

Seeing the Problem, Missing the Answer

## The Political Takeover of "Evangelical"

Peter Ditzel

Rob Bell is a popular Christian writer and, for want of a better word, performer. In an interview that appeared on boston.com ([http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles\\_of\\_faith/2009/09/rob\\_bell.html](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles_of_faith/2009/09/rob_bell.html)), he was asked, "What does it mean to you to be an evangelical?" Here is his answer:

I take issue with the word to a certain degree, so I make a distinction between a capital 'E' and a small 'e.' I was in the Caribbean in 2004, watching the election returns with a group of friends, and when Fox News, in a state of delirious joy, announced that evangelicals had helped sway the election, I realized, this word has really been hijacked. I find the word troubling, because it has come in America to mean politically to the right, almost, at times, anti-intellectual. For many, the word has nothing to do with a spiritual context.

So far, I agree. The word evangelical has been so abused in popular usage that most people, it seems, have no idea what it is supposed to mean. It has, indeed, been hijacked to serve as a synonym for Christian conservative (which is a political, not religious, term). But now read Bell's answer to the next question, "OK, how would you describe what it is that you believe?"

I embrace the term evangelical, if by that we mean a belief that we together can actually work for change in the world, caring for the environment, extending to the poor generosity and kindness, a hopeful outlook. That's a beautiful sort of thing.

Here, Bell and I take off for opposite ends of the universe. Apparently, Rob Bell objects to the term evangelical being used in connection with conservative politics, but only because he wants it to be used to support liberal politics. Bell's understanding of evangelical is no better than that of the people he criticizes. He correctly points out a serious problem—the term evangelical has taken on the meaning of Christian conservative, someone who is politically on the right and incidentally identifies him- or herself as a Christian. Bell's solution, however, is not to rescue the word and restore it to its rightful and biblically connected

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definition. No, Bell grabs the word and runs off with it into his own left-wing political camp. But this attempt to steal the term evangelical, and indeed to hijack Christianity itself, to serve as the slave of one political camp or another is characteristic of what has been happening in Christendom now for years.

### **Evangelical Defined**

If you want to get a good idea of what evangelical means, start by looking in the dictionary. According to the first three definitions in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, "evangelical" means, "1 : of, relating to, or being in agreement with the Christian gospel especially as it is presented in the four Gospels 2 : PROTESTANT 3 : emphasizing salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual."

The reason to care about this word is because it is really a biblical term. The English word "evangelical" is based on *euaggelion*, the Greek word that, in the New Testament, is translated "Gospel." It means "a good message" or "good news." So, the dictionary is right when it directly connects "evangelical" with the Christian Gospel, salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of preaching. A true evangelical is one who believes in salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone as preached by Jesus and His apostles and other followers and recorded in the Bible. Thus, evangelicals should stand up for the faith once delivered to the saints and for the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. And this is what evangelicals were known for until relatively recently.

But not any more. Now we read things like, "Rick Warren is replacing James Dobson as the political powerhouse of American evangelicalism" (<http://www.thenextright.com/soren-dayton/dobson-warren-huckabee-and-the-changing-evangelical-movement>). But the only political powerhouses in the New Testament are the Caesars, Herods, Pilate, and others who wielded Roman power and the Pharisees and Sadducees who tried to exercise the subordinate power of the Jewish political/religious state. They were all the enemies of Christ.

The New Testament knows nothing of political powerhouses in Christianity. And there is good reason for this. Although all rulers, no matter how pagan and tyrannical they may be, are ordained of God to perform their function in the world, Jesus did not build the church to

perform a political function. True Christianity is divorced from politics. The *ekklēsia* (the "church" as it is usually but incorrectly translated) consists of those people God has called out of this world as the assembly of a government that is not of this world, the kingdom of God. You will never find any Christians in the New Testament involved in politics, nor is there even a hint that Jesus intended His followers to try to influence the politics of the nations in which they dwelt. His commission to us is to preach the Gospel, and then to baptize and disciple those who believe. When Christians dabble in the politics of this world's governments, they are being unfaithful to that calling. Much like the politically powerful Roman Catholic church of the middle ages, the popular, political evangelical movement of today is apostate.

### **The Solution**

Okay. Like Rob Bell, we have seen the problem. Evangelical Christianity has lost its way and become a political movement. Rather than preaching the Gospel, it is supporting candidates running for office and trying to get bills passed in Congress. But can we come up with a better answer? I believe we can. Instead of exchanging right wing politics for left wing politics—or any politics—we must return to the Bible alone. Although the term "evangelical" may be forever corrupted in the popular mind (I simply prefer the term "Biblical Christian"), we must not let that stop us from preaching the *euaggelion*, the good news of forgiveness and freedom for those who believe on Jesus Christ as their Savior. We must uphold the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and challenge those who distort it for their own ends. We must not repeat Esau's mistake and exchange our birthright in the kingdom of God for the pottage of carnal power in this world's politics.