

The other day, a woman told me the following story. One evening she gave an address to a church congregation. After the talk, a stern-faced member of the congregation came up and said, "You're a liberal, aren't you—but with none of the doubt." It's a nice way of putting it. If I'd been there, I suppose I would have been told that I'm an evangelical, but with all of the doubts.

Ben Myers — Faith and Theology blog — May 2010



Monday Morning

evangelical

adjective

- of or according to the teaching of the gospel or the Christian religion.
- of or denoting a tradition within Protestant Christianity emphasizing the authority of the Bible, personal conversion, and the doctrine of salvation by faith in the Atonement.
- zealous in advocating something: *she was evangelical about organic farming.*

mid 16th century English: via ecclesiastical Latin from ecclesiastical Greek *euangelikos*, from *euangelos*

New Oxford American Dictionary

εὐαγγέλιον

euaggélion

bringing good news, which is from **εὐ**, good, well, and **aggéllō**, to proclaim, tell. Related to *euaggelizō*, to announce good news. Also from *euáγγελos*: *euaggelizō*, to evangelize, proclaim the good news.

New Testament Word Study Dictionary

The religious historian George Marsden once quipped that in the 1950s and 1960s an *evangelical* Christian was “anyone who likes Billy Graham.” But when Billy Graham was asked to define the term in the late 1980s, he replied, “Actually, that’s a question I’d like to ask somebody too.” As it turned out, even America’s most famous evangelical preacher couldn’t describe what the term meant. Graham isn’t alone. While the word *evangelical* pops up in American media to describe everything from megachurches to voting blocs, few people seem to know what an *evangelical* is exactly. Those who claim to know often disagree.

Jonathan Merritt — “Defining Evangelical” — The Atlantic

What does it mean to be *evangelical*? The term, without a doubt, is widely misunderstood and frequently misrepresented. In recent years, the term *evangelical* has become highly politicized, invoked to describe a voting bloc or as a blanket label for those with conservative or, perhaps, fundamentalist views. Meanwhile, some from within the movement have dropped the label or left evangelicalism entirely, coining the monicker *exvangelical*.

ChrsitainityToday.com

One of my criticisms of the evangelical church is that every decade or so a new round of voices emerge to tell us that the church is about to implode and there will be no Christian presence left for our children unless we change everything, like, right now. I'm not old enough to recall many of the fads that have come and gone. But I do remember when seeker-sensitive churches were all the rage and a contemporary worship style would supposedly solve everything. So we plugged in the guitars, turned up the lights, and made the sermons more practical. Trinity Church became Apple Blossom Community Church, and First Lutheran became Celebration of Life Church. Today, missional is all the rage and we're told that a little more attention to Starbucks culture will supposedly fix what ails the church. We've plugged into liturgy, turned down the lights, and made the sermons more dialogical. Christ Church has become The Journey and First Baptist now holds a 10:03 Fusion gathering. This too shall pass.

According to George Barna, "The window of opportunity for reaching Americans with the gospel appears to be closing rapidly." The fascinating thing is Barna wrote this back in 1990. The window must almost be shut by now. If the Christian community was in 1990 already "losing the battle" and the forecast for the decade was "mostly cloudy," surely the church must be about ready to throw in the towel on the edge of the 2010s. For Barna, the church always seems to be failing, which in turn always necessitates doing church differently, or in the case of Revolution, the latest Barna offering, not doing church at all.

But for the life of me I can't figure out why so many evangelicals got their knickers in a twist over the latest trends. We need a little perspective. What's hot and new now will, unless it is the rediscovery of something old and biblical, end up being embarrassingly out of date and unhelpful in just a few years. For example, in his "classic" *Frog in the Kettle*, Barna argued that responding to "felt needs through highly personalized messages" was the answer to declining attendance figures. Now hardly

anyone talks of felt needs and personalized messages. This kind of preaching is seen as stale, recycled self-help psychology, and out of touch. The services in 1990 were supposed "to shed existing attitudes of piety and [solemnness], in favor of attitudes of anticipation, joy and fulfillment." Such a service would seem inauthentic by today's standards. Now the worship service is supposed to be in touch with the raw, authentic pain of our doubting selves. Among the achievable goals for the 1990s were "restoring self-esteem" and "championing Christian morals" by making the legislative, judicial, and administrative ends of our government responsive to a higher order of thoughts. Today, admitting our dysfunctions is the thing to do and few things are more lampooned by the cutting-edge missional folks more than attempts on the Religious Right to legislate our morality. In 1990, Barna argued that "whatever barriers and difficulties may face the Church today, having enough local churches is not the issue." Today, there is hardly a church executive out there who isn't making the case for more churches and hardly a denomination of any stripe that doesn't consider church planting one of its top priorities.

I don't mean to pick on Barna, but because he has often written about how the church needs to change, he provides a nice test case. And very often, his descriptions of the present and prescriptions for the future do not pass the test. The 1990s were supposed to be "a time in which the Church will either explode with new growth or quietly fade into a colorless thread in the fabric of secular culture." Wrong and wrong. The church did not explode in growth and it did not fade into oblivion. Things are not the worst they've ever been. The end of the church in America is not nigh upon us. There are grave failings in the church, in the evangelical church as much as anywhere. We need better preaching, better theology, more love for Jesus, more involvement in our neighborhoods, more evangelism, more crosscultural missions, more generosity, more biblical literacy, less worldliness, less trend-tracing, and better discipleship. The church in this country will always have something—many things—to work on. But in the midst of our struggles, we need to guard against wild hyperbole. We need to exercise more caution before we pronounce the end of the church as we know it. We need a little more humility before we announce everything must change. And we need a little more wisdom before we reinvent the church for yet another time—let alone before we pitch her to the curb altogether.

Kevin DeYoung — *Why We Love the Church*