

The Evangelical Mind

Reclaiming Evangelicalism

By Richard Mouw

When John McCain criticized Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, the press assumed that evangelicals would be upset.

Well, I'm an evangelical and I'm not upset. Indeed, I think its time for evangelicals to reclaim evangelicalism from the Religious Right.

First, allow me to explain why I call myself an "evangelical." The word comes from *evangel*, which means *Gospel*. In the most basic sense, then, anyone who is serious about believing the Gospel is an evangelical. In recent times, however, the term has come to refer more specifically to those Christian people, both within and outside of the mainline denominations, who have given a specific *spin* to what it means to believe the Gospel.

While we distance ourselves from the fundamentalists, who take a literalist approach to "creation science" and who think the Catholic Church is a tool of Satan, we do take the Bible's authority very seriously, and we believe that the way to be right with God is to be "born again"-- to experience the new life that comes from knowing Jesus personally. We are actively committed to Billy Graham's kind of evangelism: we believe that God wants us to encourage all people to come to know Jesus as their personal Savior.

In those ways, I am a committed evangelical. And that means I believe things that are not very popular in our culture. Many people today are offended when they find out that people like me believe that Jesus is the only true Savior, and that we need to guide our lives by what the Bible teaches, even when it goes against the grain of "enlightened" human thought. I am currently President of Fuller Theological Seminary, one of the most influential evangelical schools in the country, which is dedicated to this view.

And this means that on many issues I do agree with the folks on the Religious Right. I can't get excited about liberal candidates who, for example, try to outdo each in their zeal for abortion rights and the political agenda of gay activist groups. And I worry about how the entertainment industry is undermining traditional family values. Indeed, these days I consider myself a "cultural conservative," and I vote for candidates that I would not have imagined supporting back in my earlier days, when I actually joined a group called "Evangelicals for McGovern."

But neither can I simply endorse the program of the Religious Right. The Christian Coalition and the now-defunct Moral Majority have focused on specific practices that they disapprove of -- abortion, homosexual lifestyles, pornography. But they have been insensitive to many of the more basic patterns of injustice in our society. What about the ways in which women have been discriminated against? What about the desperately poor? What about the industries that have contributed to the global warming that is wreaking havoc in our environment?

I find the Religious Right to be wrong on some of the issues I care about. In the not-too-distant past, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson gave encouragement to those who were committed to preserving South African apartheid. When George W. Bush recently visited Bob Jones University, he was on a campus that not only promotes a racist ideology, but that has also welcomed Ian Paisley, the chief anti-Catholic opponent of a peaceful resolution to the Northern Ireland troubles. And Religious Rightists have aggressively pursued their anti-gay agenda without showing a willingness to repent of their often inexcusable cruelty to homosexuals.

The Religious Rightists also seem confused about what they are aiming for in the public arena. We evangelicals tend to think that we have only two choices when it comes to political action: stay out of politics altogether, or try to take over the system and "Christianize" it.

For many decades in the twentieth century, evangelicals chose the first option. We shunned political activism as too "worldly." Our task, we were convinced, was to limit ourselves to evangelistic activity. We concentrated on getting people "saved" in order to get ready for heaven. This is the sort of religious outlook that Jerry Falwell advocated in the early days of his ministry. He now tells the story about how, back in the days of the civil rights movement, he preached a sermon criticizing Martin Luther King on the grounds that preachers had no business speaking out about political issues.

In the 1980s, however, evangelicals began to organize politically. After many decades of seeing ourselves as a faithful minority in a doomed world, suddenly we announced that we were members of "a moral majority" and that we were ready to "restore" America in the light of a past vision of "greatness."

When we get into this take-over mode, we say and do a lot of things that make non-evangelicals nervous. The truth is that the "great" America of the past was not a very friendly place for, say, native Americans, blacks, Jews--or even Irish Catholics.

When we evangelicals go into the public arena we tend to over-simplify complex issues. We have not been good at nuanced reflection about our convictions in a pluralistic society. At first glance it might seem rather innocent to many of us to ask that the Ten Commandments be displayed prominently in public school classrooms. But do we really want to impose a "sabbath" on everyone in America -- and if so, which day should we set aside? Is it our intention to ban "graven images" in Hindu temples? Are we prepared to introduce legislation that will make adultery a crime?

I wish that we evangelicals could work together to promote a third way -- a middle course between withdrawal from politics and campaigns that give the impression that we are attempting to impose a full range of moral and religious specifics on our fellow citizens.

I certainly do not want to see religious conservatives draw back from political involvement, as some activists like columnist Cal Thomas and Free Congress Association founder Paul Weyrich have recently proposed. Evangelicalism in all its varieties has much to contribute to the present political dialogue.

But maybe it would be good for us to take a pause and think together about what we are really trying to accomplish as evangelicals in the public arena. We could examine our consciences in order to see whether, deep down, we are indeed guided by an unrealistic desire to remake the United States into "a Christian nation."

We might even ask some help from our Catholic friends, who agree with us on some of our social concerns, and who also have a long tradition of reflection on political involvement. We evangelicals might be well served by an opportunity to do some homework, so that we can find ways to make our case on abortion and sexual behavior to our fellow citizens without simply quoting Bible verses.

We evangelicals aren't the only ones who are confused about how to make our way in a pluralistic culture. There are many secularists who like to depict any kind of fervently held religious conviction as a dangerous presence in the public square: strong religious convictions, they insist, are incompatible with a spirit of tolerance. This perspective goes back at least as far as the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that people who have

strong religious convictions cannot be good citizens. When you think you are right about theological issues, he argued, you will inevitably exhibit intolerance in the civil realm, since "one cannot live in peace with people one regards as damned."

I am convinced that this complaint is based on a misunderstanding of how religious conviction can -- and ought to -- function in the public square. But I also know that we evangelical types have our work cut out if we are going to demonstrate that we can do it in a way that contributes to the health of society.

The effort must be made, however. Indeed, I think we have a mandate from God to do so.

When the ancient people of Israel were carried off into captivity in Babylon, they were confused about how they were to act in their new surroundings. Back in their homeland they had "owned" the political system, and had felt free to shape their public life in obedience to the will of God. But now they were a minority group in a culture that was hostile to their deepest convictions. How were they to act?

The prophet Jeremiah brought them a direct word from the Lord on this subject. Plant your vineyards, he told them, and build your houses and encourage your sons and daughters to marry and bear children. And then came a call to activism: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (shalom)" (Jer. 29: 4-7).

I would hate to see the evangelicals of the Religious Right go back into the withdrawal mode. We need them in the public arena, in a time when immorality and injustice run rampant. But we don't need them to work to take us back to a "golden age" in the past; rather, we need them to join others in working for the common good. Christians know -- or ought to know -- that we are traveling toward a better world, one that only God can establish, and will do so in his good time.

I would like to reclaim the word "evangelical" for its true meaning--someone who knows Jesus Christ as a personal Savior, and who hears the Savior calling Christians today to "seek the welfare" of the complex pluralistic society in which he has asked us to live as his followers.