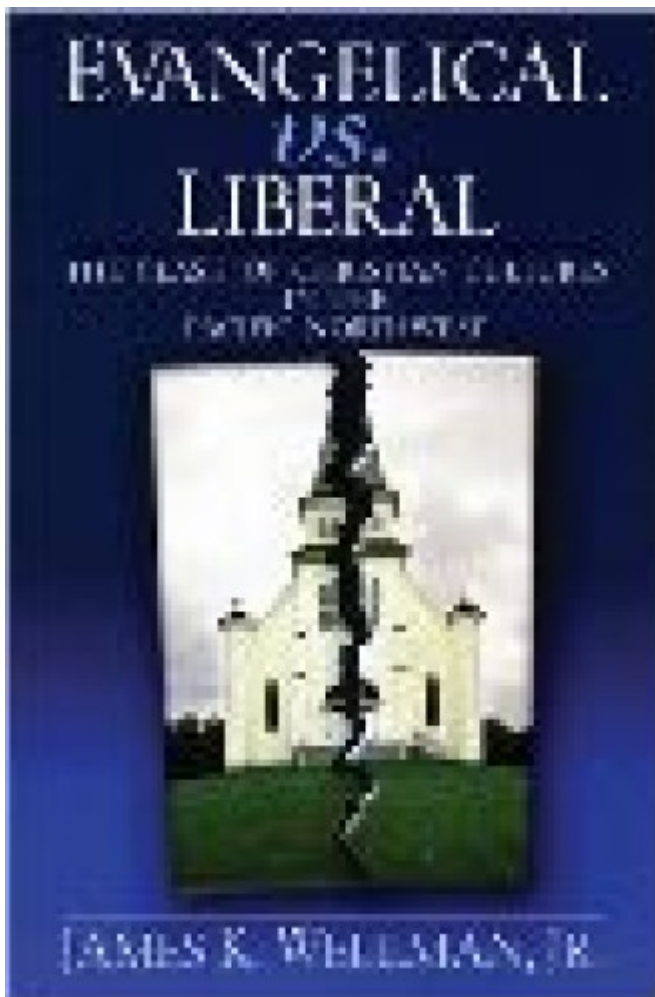


Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest

reviewed by [Dale Soden](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest

James K. Wellman Jr.

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James Wellman of the University of Washington makes a case that the Pacific Northwest might be a window into the future of Protestantism in the country as a whole.

Combining statistical analysis and insights into Pacific Northwest culture, Wellman offers a comparative analysis of liberal and evangelical theological convictions, religious practices and political beliefs. He moves deftly back and forth between liberal and evangelical perspectives on scriptural authority, Christology, gender roles and sin and grace; explores similarities and differences between the two subcultures regarding worship, missions and youth; and addresses positions on abortion, the environment, gay marriage and the war in Iraq. He even includes a fascinating analysis of Web sites and the use of technology.

Liberal Protestantism in the Northwest, as depicted through Wellman's interviews, looks similar to liberalism elsewhere. Jesus is understood to be a model of "radical inclusiveness," and decision making about faith and personal morality is left to the individual. Likewise, evangelicalism in Washington and Oregon fits the larger pattern, with its emphasis on the authority of scripture, a personal relationship with Christ, traditional values and the heterosexual family.

Wellman expected to discover that the Northwest's progressive social ethos and politics would be fertile ground for liberal Protestant churches. Instead he found the contrary. While it has strong liberal congregations, Wellman discovered that in general the region is not hospitable to progressive Christianity. And perhaps just as unexpectedly he found that "entrepreneurial evangelicals have carved out a foothold in the region, and are fast becoming the dominant Christian religious subculture."

According to Wellman, evangelicals work harder than liberals to "counteract the regional entropy toward disaffiliation from organized religion." They encourage and "nurture larger families and are simply more effective than liberals in keeping their children in the fold." Parachurch organizations such as Young Life and Youth for Christ have established strong roots in the region with their work among high school students.

In contrast, Wellman detects ambivalence among liberals toward programs for youth. A parishioner in one liberal church reported that a denominational head

“resisted the hiring of a youth leader. He would say to me, any kid who sticks with the church in their teenage years is a nerd.” Wellman’s findings are supported by a recent national study that reported a 40 percent drop in baptisms, confirmations and fifth-grade Sunday school attendance during the past decade in one mainline denomination.

Wellman is clear that evangelical growth is less about evangelizing the large number of spiritual but not formally religious folks in the Northwest (evangelicals are only slightly more successful at evangelizing than liberals are) and more about retaining their own and effectively recruiting other evangelicals who have moved into the region. While he does not specifically refer to the concept of an ecology of faith, his findings support the notion that evangelicals have worked diligently to create a culture that relies heavily on small-group ministries, parachurch organizations, youth and family ministries and Christian colleges.

Wellman’s other conclusion is that members of liberal churches are experiencing an identity crisis. Too often, he observes, liberal Protestants in the Northwest struggle to develop an identity that is distinct from the broader culture. “To a large extent liberal churches mimic or mirror many of the elite liberal cultural attributes of the PNW culture, such as the belief in the power of the individual to take care of oneself and to make the world a better place.” Ironically, he concludes, “liberal churches fail to attract the unchurched in part because they share so much in common.” Evangelicals, on the other hand, seem more certain of their identity and thus more confident in the ways they engage and critique the prevailing middle-class ethos of the Northwest—or in some cases create an alternative Christian culture.

I suspect that Wellman’s general approach and his manner of capturing interviewees’ comments and interpreting their meaning will resonate with most readers. However, his framework may be vulnerable to criticism if one considers the other religious identities that are in play. His sample does not include Catholic churches, and as the largest religious group in the Northwest, Catholics provide a challenging counterexample to the notion that believers can be categorized readily as liberal or evangelical.

Likewise, Lutherans do not fall easily into Wellman’s categories. Not only do Missouri Synod Lutherans disagree significantly with ELCA Lutherans, but Lutheranism in general has a more robust view of sin than other mainline denominations, and its paradoxical tendency to affirm the broader culture while also critiquing it makes

generalization difficult. The growth of Mormonism in the Northwest would likely support Wellman's observations about evangelical culture, and his book would benefit from more analysis of this important group.

Wellman's side-by-side analysis of evangelical and mainline subcultures exposes many liberal weaknesses. If mainline denominations are to stand a chance of competing in the open religious environment of the Northwest as well as the rest of the country, they need to be more intentional and strategic concerning their efforts to retain young people and to recruit more people who are unchurched.