

American evangelicalism and the politics of whiteness

If white evangelicals are united by anything, it isn't theology.

by [Seth Dowland](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue



Kazimir Malevich, *White Cross*, oil on canvas, 1920–21

In the 2016 election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump—a statistic that has attracted enormous attention from media, scholars, and evangelicals themselves. That piece of data also raises some obvious questions: How could a group so concerned about personal morality vote for a thrice-married casino mogul? How could pro-family Christians vote for a man who admitted freely on tape to sexual assault?

Over the past year, questions like these have consumed many of us who study American evangelicalism, and for good reason. The past 35 years have witnessed an outpouring of historical scholarship about American evangelicals, work that has greatly enhanced our understanding. But somehow this scholarship (my own work included) did not prepare us to understand why white evangelicals turned out so strongly for Trump and why they continue to remain his most ardent supporters.

Part of the problem is that in characterizing evangelicals, historians have relied on David Bebbington's four-pronged characterization: evangelicals are Christians who (1) focus on the importance of conversion; (2) support activism, particularly in missionary efforts to spread the gospel; (3) display a high regard for biblical authority; and (4) stress the centrality of the cross, with an emphasis on Jesus' work of substitutionary atonement. Bebbington's definition appears on the website of the National Association of Evangelicals as well as in countless books and lectures about the movement. It suggests that the heart of evangelicalism lies in its beliefs about God, salvation, and the Bible.

The problem with this approach was captured in the headline of an article published by LifeWay, a Southern Baptist news outlet: "Many who call themselves evangelical don't actually hold evangelical beliefs" (Dec. 6, 2017). Besides reporting that fewer than 45 percent of self-identified evangelicals strongly hold to classic evangelical beliefs, the article stated that the converse is also true: a significant number of evangelical believers reject the term *evangelical*. So if self-identified evangelicals don't buy into supposedly evangelical beliefs, and a third of those who do believe those things don't identify as evangelical, don't we need a better definition?

The answer is yes. Though Bebbington's definition has been useful for theologically grouping a diverse set of believers, it is not necessarily the most useful way to mark the boundaries of what is often meant by the term *evangelical*. In fact, what most distinguishes white American evangelicals from other Christians, other religious

groups, and nonbelievers is not theology but politics. White evangelicals in the early 21st century display attitudes about issues such as race, war, and immigration that differentiate them from other religious groups. White evangelicals have also become the most reliable bloc of Republican voters.

Other religious groups voted for Trump as well, but none did so at the 81 percent level that white evangelicals did. Among Protestants, 58 percent voted for Trump; among white Catholics, 60 percent voted for Trump; among Mormons, 61 percent. In April 2017, approval of Trump had dropped among white mainline Protestants to 50 percent and among white Catholics to 53 percent. But among white evangelicals his approval rating stayed high, at 78 percent.

White evangelicals are also outliers on social and political issues. Before the school shootings in Parkland, Florida, only 38 percent of them favored stricter gun laws, compared to 57 percent of white mainline Protestants and 67 percent of Catholics. Exactly 50 percent of white mainline Protestants and white Catholics approved of Trump's ban on refugees from seven Muslim-majority nations when it was announced last year; an overwhelming 76 percent of white evangelicals supported the policy. Racial minorities display even greater disagreements with white evangelicals than did other white Christians. More than anything else, identifying as an evangelical in the United States denotes certain attitudes about American politics and usually indicates a white racial identity. It's not that theology isn't important to white evangelicals; it's just not the primary thing that distinguishes them from other religious groups.

American evangelicalism emerged in the transatlantic revival movements of the mid-18th century, led by evangelists like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Sarah Osborn, and John Wesley. The fervor that marked revivalists' sermons spurred huge camp meetings on the frontier in the early 19th century, leading to massive numerical growth among Methodists and Baptists. These denominations, drawing on the revivalist tradition, prized emotional conversion experiences, which became normative for a wide swath of American Protestants.

The success of evangelicalism was such that by the end of the 19th century nearly all Protestants claimed the label. Even Unitarians called themselves evangelical. In 1912, Unitarian minister L. Walter Mason wrote that Unitarians were *more* evangelical than the theological conservatives, who spent far too much time poring over the Pauline epistles and the creeds. Unitarians, he said, focused on the good

news itself: the teachings of Jesus found in the Gospels. Historian Linford Fisher has argued that evangelical was always a relative identity, dependent on one group's self-definition over against other religious groups. By the dawn of the 20th century, *evangelical* denoted a faith focused on the teachings of the Bible—and on this issue nearly all Protestant groups claimed they were more evangelical than everyone else.

