

An Insider's View of Evangelicals

by Michael Davenport

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First of all, they are not fundamentalists. They're your neighbours who read, and try to live by, the Bible, but not to the point of absurdity. Some may see them as boring, but they're definitely not scary.

Does it ever happen that you and a friend view the same event or object and see completely different things? We have a blanket in our house that looks grey to me, but when I say so to my son he rolls over laughing and says "no Dad, it's green." Now, I can see green just fine, and that blanket does not look green to me.

... think of this as a National Geographic article about a strange tribe ...

That's the sort of disconnect I experience when the media "warn" people about Evangelicals, or when someone writes a letter to the editor saying "I am afraid of Evangelicals." Afraid? Of us? The ones—you know—that bring you a casserole when there's a death in the family, that don't cheat on our taxes, that stop for you at the crosswalk?

My son and I resolved the blanket controversy by taking it outside into the sunlight, where I had to admit that it was green (a grey-green, ok?). My objective in this article is to bring Evangelicals out into the *Sun* where you can see for yourself what our true colours are. Think of this as a *National Geographic* article about a strange tribe living in your midst.

Not fundamentalists

Let's get some common misperceptions out of the way. First, don't confuse Evangelicals with TV evangelists—they are no more similar than Conservatives and conservationists. In 30 years of attending Evangelical churches, I have honestly never seen Bible-thumping hucksters or white-shoed crooners ... well, except once in New York in 1979, but let's not go there.

What the Words Mean

Christian: a follower of Jesus, whose life is described in the Christian Bible;

A Church: a group of Christians that worship together

Being "Saved": being reconciled to, and declaring allegiance to, Jesus

Evangelist: a Christian (not necessarily an Evangelical) who is telling non-Christians about Jesus;

Evangelical: a movement that affirms traditional theology and submits to the authority of the bible while striving to participate creatively in modern society

Christian Liberalism: a movement to assert intellectual and cultural authority over the bible, including revising traditional theology where it conflicts with modern ideals

Fundamentalism: an extremist movement within any religious or secular group, marked by dogmatic anti-intellectualism, unwillingness to engage opposing points of view, and separation from society.

Second, please don't confuse "Evangelical" with "Fundamentalist"—most Evangelicals would be offended by that. Fundamentalism began in the 1920s as a movement among Christians to separate from their "corrupt" society and to avert their eyes from intellectual attacks on the Bible. By the 1940s, the Fundamentalist movement had strayed so far from Evangelical values of intellectual and cultural engagement with society, that mainstream Evangelicals formed alliances and created programs specifically to strengthen their members against Fundamentalist influence. So you can imagine how galling it is for those same churches to now be called "Fundamentalist"—sort of like mistaking Greenpeace for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

An approach to faith

One source of confusion is that the term "Evangelical" identifies an approach to faith, rather than a separate denomination. The distinguishing features of the Evangelical approach are:

- acceptance of the authority of Scripture over all other documents and traditions;
- affirmation that, suddenly or gradually, individuals are transformed ("reborn") into believers;
- belief that Jesus' death and resurrection were historical facts, necessary for our new life; and
- commitment to prayer, discipleship, and faithful service to wider humanity.

You will find people who believe and live these principles within every Christian church. You can't be a card-carrying Evangelical, because there is no agency issuing "cards." We have no one like the Pope to rule on who may call themselves Evangelicals, and of course no one can control what Evangelicals say. So if you hear a prominent "Evangelical" promoting, say, assassinations of foreign leaders, please know that the real Evangelicals in the audience are as uncomfortable with this as you are.

Evangelicals in the community

... evangelicals: a bit different, but not scary ...

Surveys indicate that about 12 percent of Canadians are Protestant Evangelicals. So there's a good chance that you know some from work, hockey, or your kid's preschool. Will they seem any different? Probably not at first. In my experience Evangelicals are often kind, generous, and thoughtful people, but so are people of all backgrounds. There are apparently some statistical differences—polls indicate that compared to average Canadians, Evangelicals

- typically give more money to charity, even when gifts to churches are ignored,
- are less likely to smoke, swear, or get drunk,
- are more likely to volunteer their time, and
- tend to place a higher value on marriage and family.

None of these attributes suggest to me that Evangelicals are scary. Boring, some would say, but definitely not scary.

