

Labeling Christians

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Putting labels on people is always a loaded thing, and putting labels on Christians is no exception. [What exactly](#) does "evangelical" mean, for example, and who gets to decide? Are [mainline Protestants](#) those with a particular set of left-leaning beliefs, those who belong to denominations in the National Council of Churches or simply those who aren't evangelicals? While we know what "the Orthodox Church" is, we certainly don't have a consensus definition of "the orthodox church." And so on.

Navigating the conservative-to-liberal terrain is particularly treacherous because some labels are now used mostly as pejoratives. Writing on Call & Response—the blog of Duke Divinity's new [Leadership Education](#) project—Mark Chaves [observes](#) that while theological liberalism continues to be a "potent cultural presence," many liberals "dare not speak its name."

Jason Byassee—Call & Response's editor and a *Century* contributing editor—notes in the comments that he prefers "liberal" to "progressive," a term that many theological liberals have adopted. I agree with Jason—while self-identified *political* progressives might argue convincingly that the word carries a distinct nuance, *theological* progressives seem to be using the word simply as a euphemism for "liberal."

Meanwhile, Sarah Pulliam [reports](#) that conservative evangelical leaders are trying to bury the label "religious right." Randall Balmer [defends](#) the term—but his argument emphasizes his inclination to use it pejoratively, which is exactly the problem with the label, according to Gary Bauer and other conservative evangelicals.

What's the answer? Should we take an identity-politics approach, labeling people

only if they've chosen the label themselves? This can be confusing. The church I grew up in is solidly conservative evangelical by any outside standard but rarely calls itself conservative or evangelical (or, for that matter, "religious right"). Should we stick with "Christian," declining to qualify or classify ourselves further? We mainliners know from experience that if we do this, people will make a lot of inaccurate assumptions about us.

What's a better solution?