

# Restless Faith

Holding Evangelical Beliefs  
in a World of Contested Labels

Richard J. Mouw



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# Acknowledgments

At several points I draw from short articles and bits and pieces from longer essays that I have published over the last decade; these are acknowledged in footnotes. I also make use of ideas presented in my 2013–14 Parchman Lectures at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary at several points. In chapters 13 and 14 I touch on matters that I explored in more detail in my 2015–16 Kent Mathews Lectures at Denver Seminary.

# The Label Question

When I was thinking about an appropriate title for this book, I was tempted to take my cue from the late singer Prince, who in 1993 decided he no longer wanted to be called Prince. Indeed, he said, he no longer wanted to be known by any name at all. The folks who arranged his concerts did not like that idea, and after trying out several names—with suggestions from Prince’s fans—the singer agreed to this one: *The Artist Formerly Known as Prince*.

All of this came to mind as I was contemplating different word choices to sum up what this book is about. From the beginnings of my adult career as a teacher-scholar I have identified closely with American evangelicalism. Not that I have always been comfortable with everything associated with that label, but my discomfort has never been strong enough to make me want to move to other spiritual-theological environs. My original plan for this book was to highlight both the discomfort and the commitment by using the phrase “restless evangelical” in the title.

During the time that I have been writing this book, however, there has been considerable debate about whether “evangelical”

is still a useful label. I won't go into the details that have given rise to this debate, except to say that for a variety of reasons "evangelical" has come to be seen by many as referring to a highly politicized form of Christianity here in North America.

I don't think the debate is a silly one. My own discomfort with identifying as an evangelical has certainly increased in the past few years. And some folks whom I have known and admired in the evangelical movement have said publicly that they can no longer own the label. I have taken their concerns seriously—which is why I thought of this Prince-inspired title: *The Movement Formerly Known as Evangelicalism*.

I think it will be clear to the readers of this book why I am not ready, though, to join the "formerly known as" movement. I still think the label stands for something wonderfully important, and I am not ready to give the label over to those who advocate an angry Religious Right politics. I will explain at a couple of points in these pages why I personally still hold on to the label.

But—and this is important for me to emphasize at the beginning—I do not want the legitimacy of what I will be discussing in these pages to depend on the continued viability of the label. Suppose that ten years from now "evangelical" no longer means what it has in the past, as applied to a distinct movement within global Christianity. I hope the distinctives that the label once stood for will still be widely accepted. While I will be discussing here the reasons why I personally continue to find "evangelical" a viable descriptor, then, what I really care about is that the folks who are gravitating toward a "formerly known as" identity will still hold on to what has been the distinct spiritual and theological *legacy* of evangelicalism.

Like so many of my friends, I have no desire to be associated with the politicized excesses of present-day evangelicalism. But there is much in what many of us have loved in the evangelicalism

of the past that we—under whatever label we choose to describe ourselves from here on—should not abandon.

I don't want to come off as defensive about my own preference for holding on to the label. I think it is a healthy thing to argue about whether a label like "evangelical" has outlived its usefulness. Indeed, for most of my life as an evangelical I have been engaged in conversations—some of them extended arguments—about what it means to be an evangelical. Those have been important exercises for me. So, while not wanting to turn this book into an extended defense for keeping the label, I do want to explain at the outset some of my reasons for hoping that we do not abandon that way of describing ourselves. Then I will add some more reasons, briefly, at the end of this book.

## **| Holding On to the Label**

The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals was established at Wheaton College in 1982, and it ended its existence in 2014. But while it lasted it was a wonderful gathering place for evangelical scholarly discussion. The historians Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch were the founders, and they had a knack for bringing interesting people together to explore fascinating topics. In the early years we often argued quite a bit about the "evangelical" label itself. Someone would come up with a proposal about what makes for being an evangelical, and someone else would respond that there were a lot of Catholics who fit the description. So we would go back to the drawing board.

In 1989 a British evangelical historian, David Bebbington, published a book in which he proposed a four-part definition of "evangelical," and his account pretty much put an end to the

debates. His proposal, which has come to be known as “the Bebbington quadrilateral,” identified these four distinctively evangelical emphases: (1) we believe in the *need for conversion*—making a personal commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord; (2) we hold to the *Bible’s supreme authority*—the *sola scriptura* theme of the Reformation; (3) we emphasize a *cross-centered theology*—at the heart of the gospel is the atoning work of Jesus on the cross of Calvary; and (4) we insist on an *active faith*—not just Sunday worship, but daily discipleship.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, plenty of Christians who do not self-identify as evangelicals can claim each of those features. And some can even hold all four of them together. What strikes me as distinctively evangelical about the four features of the quadrilateral is, first of all, that these items are *singled out* as key theological basics, and second, that they are *held* in a certain way.