The Civil War revealed the fault lines of the movement. As historian Mark Noll demonstrates in *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, race and region divided evangelicals on the paramount question of the day: Does the Bible endorse slavery? White southern evangelicals thought it did, while growing numbers of their northern counterparts thought not. Black Christians identified with the Israelites in Egypt—God's people enslaved in a foreign land—an identification that contravened white Christians' understanding of God's providential actions to make America the home of the free. The center of evangelicalism did not—could not—hold. Evangelicals' individualism and lack of a theological hierarchy led to a crisis of authority. American Protestantism was not up to the task of speaking with a clear moral voice on the most important political issue in the nation's history.

The sectional crisis and Civil War divided American Protestants regionally and racially into three groups: northern white Protestants, southern white Protestants, and black Protestants. Black Protestants, located overwhelmingly in the South, left white churches in droves during the 15 years after the end of the war, and they founded scores of new denominations, seminaries, and colleges. The largest white Protestant denominations had split in the lead-up to the Civil War and did not reunify until the mid-20th century (in the case of the Methodists) or the late 20th century (in the case of the Presbyterians). Northern and southern Baptists have never reunified. Each of these groups considered themselves evangelical well into the 20th century, but after the Civil War the regional groups took different trajectories.

The near-absence of black believers in white churches was the condition for the development of a distinctly white evangelicalism. As historian Ed Blum has demonstrated, the popular revivals of Dwight Moody and the growth of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in the late 19th century encouraged a solidarity between northern and southern Protestants that was built on a shared whiteness. When the African American journalist Ida B. Wells railed against WCTU leader Frances Willard for exhibiting racism, Willard responded that she did not see how characterizing whiskey supporters as "dark-faced mobs" or expressing fears of drunken black rapists strengthened a racist stereotype. Like many of her white

evangelical compatriots, Willard could not see how her religious views centered on whiteness. Though African American believers largely shared the biblical and theological views of white Protestants, white and black Christians did not worship together or view the world or the faith in the same way.

The racial segregation of American Protestantism facilitated deeper commingling of racist beliefs with evangelical religion. Historian Joe Creech has shown how white southerners' ethos of honor, which in the antebellum era had clashed with evangelical teachings about, say, humbling oneself at the foot of the cross, fused with evangelical religion in the decades after the Civil War. Defending white women's honor became a primary justification for lynching, which received theological cover from southern ministers who insisted on the centrality of sexual purity to evangelical religion. Allegations of sexual impropriety doomed thousands of black men to extralegal killings, committed by white vigilantes in the name of honor and Christian faith.

Racism was not confined to southern evangelicalism. Henry Crowell, chairman of the board of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, backed off from his early commitment to interracial education around the turn of the century. As historian Timothy Gloege has shown, Crowell wanted MBI to become more professional, and the cost of that professionalization was complicity with Jim Crow segregation. He began conducting revivals and recruiting students in the South, signaling his commitment to Jim Crow by segregating his crusades and deploying crude racist imagery. MBI forced black students to live off campus beginning in 1909, claiming that interracial dormitories were embarrassing to the institution and dangerous for the students.

Among white Protestants, the early 20th century was marked by the struggle between fundamentalists and modernists over issues such as the authority of scripture and evolution. Theological conservatives adopted the term *fundamentalist* to describe their commitment to what they deemed the fundamentals of the faith. The two factions battled for control of denominations and seminaries. As modernists slowly gained control over established institutions, fundamentalists left to form their own, leading to the creation of a sprawling fundamentalist subculture.

In the 1940s, a new generation of white fundamentalists began to reclaim the term *evangelical* to mark a more open, less defensive stance toward mainstream culture. The National Association of Evangelicals was formed in 1942, the same decade as other transdenominational parachurch organizations like Youth for Christ,

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and World Vision were started. This umbrella of “neo-evangelical” institutions produced important leaders who shaped white evangelicalism, most notably the evangelist Billy Graham.

Graham grew up in the South and started his college education at Bob Jones College, the leading institution of southern fundamentalists. He finished his schooling at Wheaton College in Illinois, where he tapped into networks of northern evangelicals that would launch his ministry. Graham’s rhetorical dexterity at sidestepping the doctrinal disputes that divided theological conservatives won most of them over. Historian George Marsden once quipped that an evangelical was “anyone who likes Billy Graham.”

Beneath the widespread celebration of a figure like Graham, however, conservative Christians remained theologically divided over such issues as predestination, sanctification, and the importance of speaking in tongues. As Molly Worthen demonstrates in her history of evangelicalism, *Apostles of Reason*, the lack of a central authority among evangelicals has meant the flourishing of a wide variety in evangelical beliefs.

Still, what most distinguished the evangelical coalition from other Protestants was not the substance of their theological infighting but their political alignments. As Matthew Sutton and Daniel Williams have described, evangelicals have been fighting a “culture war” for a long time. In the 1920s, evangelical preachers railed against liberated women and loosening sexual mores, and they attacked socialists and labor activists as agents of a worldwide communist revolution. In the years after World War II, white evangelicals became the most stalwart supporters of the military and some of the most vocal anti-communists in the nation.

