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STILL
EVANGELICAL?

INSIDERS RECONSIDER POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND THEOLOGICAL MEANING

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

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INTRODUCTION

STILL EVANGELICAL?

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Evangelicalism in America has cracked, split on the shoals of the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath, leaving many wondering whether they want to be in or out of the evangelical tribe. For a movement with a high public profile and much influence in American religion, culture, and politics—perhaps providing determinative support for the election of Donald Trump—it matters when that influence itself is breaking up the evangelical camp.

Contentiousness brought to the fore by the election surrounds what it means to affirm and demonstrate evangelical Christian faith amid the messy and polarized realities gripping our country and world. Desperation, anger, pain, frustration, and fear are evident on nearly every horizon. Within the relatively broad evangelical family, the election made apparent that culture rivals the gospel in defining evangelical political vision; our sociological

frame speaks louder than our theology. This is not new to American evangelicalism (nor mainline Protestantism), but it is now more blatant and more critical. For a movement that has been about the primacy of Christian faith, this is a crisis.

This collection of essays offers perspectives and reflections from a spectrum of people who could be seen as insiders to the evangelical movement. The book isn't trying to advance a single perspective or to speak for evangelicalism at large. For some, the story is about a historical movement; for others, it's more about their own story. All the writers speak for themselves as they wrestle with and offer their response to "Still evangelical?" in light of their convictions. All of these writers are more than aware that the word *evangelical* is understandably being declared dead and buried by some voices who find the word hopelessly entrapped in a particular and problematic political vision. This means contributors to this volume probably have varying attitudes about whether the term *evangelical* or *evangelicalism* has any meaningful viability or necessity, and the associations it accrues daily may make that more difficult to sustain. All of these writers, however, would maintain the distinct importance of the evangel that lies at the heart of our faith and life.

"Still evangelical?" is a question at the intersection of Christian faith and public life, but its urgency and pathos do not have to do primarily with evangelicalism as a movement. Rather, they have to do with how this part of the Christian family defines its central mission: to follow Jesus Christ and to love our neighbors and enemies in word and act, especially in troubled and conflicted times. What matters most, therefore, is the *evangel*—the *good news*—not evangelicalism. But for many, it's the evangel that current evangelicalism seems to put at risk.

A THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY AND
A THEO-POLITICAL BRAND

The 2016 election may have been the occasion for this drama, but it isn't the cause. For starters, it needs to be said that the battle afoot has little to do with theology proper. In part, this reveals that the word *evangelical* has morphed in common usage from being a reference to a set of primary theological commitments into something akin to a passionately defended, theo-political brand. The word *evangelical* has become a kind of litmus test with which certain gatekeepers draw interpretive lines. Crossing those lines can mean paying a steep and intractable price in the name of theology, but tends to be more about sociology and ideology. Alternatively, to stay within those lines is anathema to people who, because of their faith and social location, find the sectarian biases of white evangelicals especially to be more and more like religiously justified social bigotry and therefore an unsustainable context for their lives and especially for their faith in the good news.

In its current mode, evangelicalism contains an amalgam of theological views, partisan political debates, regional power blocks, populist visions, racial biases, and cultural anxieties, all mixed in an ethos of fear. No wonder it can be difficult to know whether one is still evangelical. The impression of many on the evangelical left is that the good news of Jesus Christ has been taken hostage by a highly charged, toxic subculture on the evangelical right that—in the name of God—expresses steely resolve to have its own way in the public square. From the evangelical right, the critique is that Christian America is at war with any and all liberalism—evangelical or otherwise—and is in serious

danger of losing its conservative virtues and spiritual practices. The Bible may be quoted in various ways, but arguments on all sides often seem more ideological than biblical.

After the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s, the more conservative end of the American Protestant movement eventually divided along theological and cultural lines. Fundamentalists continued to defend a tight, originalist orientation in their understanding of the Bible, its inerrant authority, and its implications for social relations, not least for the role of women in leadership. Fundamentalism tends to see itself as a bastion of faithfulness defending the faith against secular opponents and Christian compromisers (evangelicals and liberals both).

In contrast to this is the rise of a more distinct evangelicalism that maintains Christian orthodoxy but does so with a greater engagement with and receptivity to culture and to critical self-reflection. This history has led to the two branches of what today is called evangelicalism. While sharing many theological commitments, they have very different social locations and hold very different mental frames for the values they affirm.

