblies of God members but only 27% of Roman Catholics believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God.

The high percentage of evangelicals who are fundamentalist can be explained by the very urgency of evangelization: it depends on the conviction that billions of years of agonizing physical punishment await those who have not been born again according to very specific guidelines (for example, those who have not been baptized in water, baptized in the Holy Ghost, sanctified, and so on). Evangelicalism is difficult to maintain without a literal interpretation of the Bible to provide evidence that the lake of fire actually exists, plus an authoritarian church leadership to point out repeatedly that unsaved family members and friends are doomed.

Anti-modernism is also useful, since unless one can demonstrate that "the world" is dangerously evil, those who have been born again may be tempted to backslide into their old, sinful habits, and rejoin the ranks of the eternally lost.

Evangelicalism and Homosexuality

There is no logical reason why promoting the experience of being born again should be associated with homophobia, yet within the last thirty years most evangelical denominations have embraced anti-gay agendas. With few exceptions, evangelical denominations teach that homosexuality is a grave sin that imperils the soul. Individual evangelicals, believing that one should "hate the sin and love the sinner," are often quietly tolerant of gay and lesbian family members and friends, but official dogma exhorts gay people to pray for forgiveness from their "sinful" desires and to sin no more.

Some Holiness-Wesleyan and Baptist denominations go farther, asserting that gay people are minions of Satan dedicated to the destruction of the world. Some Pentecostals suggest that the root of gay identity is demonic possession, and offer deliverance ministries. The Southern Baptist Convention, the most politically powerful of the Evangelical groups, is obsessed with homosexuality, frequently passing resolutions attacking the gay and lesbian rights movement and actively lobbying against glbtq interests. In Southern Baptist churches, homosexuality is routinely excoriated in sermons and Sunday school lessons.

Evangelical homophobes frequently cite Biblical passages that appear to condemn same-sex practices. However, it may be that Scripture is really used as a justification of homophobia rather than its source, since many Biblical literalists believe that those passages do not apply to gay people at all, and even the most literal interpretation of the Bible excludes passages irrelevant to modern life, such as those that explicitly promote slavery.

Given the promotion of homophobic beliefs by their churches, it is not surprising that Evangelical Christians are an important part of the New Right political constituencies opposed to glbtq rights.

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About the Author

Jeffery P. Dennis is Assistant Professor of sociology at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Fla. He specializes in culture, sexuality, and religion.