On the singling-out point: I have Protestant friends who would certainly endorse all four points while not claiming the “evangelical” label in the way we were trying to account for it in our Wheaton debates. The response of these Protestant folks would be: “Yes, sure—but why just those four?” Some Anglicans would be reluctant to affirm biblical authority without quickly adding something about the role of tradition. My Lutheran friends would not balk at a central emphasis on conversion and the cross but would see those as lacking enough specific content if “justification by faith alone” were not added as one of the essentials for understanding the others. And some of these same folks would also want to pay attention to ecclesiological specifics and the central role of the Eucharist.

As an evangelical, I don’t think it is wrongheaded to pay close attention to such things. But the items in the quadrilateral

1. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–17.



are for me theological emphases that serve to unite a trans-denominational, transconfessional movement. I may wish that a Baptist evangelical had a more robust appreciation for the sealing of God's covenant promises in the baptism of infants. But that area of disagreement is not as basic as the matters set forth in Bebbington's quadrilateral.

A case in point: I have rather strong affinities for a fairly detailed ecclesiology, and I am willing to argue at length with folks who disagree with me on these matters. But I am also very fond of the sentiment that Alister McGrath, himself an Anglican evangelical, expresses in response to the complaint that we evangelicals are willing to tolerate weak ecclesiologies. Yes, he observes, we evangelicals do often operate with an "under-developed ecclesiology"—but we are willing to live with that defect because of what we have experienced at the hands of "others who have over-developed ecclesiologies."<sup>2</sup>

And that, of course, points to the factor of how we evangelicals *hold to* what we see as the basics. It is impossible to understand why the four points of the quadrilateral loom so large for us without understanding our own histories.

The question about how evangelicals hold to the basics came up in the question-and-answer period after a lecture I gave on a Catholic campus. This university had a significant number of evangelical students, and they invited me to speak about the relationship between Catholics and evangelicals. I had explained the Bebbington quadrilateral in my lecture, and a student in the audience responded in a rather blunt fashion: "My response as a Catholic to those four points you mentioned is 'Duh!' What's so special about those points? As a Catholic I can endorse them too!"

2. Alister McGrath, "Evangelical Anglicanism: A Contradiction in Terms?," in *Evangelical Anglicans: Their Role and Influence in the Church Today*, ed. R. T. France and A. E. McGrath (London: SPCK, 1993), 14.

Afterward my host, a Catholic priest theologian, put the point in more detail. “I can agree with all four of your Bebbington points,” he said. “Certainly three of them are for me no-brainers. Do we need to have a personal relationship to Christ? Of course. Is the cross essential for atonement? Yes, surely. An activist faith? Why would we deny that? But even the supremacy of the Bible works for us in an important sense. Biblical revelation has primacy for us—it’s just that we insist on an infallible church authority in deciding how to *interpret* the Bible!”

I could have pushed him on several specifics in what he was saying, but his overall observation was legitimate. For evangelicals the four emphases of the Bebbington quadrilateral are just that: *emphases*. And they are emphases that have a lot of history attached to them. They are lines that in the past we have drawn in the sand in the midst of specific controversies.

We have insisted on the need for a personal relationship to Christ in response to a more “nominal” form of Christianity—as well as over against a “many different roads to heaven” relativism. We have proclaimed the supremacy of the Bible’s authority as over against those who allow churchly authority to “correct,” or to supplement in relativizing ways, the clear teachings of the Scriptures. The centrality of the work of the cross has been for us a nonnegotiable undergirding of the call to sinners to trust in Christ alone as the heaven-sent Savior. And our brand of activism has been our way of insisting that a genuine faith must take shape in the kind of holy living that requires us to bear witness to God’s revealed will for our daily lives.

All of that still strikes me as of great importance. And the word “evangelical”—from “evangel,” the gospel—has been for me a perfectly fine shorthand label for covering that theological and spiritual territory.

## | Still Viable?

Again, though, as I write this, many people who have identified as evangelical in the past are wondering whether it is time to give up on “evangelical” as a term of self-identification.