Social justice

Evangelicals have a long and honourable history of social activism, often as revisionists rather than conservatives. Here are some of my favourite examples of Evangelicals who had an impact on our world:

- **William Wilberforce:** an English member of parliament who single-handedly forced the abolition of the slave trade in 1807;
- **The Clapham Sect:** social activists from the same parish as Wilberforce who set up schools for impoverished children, improved the prisons, and pioneered labour laws and animal welfare laws;
- **Tommy Douglas:** former premier of Saskatchewan and recently voted the "greatest Canadian," who



William Wilberforce, an Evangelical politician, persuaded England to abolish the slave trade.

- established universal health care in Canada;
- **World Vision:** global aid agency that brings crisis relief, feeds and educates children, builds self-sufficiency, and acts against social evils such as child prostitution, all without regard for race or religion;
- **Jimmy Carter:** former US president who works with "Habitat for Humanity" to build decent homes among the world's poorest people;
- **Preston Manning:** founder of the Reform Party who badgered the Liberals into eliminating the fiscal deficit;
- **Brian McConaghy:** RCMP scientist from Richmond who brought medical aid to children in the "Killing Fields" of Cambodia two years before the UN dared to become involved. More recently, he gathered key evidence in Cambodia leading to the first conviction under Canada's new child sex tourism law;
- **Lillian To:** Vancouverite and immigrant who established "SUCCESS" to help new immigrants adjust to living in Canada.

The environment

The Evangelical Environmental Network, in a widely-endorsed declaration, sums up our attitude to the environment as follows: "We urge individual Christians and churches to be centers of creation's care and renewal, both delighting in creation as God's gift, and enjoying it as God's provision, in ways which sustain and heal the damaged fabric of the creation which God has entrusted to us." This is the only approach to environmental issues that I have ever heard preached in church.

... morality does not revolve around human happiness ...

Some fundamentalists (very few as far as I can tell) seem to use end-time prophecies as an excuse to neglect the environment, but that view is definitely not an Evangelical view.

Living from the heart

So what motivates Evangelicals to serve the world with such vigour? Are we, for example, reacting to a guilt trip laid on us by a manipulative church or vengeful God? More frighteningly would an Evangelical, given political power, visit the same guilt trip on you?

The answer is "no," but it is an interesting "no." In ancient times, and I think still in some religions, one tried to avoid God's wrath by following God's laws. Christians believe that this is a hopeless strategy—that we humans are predisposed to screw things up and break the laws. We believe instead that closeness to God comes as a free gift, when by faith we are ready to receive it. This is the "Good News" (in Greek *evangelion*) that gives our movement its name.

This means, logically, that our good deeds are of no value in "saving" us. So why do we do them? We do good deeds because we have fallen in love with a God of love, and when you love someone there is no greater joy than to please them.

It also means that Evangelicals believe very profoundly that you can't force a belief system or a morality onto others. Our God does not "force" us to believe or behave morally, but rather calls us to do so in love. You can expect that same model from Evangelical leaders—moral leadership based on influence rather than power politics.

Good and evil

I hope this hasn't given the impression that we take morality lightly—as you've probably noticed quite the opposite is true. Evangelicals believe that when a child is abused in Cambodia it is not an isolated tragedy, but rather an assault on the whole world. The grief and the pain ripple out around the globe and for generations forward in time.

The word we use for this is "evil," and it is the visible manifestation of an epic battle—a spiritual *Lord of the Rings* if you like—that, we believe, rages around our world. It is a battle best fought not with violence but rather with fierce love, patience, kindness, and self-control. And in this battle we do not see the "bad" people—the abusers, the cheaters, the destroyers—as the enemy, but rather as hostages of, and collaborators with, the enemy.

This view of good and evil makes moral relativism untenable for Evangelicals. Some choices, we would say, are inherently and non-negotiably wrong. It is just plain wrong to cheat on your wife even if "she'll never know so it can't hurt her." I mention this because some postmodernists, for example, believe that any talk of "right" and "wrong" is, well, wrong.

I suspect, however, that those who are frightened by Evangelical morality are less frightened by the prevailing environmental morality, which is equally committed to concepts of "right" and "wrong." Surely we can all agree that it is absolutely wrong to hunt a species to extinction. No argument of how "that species helps humanity" need be given, because morality does not revolve around human happiness.

... committed to excellence in biblical scholarship ...

Environmentalists also understand the need to be careful of "small sins" which, integrated over time, can add up to great evil. Hiking on Vancouver Island years ago, I went up a forbidden trail to see the Carmanah Giant cedar tree. When a Park Warden stopped me on the way back, I explained that I was just one person, and I had been careful to stay on the path. "It's the path that's killing the tree!" the Ranger explained "What would happen if everyone ignored the trail

signs?" He didn't give me a ticket, but I deserved one—not because I lacked concern for the trees but because, thinking I knew what the sign "really meant," I ignored what it plainly said.

