American Evangelicalism, by Christian Smith, with Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy and David Sikkink

reviewed by Mark Chaves in the February 24, 1999 issue

By Christian Smith, with Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy and David Sikkink, American Evangelicalism. *(University of Chicago Press, 323 pp.)*

The vitality of American evangelicalism is beyond doubt. Surveys consistently show that evangelicals spend more time in church and give more money to their churches than do other Protestants or Catholics. Evangelical magazines outsell mainline magazines by a considerable margin. Scholarly books about evangelicals have virile titles like *Resurgent Evangelicalism* or *Christianity in the New Millennium*, while books about liberal Protestants have chastened titles like *The Travail of the Protestant Establishment* or *Realities and Possibilities*. In some quarters evangelicalism even has managed to become synonymous with Christianity itself. Who has not heard someone say something like what a student at an evangelical seminary told a visitor: "I was raised Presbyterian, but I became a Christian when I was 17"?

Christian Smith's book is the latest installment in the ongoing documentation of evangelical vitality. Using information gathered by telephone interviews with more than 2,000 people, and by in-person, in-depth interviews with 300 more, Smith and his colleagues explore the beliefs, practices and social characteristics of evangelicals, comparing them with other Christian subgroups.

The sheer amount of information gathered and presented here is impressive, as is the innovative approach Smith takes to defining "evangelicalism." Smith asks people to identify themselves as evangelical, fundamentalist, mainline or liberal Protestants. When they say that more than one of these labels fits them-as more than half do-they are asked which best describes their religious identity. According to this self-identification, the Protestant churchgoing population is about one-fifth evangelical, one-fifth fundamentalist, one-fifth liberal and one-quarter mainline, with the rest (about 10 percent) resisting all four of these labels.

This procedure captures real differences. That people who identify themselves as evangelicals are, in fact, different from other groups in ways we would expect increases confidence in the validity of Smith's approach. However, his method also produces a few odd results. Are there really more theological evangelicals among Lutherans (27 percent) than among Southern Baptists, only 19 percent of whom choose the evangelical label? Or does the term "evangelical" mean something different to members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America then it does to those of other denominations?

And what should we make of the fact that evangelicals are significantly more likely than fundamentalists to say that absolute moral standards exist and that the Christian life must be radically different from that of mainstream Americans? Has Smith discovered that, in some respects, evangelical tradition is more fundamentalist than fundamentalism itself? Or should we treat this finding as a distortion that results from his method? Fortunately, the book provides the information that allows readers to sort through these issues for themselves.

When Smith assesses the religious vitality of each of his four groups he concludes that evangelicalism "appears to be the strongest of the major Christian traditions in the United States today." Evangelicals are more likely than those of other traditions to endorse certain "orthodox" Christian theological beliefs; they are more likely to say that their faith is important in their lives; they spend more time in church; and they are less likely to switch to other forms of Protestantism.

In certain respects evangelicals are more activist than either mainliners or liberals: they are more likely to say that Christians should try to change society to better reflect God's will, and that it's very important to convert people to Christ and to defend a biblical worldview in intellectual circles. They are more likely to have told others about how to become Christians, to have volunteered for church programs that serve the community and to have given money or time to Christian political organizations.

The book stacks the religious "vitality" deck in favor of evangelicals by making nearly all the vitality indicators it uses consistent with evangelical style. On indicators less closely tied to that style, the evidence is more mixed. There is no difference between evangelicals and members of the other groups when it comes to endorsing the importance of giving money to charity or volunteering for local community organizations. They are slightly more likely than those in other groups to

report giving "a lot" of money to help the poor and needy, but they are not more likely to have given money or time to a non-Christian political organization, to have educated themselves about social or political issues, or to have volunteered for a nonchurch community organization.

Smith rightly argues that part of what defines a religious tradition as strong and vital is its "commitment in both belief and action to accomplishing the mission of the church." However, if "the mission of the church" is defined in less evangelical ways, it is not so clear that the evangelical tradition is stronger and more vital than others are.

Even church-attendance patterns can cut both ways. Evangelicals do spend more time in church than those who identify themselves as either mainline or liberal. At the same time, however, among the active, churchgoing Protestants who make up Smith's sample, mainline and liberal Protestants outnumber evangelicals by more than two to one. Why use the former rather than the latter statistic to indicate a religious tradition's strength? If one looks at Smith's evidence without the evangelical slant built into the measure of religious "strength," it is not so clear that American evangelicalism "enjoys a religious vitality . . . that surpasses every other major Christian tradition in the country," as he claims. What his evidence mainly shows is that evangelicals are more-well, more evangelical than everybody else.

Smith also develops an explanation of religious vitality in general. He argues that religious groups are strengthened by simultaneously distinguishing themselves clearly from outside reference groups and creating significant engagement and tension with those groups. This is the most valuable part of the book. There is also a wonderful chapter documenting-and diagnosing the reasons for-evangelicalism's relative ineffectiveness in bringing about social change.

Despite all its surveys, statistics and disclaimers, Smith's lively and important book is deeply, if implicitly, theological. He assesses religious vitality in theological as well as-perhaps rather than-sociological terms. At least in part, that vitality consists of faithful adherence to "essential Christian religious beliefs." Smith defines this as emphasizing the doctrines of the divine inspiration of the Bible (rather than hearing God speak in many texts), the sinfulness of human nature (rather than the goodness of all God's creation), salvation only through Christ (rather than the hope of salvation for all through God's grace), and so on.

Identifying religious vitality with evangelical religious style reproduces in academic form the larger cultural trend by which evangelicalism increasingly is treated as synonymous with Christianity itself. Liberal and mainline Christians ought to be troubled by this trend. Smith's book will help them understand how and why this important cultural shift is occurring.