Fundamentalism's attraction to theological and social purity plays easily into a theologized ideology that fits what many think of as the religious right. As a movement refined in earlier battles in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the social birthright of fundamentalism can still be very much on display. Evangelicalism's greater receptivity and engagement with culture and diversity has never mixed easily or happily with the more boundary-keeping fundamentalism.

Today's press represents this spectrum as one movement, which it calls evangelicalism. In the media coverage of conservative Christianity, somewhere along the line the distinction

between fundamentalists and evangelicals was lost, and the two were conflated. Perhaps this has much to do with an inclination of both groups to position themselves in the middle, with delineations given up in favor of a broader commonality. The consequence is that a large block can be designated "evangelical," but this is so broad it fails to delineate basic differences. In the end, a lot of what has been dubbed evangelical in recent media coverage probably more aptly fits fundamentalism.

However, is all this just in-house debate? The more compelling issue is not whether evangelicals should be cast with fundamentalists but whether Christian witness is evangel-centric in character, motive, expression, and integrity. Is the evangel defining and shaping evangelicalism, or is it vice versa? The more "evangelicalism" seeks to be cast or accepts being cast as a theo-political brand, the more motivating it is for some evangelicals to walk away from the tribe, not as a rejection of Christian orthodoxy but as a way to preserve and defend it. The alternative is to reclaim evangelical witness as accountable to the righteousness, justice, and mercy of the evangel itself.

WHERE ARE WE?

It has become clear that there are evangelicals and then there are evangelicals. Telling them apart based on certain theological tenets of Christian faith would be difficult, since there are few significant points of distinction. The beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, conversion, and the afterlife aren't different enough to explain the growing division between some evangelicals and others.

What divides evangelicals can be found underneath our theology, on the often-recognized mental and social frame on which our theology sits. From conception onward, each of us gradually

develops a mental frame that defines our most basic instincts, values, assumptions, habits, and choices. It's as primary as what cues our fears or assuages our anxieties or stimulates our appetites. Our frame tells us "what is" and gives us the impression that it's the baseline of reality itself; it includes unexamined yet gripping "facts."

On top of our frame sits our theological beliefs. Of course, being evangelical typically means belief in theology as the bedrock, not our frame. But what the 2016 US presidential election exposed so vividly is the reverse. Evangelicals can affirm that faith commitments and their implications are essential to discerning values; but when evangelicals who affirm the same baseline of faith reach radically opposing social and political opinions, we have to ask what else is at play. The collision can't be explained by different definitions of the incarnation or by alternate views of the Bible and its authority. Rather, opposing views expose that underneath "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" lie basic instincts in our mental and social frames related to who and what actually matters.

Red and blue states cluster, and with them the churches in those regions. This points to what we could call our theologized ideology—belief that has an attachment to biblical faith but is fundamentally shaped by the social and political mindset in which that faith is nurtured. We see this in current issues that were primed for evangelical responses: conservative social anxiety over an ever-wider reach of an ever-wider liberal and secular government agenda; culture-war debates about abortion and homosexuality and potential Supreme Court nominees; threats to US safety because of terrorism and the role of Islam; economic and social elitism that isolates and ignores the cries and struggles of middle- and lower-class citizens, particularly whites; roiling

anger and fear over issues of immigration and race, especially killings of unarmed, young black men, further unsettling a narrative of America as exceptional, Christian, and white. The regionalisms that cast these issues differently are evident in the evangelicalism that emerges within them.

Depending much on our social location, these dramas carry varying importance and meanings. Their urgency and relative priority tends to be a reflection of where we live and a measure of the social anxiety, vulnerability, and pragmatism around us: who and what is at risk, and what price should be paid for defense or change? Our Christian faith speaks to all of these concerns. Yet when our context or ideology leaves us desperate, angry, or fearful, it's more attractive to look for an alternative that asserts whatever populist power we can find.

A middle-class, underemployed, white American, perhaps living in Appalachia or the Rust Belt, may believe failed immigration policy or enforcement has disrupted their "God-given right" to work, which makes it difficult to support welcoming the alien or stranger. An African American or Latino American living in Los Angeles or New York may view huge rallies of white people as excluding or mistreating people who look like them and hear the rallies' language about God as abusive and its "good news" as unrecognizable.

Tensions among faith, context, and action are not new, of course. They permeate the Scripture, the church, and US history. Jesus knew that building a house on rock would never be as easy—and therefore as common—as building on sand. The dilemma of living faith wouldn't be newsworthy now apart from the disjunction that puts evangelical inconsistencies under a hot national spotlight. With the cross of Christ as the theological

centerpiece and model of evangelical faith, people inside and outside the church expect evidence of the pursuit of moral purity and/or of the humility of self-sacrifice. Both of these now seem buried in the rhetoric of populist and partisan political power.

