Evangelicals, gender, and anxiety

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A recent meeting of the Conference on Faith and History featured a paper session titled “20th century evangelicalism.” Surprisingly, all three papers focused on conservative Protestant gender ideologies in the years since World War II.

Just a few years ago, I would have expected studies of evangelicalism to emphasize political influence. Is gender the hot new topic in evangelical studies? If so, why, and what does the shift reveal about both the way evangelicals present themselves and the way scholars see them?

Calling attention to evangelicals’ distinctive gender ideologies, and associating those ideologies with evangelicals’ politics, makes a lot of sense. Seth Dowland asserts in his forthcoming book *Family Values: Gender, Authority, and the Rise of the Christian Right* that the rhetoric of family values “provided coherence for the Christian right.” This rhetoric also revealed “two primary beliefs at the core of conservative evangelicalism”: (1) that gender is a God-given, biological category, not a malleable social construction; and (2) “that lines of authority matter and must be observed in order for society to function well.”

Until the success of the Civil Rights movement, as Randall Balmer and others have argued, one of the lines of authority that evangelicals defended was the hierarchy of dominant whites over deferential blacks. When defense of that line became, well, indefensible, evangelicals shifted their attention to the hierarchy of dominant men over deferential women. The logic of the evangelical argument did not change: God had instituted an order for the world way back in Genesis, and it was the duty of his people to uphold that order.

If Dowland aptly renders “the core of conservative evangelicalism,” then the abundance of gender-related papers at the CFH is certainly understandable. I had to wonder, though, if replacing the mental association of “evangelical = conservative politics” with “evangelical = conservative gender roles” might obscure other paths of inquiry.

Only slightly less prominent than gender in the conference papers was a theme of anxiety and therapy. All three authors assumed a broadly shared knot of anxieties in the postwar period and asserted that evangelical religion consciously adapted itself to address these anxieties. Granted, the postwar period has often been labelled “The Age of Anxiety.” Nonetheless, it’s almost impossible for people to be equally afraid of everything. Of all of the things people might have been anxious about after WWII, why did evangelicals respond to some fears but not to others? What might this selective anxiety say about them?

There is also a distinct possibility that evangelical churches were *heightening* certain fears as much as they were assuaging them. It’s not a one-way transaction, in which the “culture” provokes a crisis and “evangelicalism” responds. Churches can provoke crises as well, or at least they can frame developments with a range of possible interpretations *as* crises. Consider the hypothesis that evangelicals manufactured the very fears about masculinity and femininity they then addressed with their many programs and publications. How did evangelicals create these anxieties? Why might they have done it? Did the strategy ultimately succeed or backfire?

Finally, another type of emotion merits consideration in study of evangelicals: pleasure. (I credit Julie Byrne’s work for bringing this topic to mind.) The Power Team, an evangelistic bodybuilding troupe that was the subject of one of the conference papers, can be understood as a spiritual-warfare analogue to the Cold War, with Satan standing in for the Soviets. But the Power Team can also be understood as an attractive spectacle, a high-energy change of pace from the typical church outing. Shifting from a framework of anxiety to one of pleasure may work less well for understanding evangelical women, but books by Christine Gardner and Amy DeRogatis demonstrate that even an area in which evangelical women might appear to be especially restricted, sexuality, can be a locus of freedom and fulfillment.

If gender is the hot (dare I say sexy?) new topic in studies of evangelicalism, some exciting scholarship is on the way. As with work on any other topic, though, it will tell only part of the story of this broad and contested movement.

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