When the civil rights movement’s acts of civil disobedience became more widespread and forceful in the 1960s, white evangelicals endorsed the politics of “law and order”—to use the phrase strategically adopted in 1968 by GOP presidential candidate Richard Nixon. Graham spoke for many of them when he urged Martin Luther King Jr. to “put the brakes on” during the latter’s 1963 campaign against segregation in Birmingham. On racial issues, Graham embraced what historian Darren Dochuk has called “corporate civil rights”: the belief that racial progress would come through the work of benevolent white business leaders who rejected hard-core segregation. White evangelicals taught that racism was a matter of the heart, so only by changing hearts could the nation overcome its racial

divisions. Sociologists Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson argue in *Divided by Faith* that white evangelicals' approach to racial issues in this period exacerbated church segregation. By eschewing advocacy for structural remedies to systemic racism, white evangelicals' stated commitment to racial justice was an empty gesture for many black believers.

The social and political revolutions of the 1960s eventually led to the coalescence of the religious right as a national political force. Conservative white evangelicals, worried about the cultural shifts demanded by civil rights activists, feminists, and champions of gay rights, called for a return to "family values," a phrase that Republicans used in their party platform for the first time in 1976. But histories of evangelicalism have overstated the novelty of evangelical political activism. The political realignment of the South, in which conservative Dixiecrats moved from the Democratic to the Republican Party, facilitated the rise of a national coalition of evangelicals within the GOP in the late 1970s. Previously, white southerners were mostly Democrats, while northern and western evangelicals were mostly Republicans—a division that inhibited the rise of a national political coalition of evangelicals. But evangelicals have always been political actors.

More to the point, the late 19th-century reunification of northern and southern white Protestants embedded a politics of whiteness on the evangelical coalition. By the 1960s, white evangelicals had spent decades sacralizing Jim Crow. The ministers who led the civil rights coalition caught white evangelicals flat-footed by naming segregation as unbiblical. Such a claim flew in the face of the status quo, where God-fearing white Christians and black Christians worshiped in separate churches and went to segregated schools. White evangelicals understood segregation as the natural—even divine—ordering of society. They responded in different ways to the civil rights challenge. A minority preached "massive resistance" to desegregation, but a greater number took their cues from Billy Graham, calling on civil rights activists to take it slow and follow the laws.

When civil rights activists (and later, second-wave feminists and gay rights activists) refused to slow down or to reject civil disobedience, white evangelicals strengthened their political resistance to liberal activism. They also sharpened their hostility to the federal government, which enforced desegregation through court orders and the deployment of the National Guard. Fears of a tyrannical government became more pronounced among evangelicals in the 1970s, fueled in particular by an obsession with end-times theology.

By the final decades of the 20th century, a commitment to right-wing political movements and white racial identity offered the most distinctive marks of evangelicalism. This characterization—like any characterization—leaves some people out. There were liberal evangelicals like Jim Wallis and Ron Sider. There were black evangelicals, particularly in the South, who refuse to cede the movement entirely to white believers. Perhaps most notably, American evangelicalism acquired a distinctly international following in the late 20th century, as millions of Christians from Latin America, East Asia, and Africa have poured into American churches.

Evangelical churches today still emphasize a heart-based, conversion-centered faith that Wesley and Whitefield would recognize. Theology still matters. But the growth of the religious right in the 1980s made Jerry Falwell, founder of the political action group Moral Majority, the public face of evangelicalism. Work in the 1990s by other religious right groups like the Christian Coalition brought evangelicals to the apex of their political power during the George W. Bush administration and solidified their political identity. President Bush invited evangelicals into his administration to a much greater degree than any other president. And Bush claimed the evangelical label for himself in ways that Reagan had not. All this helped *evangelical* become even more firmly a political term in the early 2000s than it had been in the 1980s.

Over the course of the 20th century, the evangelical coalition entwined theology, whiteness, and conservative politics. The histories we tell about that movement demand attention to all three aspects. By using theological markers to define evangelicalism, we miss the ways cultural and political forces have shaped the movement. To identify as evangelical in the early 21st century signals commitments to gun rights, the abolition of legal abortion, and low taxes. It's next to impossible to understand these commitments through the prism of theology alone. But when we understand evangelical as an identity forged in the contexts of Jim Crow segregation, a struggle against second-wave feminism, and fears of a tyrannical federal government, the origin of these commitments becomes clearer.

Evangelicals are not any whiter, demographically, than mainliners or Mormons. But they have rallied around Trump to defend a white Protestant nation. They have proven to be loyal foot soldiers in the battle against undocumented immigrants and Muslims. The triumph of gay rights, the persistence of legal abortion, and the election of Barack Obama signaled to them a need to fight for the America they once knew. The history of American evangelicalism shows us a group of believers who find the most in common when it comes to race and politics.

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