Traditional Christian convictions about a comprehensive vision of faithfulness seem to have shrunk in the culture-war battles over abortion and homosexuality, immigration and race. No matter whether the battle involves the evangelical right or left, the gloves have come off, and the battle rages as it will. The incongruous fury or inconsistency that arises is rationalized as the cost of just war, whether for or against these defining issues. Meanwhile, the personal virtues of humility, compassion, and public commitments to justice and righteousness seem to have been submerged by both the church and the media. No evangelicalism is in question; the evangel itself seems to have been marginalized.

Fatigued, angry, and desperate, many white evangelicals, particularly in the central and southern states, made an alliance with the unlikely candidacy of Donald Trump. In an iconoclastic and populist eruption of desire for ideological change in our national narrative around issues of class, race, gender, religion, government, nation, and globalization, 81 percent of white evangelicals reportedly voted in support of Trump. Many white evangelicals voted out of protest and rejection of the liberalizing effects of the Democratic Party, and particularly of Hilary Clinton. Noted white evangelical voices spoke vehemently against Trump's candidacy on grounds of competence and suitability. Nonetheless, Trump lost the popular vote but won the electoral college and became the forty-fifth president of the United States.

For some evangelicals, this was an agonizing compromise vote, performed as an act of opposition to Hilary Clinton as much or

more as support for Donald Trump. However, for many other evangelicals, the vote signified a collective unity and spiritual victory that had at last won a cultural moment, defeating liberal Democrats and asserting their cry for radical change. Such voters celebrated a new American political landscape with a white Republican coming to the White House, accompanied by largely white and Republican Senate and House majorities as well. The prospect of a similar Supreme Court nominee was hugely relieving.

However, this new day of hope for some evangelicals signaled an apocalypse for other evangelicals. The ease with which some on the right could affirm an evangelical faith connected to campaign rhetoric that was racist, sexist, and nationalist was disorienting to an extreme. It left many evangelical people of color gasping in despair and disorientation that so many white brothers and sisters in Christ could vote for someone whose words and actions were so overtly inconsistent with their common faith in Christ. But likewise, the willingness of other evangelicals on the left to tolerate advocacy for abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and a pervasively secular vision for America caused many white evangelicals, even with a troubled conscience, to do anything to stop the liberal political machine. Since the inauguration, the divide between these groups of evangelicals has revealed just how deep the lines of distrust and disassociation across the evangelical political and social spectrums are.

Feelings and rhetoric flow passionately along these two opposing sides of the evangelical community, separating them with an enormous gulf of theologized ideology. Security for some means intensified fear for others. For many, feelings of finally being seen and heard left others feeling stalked and targeted. Class, race, and gender issues tore the fabric of evangelicalism,

perhaps irrecoverably. What emerged was a deep separation be-
cause of social location, personal experience, and spiritual con-
viction, even if the "sides" held a similar view of Jesus, eternal
salvation, and biblical authority. A house divided indeed.

Abortion, homosexuality, race, and immigration are some of
the biggest social dangers in the minds of many white evan-
gelicals. These are important social ethics issues, and the
Christian faith can and should inform our way of understanding
each of them. But typically, before that exploration even gets
under way, our sociology presets our convictions before the
teaching of the Bible has been considered and integrated into
our lives. And this can be as true of the right as it is of the left.
This doesn't minimize the potential for biblical faith to inform
our social location, particularly about important matters such as
these. It is striking, however, that our context is the most per-
vasive influence that shapes us, even if we profess Jesus as Lord.
The red-and-blue-state pattern reflects the profound sway of
social location.

The denial of personal racism by many in the evangelical right
is often paired with blindness toward systemic racism. This com-
bination continues to play out in familiar but devastating ways
for many evangelical African Americans, Latinos, and others.
The evangelical right's sustained failure to demonstrate the
theological and spiritual capacity to grapple with a long history
of racial abuse—for which white Christians in America bear
particular guilt (from the beginnings of slavery to police
shootings of unarmed black men)—has led many evangelical
Christians, both white and people of color, to dissociate from
evangelicalism. For them, white supremacy and white evangeli-
calism are synonymous and equally unacceptable.

