

Rename the mainline?

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In a [recent interview with the *Century*](#), historian David Hollinger talks about his preference for the phrase “ecumenical Protestants” to describe non-evangelical mid-20th-century American Protestants, instead of the more frequently used terms “liberal” and “mainline.”

“Ecumenical” refers to a specific, vital and largely defining impulse within the groups I am describing. It also provides a more specific and appropriate contrast to evangelical. The term evangelical comes into currency in the mid-century to refer to a combination of fundamentalists and Holiness, Pentecostals and others; ecumenical refers to the consolidation of the ecumenical point of view in the big conferences of 1942 and 1945.

I appreciated this shift in vocabulary because I have long disliked both the terms “liberal” and “mainline” to refer to whatever-kind-of-Protestant it is that I am.

“Mainline” emerged as a label in the early part of the twentieth-century to distinguish a certain kind of Protestant from a fundamentalist. Some have speculated that the name comes from the Philadelphia Main Line, a suburban rail line that passed by one denominational church after another. But its two parts, “main” and “line” are both utterly unhelpful in describing the people, theology, social commitments or religious identities contained under that category today.

If anything, so-called mainline Protestants are less “main” and less “line” than they’ve ever been.

“Liberal” likewise is useless. At our particular moment, it is primarily a political term. While it can apply to theology and abstractly to philosophy, that isn’t its main rhetorical purpose now, and it lumps people from a broad spectrum under a term that is awkward and uncomfortable for most of them. Many people in this category would not consider themselves “liberal” in theology, but they might in politics. Or they might be liberal in theology, but decidedly not so in politics. Or they might claim neither or both, or have no idea why it matters.

But “ecumenical” has its problems too. For one thing, is ecumenism still the defining impulse of the group of Christians in questions? What’s more, the word may no longer helpfully distinguish us from evangelicals, who are a whole lot more ecumenical than they used to be.

It isn’t that we must have a term that everyone can agree on, one that suits us all perfectly. But it would be nice to have something, as Hollinger says, that “refers to a specific, vital and largely defining impulse.” We know—at least I think we do—who we are talking about. Why can’t we put a name to it or to ourselves? Is it because of an identity crisis? An awkward transition toward a less central cultural role?

If you could rename this form of Protestantism, what would you call it?