Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning

Mark Labberton, ed. | Reviewed by Jennay Smith

The November 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump marked a turning point in the landscape of American evangelicalism. This highly contentious candidate yielded polarized reactions: while 81% of white evangelicals vocally supported Trump, droves of other American evangelicals recoiled in disgust. In the midst of this seemingly black-and-white reality, American evangelicalism remains a highly nuanced, varied, and diverse phenomenon. Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning includes a collection of perspectives which mirror this varied movement. Edited by Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, Still Evangelical? contains chapters by ten individuals who consider themselves evangelicals, and their reflections as they wrestle with the meaning of and their association with evangelicalism, especially in light of the 2016 election. Given the breadth of perspectives, each contributor will be considered individually as part of this review.

In his introduction, Labberton identifies evangelicalism as a diverse movement that owes much of its identity to the variety of social contexts in which it is found. Throughout the twentieth century, evangelicalism became increasingly tangled with the political right so that oftentimes today evangelicalism refers more to a political agenda than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In her chapter, Lisa Sharon Harper discusses the struggle that non-white members of evangelicalism experience, noting that white evangelicals often present a façade of valuing justice and compassion, but in reality often remain far removed from the real trials of minority evangelicals. She challenges the evangelical movement to abandon the norm of majority whiteness and actively pursue racial inclusivity.

Karen Swallow Prior organizes her chapter around the reasons for why she still considers herself an evangelical. Despite the controversy evangelicalism currently finds itself embroiled in, Swallow Prior positively identifies some of evangelicalism’s core values and historical landmarks. She also recounts the way this faith tradition has shaped her personal family and life of faith, and affirms the relevance and importance of evangelicalism to Christianity today.

Mark Young identifies what he believes to be a major weakness within evangelicalism: a lack of proper ecclesiology. In looking at the history of this movement in the twentieth century, Young argues that a lack of developed doctrine of the church, or mission, allowed evangelicalism to instead find its mission in a political agenda. It is this political agenda that has eclipsed the real mission of the church: to glorify Jesus Christ and pursue his kingdom.

The response of evangelicalism to the immigration crisis in the United States is the focus of Robert Chao Romero’s chapter. He argues that the indifferent response of white evangelicals to the problem of immigration has not only harmed the witness of evangelicals to the world and created discord between white and Latino evangelical Christians but is a response that also neglects God’s heart for the immigrant as revealed in Scripture.

Soong-Chan Rah focuses his chapter on the shifting evangelical landscape, with individuals from the Majority World composing a larger portion of the evangelical population than individuals from the West. In light of this transition, Rah argues that Westerners cannot continue to define what is normative within evangelicalism. White evangelicals should rather surrender their messages of “triumphalism” and actively
Allen Yeh argues for a balancing of worldwide evangelicalism. While having an abundance of theological texts and orthodoxy, Western evangelicalism is weak on the lived practice and experience of the Christian faith. The Majority World, Yeh contends, has a more vibrant faith experience and has important theological contributions, but these contributions remain small in quantity. Balancing of orthodoxy and orthopraxy will contribute to worldwide evangelical unity.

The marginalization within evangelicalism of women and minority races, and issues experienced by these minority evangelical populations, is the subject of Sandra Maria Van Opstal’s chapter. As a Latina woman within evangelicalism, Van Opstal has firsthand experience of exclusion within the evangelical community. Much-needed revival within evangelicalism will only come, Van Opstal argues, through active inclusion of these minority voices.

In his chapter, Mark Galli addresses the socio-political diversity within evangelicalism. The divide between what Galli identifies as “elite” and “non-elitist” evangelicals is wide, though both groups share a fear of the other. Ultimately, evangelicals should strive towards unity not through analogous political beliefs but through a shared goal of loving one another as Christ commanded.

Shane Claiborne identifies that the perception of evangelicals has come to be associated with white, politically right individuals. Calling this “identity theft,” Claiborne argues that evangelicalism is, and should seek to be perceived as, a movement that focuses on the basics of being wholly obedient to Jesus Christ; the words of Jesus, not the American political system, should define Christian priorities.

Listening, Jim Daly contends in his chapter, is a powerful antidote to the tunnel vision and polarization so often found in evangelicalism. The importance of listening to God, others, and the world is paramount, Daly argues, as evangelicals seek to be humble servants and followers of Christ in the twenty-first century.

While at times American evangelicalism can appear dire, Tom Lin writes, in reality, evangelicalism worldwide should be a source of great hope. Young people, through organizations like InterVarsity, are coming to faith in record numbers. It is in this next generation of Christians that God continues to build his kingdom.

*Still Evangelical?* is a timely work that wrestles honestly and thoughtfully with the present realities of evangelicalism in America. Hearing from such a range of individuals on diverse topics pertinent to evangelicalism helps to provide a more holistic grappling with the ambiguity that is evangelicalism. It is commendable that Labberton includes women and minority voices within this volume. This choice renders *Still Evangelical?* reflective of the larger American evangelical community.

Yet the difficulty of addressing the ambiguity of evangelicalism left several chapters wanting for clarity and focus and the overlap of themes addressed by the authors also contributed to some repetition. However, overall, this work makes the complex issue of evangelicalism accessible, and invites readers to think deeply and reflectively about the current state of evangelicalism in America.

While not explicitly about gender equality (though several chapters briefly address the marginalization of women within evangelicalism at large), *Still Evangelical?* remains an important work for supporters of CBE. CBE’s commitment to equality of all people within the church is reflected throughout this entire text. Those who are advocates of gender equality should also be advocates of racial and economic equality, and *Still Evangelical?* provides thoughtful, contemporary reflection on both the current state of this within evangelicalism today and also encourages readers to move forward as pursuers of justice.
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