Until the previous decade, the overwhelming percentage of evangelicals would have reliably and consistently defended a traditional view of marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman, and maintained that homosexual activity is outside the bounds of biblical ethics. In the last decade, this consensus has eroded in two directions: geographical and generational. As the East and West Coasts of the United States have led the way in the growing affirmation of LGBT people and lifestyles, evangelicals in these regions have quietly done likewise. When the Supreme Court affirmed same-sex marriage, the state debates and votes ceased, and a lot of evangelicals accepted the legal status and legitimacy of same-sex relationships. Perhaps even more noteworthy is the generational divide over the acceptance of LGBT relationships, with affirmation from 47 percent of white evangelicals under the age of thirty, despite their otherwise more traditional views. Their cultural frame led to a recasting of their faith understanding.

Such a tense and wracking division within an influential theological and religious sector of Christian America underscores a far more profound set of issues than mere arguments between conservatives and progressives. A pure Christian identity isn't available, because we all live immersed in context. But evangelical language easily falls prey to making absolutist statements in ways that appear to claim a biblical "purity" of vision unfettered by anything other than the Bible. Meanwhile, what mystifies and infuriates the evangelical left is that the voice of the evangelical right seems to be controlled by white supremacy, moral and political inconsistency, and a fearful nationalism and isolationism that bears little evidence of the fruit of God's Spirit. Again, social frame matters in how we see and what we see.

EVANGELICALISM AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

In its larger historical context, contemporary evangelicalism is a relative newcomer to the public square. The emergence of the Moral Majority in the late seventies introduced conservative Christian politics to the national scene. Jimmy Carter complicated the picture a bit by being a pious Baptist, a Bible-focused Sunday school teacher, and a Democrat from Georgia. By contrast, the primary thrust of the Moral Majority was white Republicanism on the religious right.

Over the intervening decades, the Moral Majority (more fundamentalist than evangelical) defined faith and the public square in ways that were politically conservative, issue centered, and largely bombastic and hostile toward culture and government. Out of this context, the term *culture wars* emerged and gradually became identified as the evangelical posture toward the public square.

This continues in the voices of many in the evangelical right, and the binary nature of the culture wars has made it difficult for any who dare to call themselves the evangelical left to avoid being lambasted as heretics or frauds by the evangelical right. Rather than seeing the public square as a context for substantial and civil discussions of issues of faith and society, the rhetoric has operated more like an on-off, right-wrong switch. This has greatly intensified passions and hasn't enhanced public discussion or the need for a more careful and diverse set of Christian voices to be heard in the public square.

The 2016 election extended this situation further while opting for pragmatic power (by which Trump is compared to Cyrus, the pagan king used by God for holy ends) rather than coherent piety

(as seen by the endorsement of Trump despite his lack of what would usually be considered "Christian" character qualities).

Each believer occupies and is occupied by a social context—that is, an educational, economic, racial, and religious ethos that permeates and shapes each of us. We are never context-free. Context sets our life's terms and possibilities; it is the frame that defines, supports, and contradicts our values and actions. A confession of trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord has to be worked into every dimension of our life—formed and socialized as we are in light of everything from our genes to our family, race, class, education, and more.

Common evangelical faith claims confidence and trust in the supracultural good news of Jesus Christ that makes a first-order claim on what is true and most important. As Savior and Lord, no one and nothing rivals Jesus Christ. But what does that primary evangelical affirmation mean for embodied daily life in Biloxi or Madison, San Francisco or Chicago?

When evangelicals went to the polls on November 8, 2016, we presumably went as people trusting Jesus Christ and praying for God's will. We hopefully thought and prayed carefully about our choices as we voted. What we may not have done was make an effort to examine carefully how our choices were influenced by Jesus and the kingdom he came to preach and establish. We may not have asked how we'd been shaped by our context and culture or asked whether we were using Jesus as leverage based on our social location.

EVANGELICALISM AND KINGDOM SOCIOLOGY

All of these factors contribute to the divided evangelicalism of this season. For those on the evangelical right, the pragmatic

political outcomes of the election and its aftermath may seem to be grounds for justifying their tactics and protecting their religious brand. It remains to be seen whether such results occur. Even if they don't, the fallback posture is simply that sometimes "the bad guys" win, and the just-war battle moves ahead as "the good guys" soldier on.

What such an approach would likely *not* do, however, is engage in constructive self-critique, including a deep reexamination of the relationship between evangelical theological identity and social location or ideology. Circling the wagons is a more likely strategy, and that won't lead to change but to retrenchment, whether of the right or the left.

If this is so, it's likely many on the evangelical left will more completely and broadly disassociate from the culture, churches, and institutions that have become known as white evangelicalism. As the racial diversity and generational differences among evangelical churches on the left continue to grow, it will become more and more unpalatable to choose association with evangelicals on the right. It will feel like a choice between bigotry and justice, in which case faith and social location will compel the evangelical left toward justice.