Sometimes the concern is raised by people who think that preserving labels as such is a bad practice. When an op-ed piece that I wrote, defending the continuing use of the label, appeared online, someone posted a comment characterizing my defense as “tribalism.” Well, in a certain sense, yes. I prefer to characterize evangelicalism as a movement, but we are also a tribe of sorts. And there are also other tribes, with whom we have long-standing differences. It doesn’t help, then, simply to stick with being “Christian”—also a tribal label, of course. There is enough serious diversity in Christianity to require some further specificity regarding where one places oneself on the broad Christian spectrum. I find the need for a label that distinguishes my pattern of Christian from many others.

There is also a very practical issue about abandoning the “evangelical” label. The Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents, for example, meets for a few days each January in a retreat setting. It is in its own way a diverse group: conservative Reformed types, Holiness, Pentecostal, Baptist, Anabaptist, “none of the above”—all quite willing, and even eager, to gather together under the “evangelical” label.

Suppose they decide that because of the recent connections of the label to right-wing politics they should change the name of their organization to “The Fellowship of \_\_\_\_\_ Seminary Presidents”: How would they fill in the blank? If they chose “Christian” they would have to make it clear that not just any president of any seminary who claimed that identification would be comfortable in their midst. “Historically Christian”?

Once again, the label would require some explaining. Or “Orthodox”? The very fact that they would have to use a capital letter would compel them to explain that they were not claiming to have converted to *that* kind of Orthodoxy.

For myself, I can’t think of a label that suits me better than “evangelical.” For one thing, it affirms my ties to people in the past who felt strongly about using it to define their understanding of their Christian identity: Sunday school teachers, youth ministers, family members, missionaries—and many of my own saints and heroes: Billy Graham, Carl Henry, Leighton Ford, Elizabeth Elliott, Tom Skinner, Corrie Ten Boom, Vernon Grounds, Arthur Holmes, Edward Carnell, Dave Hubbard, to name only a few.

One of the vows that the Benedictine monks take is the vow of stability. To take that vow is to pledge to stick with a particular monastic community. Many of us in the older generation of evangelicals have taken something like that vow in our relationship to our movement. There is much to consider in deciding whether to break that vow.

## | A New Generation

One consideration in deciding whether evangelical identity is worth preserving is our relationship to our younger generation. Take Amy—not her real name—a Fuller Seminary student. She was raised by evangelical parents who were active in a conservative congregation. Amy’s own faith was strengthened by her participation during high school in Young Life. She attended an evangelical college, where she embraced the idea of developing Christian worldview sensitivities—including a strong commitment to marginalized peoples. Amy is now in seminary, studying cross-cultural ministries. She wants to bring the healing

power of the gospel to women who have been deeply wounded by sex trafficking.

Amy loves her parents, but she has a difficult time these days talking with them about the things that matter most to her. Her mom and dad are numbered among the 81 percent of “white evangelicals” who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Her parents suspect that Barack Obama is secretly a Muslim, and they also wish that many Latinos living in the United States could be “sent back to where they came from.”

Amy loves Jesus, and she believes that the Bible is God’s supremely authoritative Word. She leans toward the traditional understanding of marriage, but she stays in touch with friends she knew well in Young Life who have subsequently come out as openly gay and lesbian.

Right now Amy isn’t sure whether she wants to be known as an evangelical: “The label has gotten too politicized.” The practical challenge for her is where she goes denominationally.

I met Amy’s mother once, when she visited our campus. She was clearly proud of Amy, and the affection between them was obvious. I wish she and Amy could find more common ground on the issues where they presently disagree. I’m sure that Amy’s parents are troubled by some of her views, but they do not see her as having simply departed from the faith of her younger days.

Both Amy and her parents are a part of my evangelical world. I want to see Amy’s parents move in Amy’s direction on many of their social and political views. I want Amy to claim the evangelical faith of her upbringing. As an evangelical educator I sense an obligation to both Amy and her parents. If I have to take sides, though, I will cast my lot with Amy, encouraging her also to take a vow of stability. I don’t want the evangelical movement to lose her. We need her.

### | The Elites<sup>3</sup>

The *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat has written about what he sees as a possible “crackup” that may be coming in the evangelical community.<sup>4</sup> He sees a quiet version of that split already happening within the younger generation—Amy and her peers—some of whom seem to be quietly moving in other directions: mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy.