High regard for the Bible

Evangelicals believe that humans are equipped to recognize what is right and what is wrong, and that the Bible provides essential "trail signs" to guide that instinct. More specifically, we believe in reading, discussing, and prayerfully considering the whole Bible, and allowing it to direct our morality. Very nasty things have been said and done by people who use segments of the Bible out of context to defend their pet projects.

Evangelicals are sometimes accused of "reading the Bible literally" as if we are blind to its subtleties. The truth is that Evangelicals place a very high value on excellence in biblical scholarship, as exemplified by the writings of CS Lewis. One of the world's leading Evangelical think-tanks, Regent College, is located in Vancouver and draws scholars from all over the world. So we read the Bible literally when appropriate, but we also know a metaphor when it hits us in the face.

Sexual morality

Some people seem to be threatened by Evangelicals' apparently "old fashioned" sexual morality. More disturbingly, some have suggested that we are hateful to people with alternative sexual orientations. On the contrary; I have seen only loving and respectful acceptance of all people at our churches.

One Sunday long ago, when I was a junior Sunday School coordinator, a man came up to me wearing a very nice blouse, skirt, medium-rise shoes, and blonde wig, and offered to help teach a class. I explained that we did not appoint teachers until they had attended our church for some time, and suggested other ministries that might be appropriate in the mean time. Over the coming months he attended regularly, sometimes as a woman and sometimes as a man, and I was very impressed with the complete absence of fuss within the congregation. We accepted him as he was, and trusted that God would make our church for him a place of both grace and transformation just as it had been for so many of us.

So I find the accusations of "hatred" bewildering. Cannot our liberal society just accept Evangelicals as an odd minority group that avoids sex except between husbands and wives? Wouldn't that be just like accepting vegans as an odd minority group that avoids foods derived from animals? Cannot vegans dislike meat and still love meat-eaters? Should our laws forbid vegans from suggesting that their diet is healthier or morally superior? If I go to a vegan home would it be

right, when they politely refuse to prepare bacon and eggs for my breakfast, to accuse them of hating me?

And if they refuse to appoint me, a meat-eater, as an official vegan spokesman, can I accuse them of unfair discrimination?

Evangelicals in politics

I am very proud of the achievements of Evangelical politicians such as Wilberforce, Douglas, Carter, and Manning. They show that great good can be done by people with solid moral foundations and a willingness to serve their people in the political arena. They also show that Canadians should welcome, not fear, the contributions of Evangelicals on the political stage.



In a media poll, Evangelical Tommy Douglas was identified as the "greatest Canadian" for bringing universal health care to Canada. 1965 CP Photo

learn from them.

It's also possible, of course, that they are just claiming to be Evangelical for political gain. Not that there is much gain to be had in Canadian politics. Polls indicate that in our last election, Evangelicals split their vote approximately evenly between the Liberal and Conservative parties, just as the rest of Canada did. I have never heard any political party endorsed by my church leaders.

But what about Evangelical politicians who seem to be doing bad things? The first thing to remember is that no-one will ever perfectly exemplify Christian principles. Evangelical leaders struggle against many of the same failings and temptations as the rest of humanity, and of course they are not all intellectual giants and brilliant speakers. Furthermore, politics is a complicated dance of rhetoric and compromise, and I suspect there is often no way to move forward without in some way compromising ones ideals.

So if an "Evangelical" politician is making you squirm, take some comfort in knowing that if they were not Evangelical it might have been even worse. Or maybe, just maybe, you have something to

Welcome in a liberal society

OK, so after all these words, I'm guessing that some of you still don't really like Evangelicals. Maybe I've convinced you that we're not all dangerous, but even in the bright light of day we don't quite match your colour-scheme. Here's my challenge: get over your fear—it's called xenophobia—and accept us as just one more quirky component of this country we call Canada.

We are a minority group accounting for about one eighth of all Canadians and holding some values that differ from the ruling elite. Should we be encouraged to get politically active? The answer is "yes" if Canada is a liberal democracy, and "no" if it is a liberal hegemony.

With the passage of the same-sex-marriage law, perhaps it is time for social liberals in Canada to accept that they are now the Establishment. As the Establishment they have the primary responsibility for defending Canada's commitment to tolerance and multi-culturalism—core elements of our identity. This means they need to shift from "fighting for their voice to be heard" to "fighting to ensure that other voices are heard."

Judging from some of the rhetoric we read in the media, this may require a bit of an adjustment.

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