In the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul argues that the Ephesians were spiritually dead but were made alive in and through Jesus Christ. This language and affirmation lies at the very core of the Christian gospel, and it's the way evangelicals have articulated and proclaimed the good news. So far, so good. However, what Paul goes on to describe is exceptionally important yet uncomfortable for many white American evangelicals: though we were once dead but now alive, the evidence of our resurrected life is our participation

in a resurrection community of not-alike people, who in Christ are now made into one new humanity.

In other words, the trajectory of salvation leads to a new sociology—a new social location and communion that is made possible only because of Jesus, who brings divided enemies into one new social reality. This is the pragmatic evidence that the gospel is true; it provides the sign of what only God could do in a broken, divided, warring world. The God of shalom has made peace, and the sign of that is an unexpected new community between unlike people who may even have been enemies.

This is the agenda and burden, the promise and hope that a full evangelicalism should speak and demonstrate. Sadly, when evangelicals truncate the gospel and focus on personal and spiritual transformation without communal, systemic, and public transformation, we find ourselves just where we are: reproducing the same social locations and ideology as when we were "dead in [our] trespasses." We may try to say we have been "made alive" (Ephesians 2:1 NKJV), but whenever we show little or no interest in working out the social implications of this new identity and life in Christ, is it any wonder that our witness is confusing and unconvincing?

In an era of declining church attendance in the United States, allegiances to congregations and denominations are waning significantly. Evangelical churches as well as mainline congregations are diminishing, and the growing number of disaffected youth and young adults is frequently noted.[1]

The social battering of Christian orthodoxy is not new, but the crisis facing the evangelical church as a result of the 2016 election and its aftermath is a problem of our own doing. It exposes issues that haven't been taken up with adequate faith or

action. For the evangelical witness in the United States to flourish, it doesn't need better branding but genuine revival: the personal and social transformation that more fully bears witness to the adequacy, truth, and relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Issues will continue to be more about social location than theology proper, and efforts to live a gospel that humbly and authentically reflects the sociology of the kingdom of God will continue to call out to those who have "ears to hear" (a term Jesus used often).

STILL EVANGELICAL OR YET EVANGELICAL?

It may be a very evangelical act to decide whether one is truly evangelical. The rife individualism of evangelicalism is obvious these days. The decision to be in or be out of the tribe will no doubt continue to shift in light of various factors—not least being the relationship between evangelicalism and political rhetoric.

The future of American Christianity will be affected by the current and future dynamics of evangelicalism, arguably one of its most vibrant and determined movements. Its multidenominational and nondenominational expressions mean it has plenty of room for flexibility and change—qualities that are among its most distinctive.

The highest reputed value in evangelicalism is the gospel itself—the only good news that can finally change the world. Thus the hope and corrective, to the right or left of evangelicalism, is that the evangel can and must continue to change evangelicalism itself. Whether "still evangelical" or not, being open and responsive to gospel transformation in word and deed is the most evangelical thing one can do.

Evangelical has value only if it names our commitment to seek and to demonstrate the heart and mind of God in Jesus Christ, who is the evangel. To be evangelical is to respond to God's call into deeper faith and greater humility. It also leads us to repudiate and resist all forces of racism and misogyny, and all other attitudes and actions, overt and implied, that subvert the dignity of people, who are made in the image of God. The evangel holds our evangelicalism to account and not vice versa.

The only evangelicalism worthy of its name must be one that both faithfully points to and mirrors Jesus Christ. It is the good news for the world as it seeks justice that reflects the character of God's kingdom. Any evangelicalism that seeks its own power is unfaithful to the evangel it claims to represent. Any evangelicalism that doesn't allow the evangel to redefine, reorder, and renew power in light of Jesus Christ is lost and worth abandoning.

Referring to oneself as evangelical is not a congratulatory self-description (as though it were a trophy), nor a theo-political brand (as though it were a platform). It is rather a commitment and an aspiration to identify with God's great love in Christ and, in true humility, to cry out for the daunting and urgent hope we believe can transform us and transform our world. It is a call to acknowledge and repent of our complicity in sin and injustice (both personal and systemic), and to work toward the reordering of all power after Jesus' example. It's a vision of living with coherence and integrity so that we truthfully proclaim and faithfully enact God's good news of love, justice, and mercy in Jesus Christ.

If this is what the word *evangelical* means, then perhaps the pressing question is not, *Still evangelical?* but rather, *Yet evangelical?*