The more dramatic gap, as Douthat sees it, is between the elites—“evangelical intellectuals and writers, and their friends in other Christian traditions”—and those millions of folks who worship in evangelical churches. It may be, he says, that these elites “have overestimated how much a serious theology has ever mattered to evangelicalism’s sociological success.” It could be that the views and attitudes on display in the recent support for rightist causes has really been there all along, without much of an interest in the kinds of intellectual-theological matters that have preoccupied the elites. If so, then the elites will eventually go off on their own, leaving behind an evangelicalism that is “less intellectual, more partisan, more racially segregated”—a movement that is in reality “not all that greatly changed” from what it has actually been in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Douthat hopes he is wrong about this, and I think he is. But his scenario gets some plausibility from the evangelical elites who have been talking about leaving “evangelical” behind.

3. Parts of this section have been adapted from Richard J. Mouw, “The Unlikely Crackup of Evangelicalism,” *Christianity Today*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/unlikely-crack-up-of-evangelicalism.html>. Used with permission.

4. Ross Douthat, “Is There an Evangelical Crisis?,” editorial, *New York Times*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/25/opinion/sunday/trump-evangelical-crisis.html>.

5. Douthat, “Is There an Evangelical Crisis?”

This scenario does not really hold up well, though, when we look at the realities of evangelicalism’s intellectual community. Douthat’s picture is one of a band of “evangelical intellectuals” who are cut off from much of the vast majority of “ordinary” evangelicals. Is that picture accurate?

There is a rather significant network of evangelical academic institutions in North America. The Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) has a membership of 140 evangelical schools, with a total enrollment of over 300,000 students. In addition, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) reports that of the 270 member institutions that it accredits in North America, 40 percent of these seminaries identify themselves as evangelical, and their student bodies account for 60 percent—about 40,000 students—of those enrolled in graduate theological education. If we add to those numbers the many Bible institutes, colleges, and seminaries who are not members of either the CCCCU or the ATS, it is fair to say that “evangelical intellectuals” are presently teaching almost half a million students who have chosen to attend self-identified evangelical schools.

The majority of those students come from evangelical churches, and many will return to those churches. They will also take what they have learned from “evangelical intellectuals” into professional life when they graduate. This is not exactly a picture of ivory tower elites who are clueless about grassroots evangelicalism.

As one who has spent over a half century in the evangelical academy, I have just sketched a picture that poses some important questions for my own reflection. Given the tens of thousands of evangelical students whom my colleagues and I have taught, to what degree are we responsible for current attitudes and viewpoints in the evangelical movement at large? And if we were to decide to “resign” from evangelicalism, would

we have an obligation to all of those former students, to give them counsel about what they should now do with what we have taught them about being “evangelical”?

I also have a different sort of concern, relating to what I described earlier about those conferences we had in previous decades at the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicalism. When we came together—there and in other venues—to talk about an evangelical identity that we all claimed at the time, we experienced a shared commitment to addressing a diverse intellectual agenda out of a deep commitment to the gospel. This bonding produced, in turn, a kind of scholarship that we would not have otherwise pursued if we had not seen ourselves as serving a distinct movement within American Christianity.

What happens to all of that now? Is that kind of bonding in the evangelical academy no longer needed? Will younger scholars continue to nurture those bonds if they no longer have a sense of serving a broader spiritual-theological movement?

A well-known scholar—himself a secular Jew—once spent some time working on a project at Fuller Seminary. He was a good friend, and he made a point of sharing with me his impressions of what he experienced at Fuller. “This is a unique place, Richard,” he said. “Right now your faculty is holding two things together in an impressive manner. You have top-notch scholarship *and* you have strong connections to the grass roots.” Then he went on: “But you can’t keep that up. Eventually you will either dumb down your scholarship or you will lose touch with the grass roots. Holding the two in tension is great while it lasts, but it will inevitably come apart.”

I responded by telling him that Fuller was only one of many evangelical campuses where the successful holding-together was happening. And I said I was confident we could all keep doing it well. Indeed, I said, if the day comes when we go in one or



the other directions he described, I would consider it a major defeat for evangelicalism as such.

Douthat’s “crackup” scenario is, in effect, a prediction that the defeat is coming. It does not have to happen that way, though. Nor does being successful at the holding-together require necessarily keeping the “evangelical” label. But it does mean intentionally developing a clear strategy for preserving what has been the best of the legacy that has—up to now—been identified by that label. I plead with those intellectual leaders who have been talking about simply resigning from the evangelical movement to stay around and help to work on that strategy.