

Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism

Summary: American evangelicalism has deep roots in the Protestant tradition, and today the term references a diverse group of Christians who often prioritize spiritual rebirth, personal piety, scriptural authority, and evangelism. Fundamentalism emerged in the 20th century as a particular theology characterized most notably by biblical literalism. Pentecostalism refers to Christian denominations who prioritize the Spirit and whose worship may include speaking in tongues, faith healings, and other charismatic expressions.

American evangelicalism is a protean movement that includes Christians from across the globe, with divergent theologies and varied practices. Evangelicals stand within a tradition whose theological roots lie within the Protestant Reformation, and whose immediate ancestors include English Puritans and continental pietists. Although evangelicalism today defies neat categorization, there are some distinguishing characteristics often associated with the movement. These include a spiritual experience of being “born again” in Christ, a prioritization of personal piety, a high view of the authority of the Bible, and a zeal for evangelism. Since its beginnings in the revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, the movement has proven capable of absorbing disparate influences, experimenting with innovative methods, and producing new expressions. As a result, today the term evangelical encompasses fundamentalist, pentecostal, and charismatic forms of Christianity, powerful streams of belief, spirit, and practice that cut across any simple denominational classification.

The influence of evangelicalism on American public life has ebbed and flowed, from the proliferation of reform movements in the mid-19th century to the efforts to eschew secular society in the mid-20th century. In many ways, the modern history of the movement can be traced back to the birth of fundamentalism in the first decades of the 20th century, when conservative Protestants began to organize around their rejections of liberal and “modernist” Christian responses to the rise of science, biblical criticism, and secularism. Fundamentalists lost control of most church institutions to the liberals, but they largely retained control over who would be identified as an evangelical going forward. After withdrawing from the mainstream denominations in the 1930s and 1940s, these religious conservatives formed an extensive subculture which served as an incubator for a range of fundamentalist and neo-evangelical forms of Christianity.

Fundamentalism is characterized by a clear-cut doctrine of what adherents believe to be “the fundamentals” of Christian orthodoxy, a literalist approach to reading the Bible, and often by a unique view of history called dispensational premillennialism. Fundamentalists concentrated much of their energy on building institutions, such as separatist churches and schools that would allow them to shun the corrupting influence of society and competing forms of Christianity. These institutions also enabled fundamentalists to become effective political organizers for conservative moral reform, as was demonstrated by Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority” in the 1970s.

Many conservative evangelicals celebrated fundamentalism’s initial opposition to liberalism and defense of orthodoxy, but also came to reject what they saw as fundamentalism’s anti-intellectualism and parochialism. The most prominent evangelical leader in the years following World War II was the preacher Billy Graham, who developed a style of mass evangelism in the 1940s with the Youth for Christ movement and went on to develop a worldwide television ministry. Evangelicals also continued to establish influential institutions, such as the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947), Bill Bright’s Campus Crusade for Christ (1951), and the magazine *Christianity Today* (1956). The presidency of Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist, brought the evangelical movement into the spotlight so much so that Newsweek declared 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical.” The Megachurch—a space for worship and other activities large enough to accommodate tens of thousands—was another manifestation of the evangelical growth spurt during the 1970s and beyond.

As the 1980s opened, conservative voices like those of the Moral Majority gained traction and the “evangelical” moniker became increasingly synonymous with “Republican.” Politicians such as Ronald Reagan began taking note of conservative Christian views on social issues such as abortion, prayer in schools, science curricula, and gay rights. The media and scholars alike began discussing the “Religious Right” as a formidable force shaping the social and political landscape of the country. However, the Republican party’s courtship of the “evangelical values voter” has been challenged by a growing concern for social issues such as poverty, peace, and the environment. Sojourners and *Sojourners* magazine, under the leadership of evangelical theologian Jim Wallis, have been outspoken advocates since the 1970s for “faith in action for social justice.” Red Letter Christians, a movement led by Wallis and Tony Campolo, and “new monastic” communities like the Simple Way, emphasize the “radical,

counter-cultural message” of Jesus. These evangelicals and others have worked to cultivate a distinct voice in American culture, keeping the movement socially engaged while disentangling it from the platform of a particular political party.

Pentecostals are often distinguished by their exuberant Spirit-filled worship, the practice of speaking in tongues, and services of miraculous healing. Pentecostalism’s roots are in the Holiness movement of the late 19th century as well as the early 20th-century spiritual healing ministry of Charles Fox Parham. Parham’s community in Topeka, Kansas, had an early experience of speaking in tongues, where worshipers spoke in unknown languages just as the early Christians did on the first Pentecost. They understood this experience as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism became a widespread phenomenon in the wake of an interracial revival in 1906 led by William J. Seymour, an African American preacher, at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles. Within a decade, Pentecostalism gave rise to two new denominations: the predominantly Black Church of God in Christ and the predominantly white Assemblies of God.

Pentecostalism experienced extraordinary growth in the middle of the 20th century with the building of mega-churches, the emergence of mass media evangelists, and the creation of a loose network of membership that is estimated in the hundreds of millions worldwide. The charismatic movement emphasizing the “gifts of the spirit,” or charisms, is a form of pentecostalism that developed within the mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church beginning in the 1960s. The Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Initiative at the University of Southern California’s Center for Religion and Civic Culture tracks these movements around the world, finding significant growth, particularly in the global South and East. As immigrants continue to arrive in the United States, they bring with them pentecostal practices and beliefs steeped in the cultures and histories of their country of origin.