

[Print This Page](#)

FIRST THINGS

The Good News About Evangelicalism

Byron Johnson

February 2011

Evangelicalism is not what it used to be. Evangelicals were once derided for being uneducated, unsophisticated, and single-issue oriented in their politics. Now they profess at some of our best universities, parse postmodernity, and preach “creation care” with liberal fervor. Looking at the supposed repudiation of “the religious right” in the 2008 election, many pundits chortled gleefully that evangelicalism—the conservative brand of Protestantism reflected by Southern Baptists, the Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene, and others who believe in the final authority of the Bible and the need for conversion—is smaller than most have thought, and that the evangelical young have morphed into social liberals.

In other words, evangelicals are not as powerful a cultural force as previously thought, and in the future they will be even less so. Neither of these claims is true.

The evangelical movement is undergoing a sea change, to be sure, but it is not the sort most observers imagine. For starters, evangelicals have not lost members. This was confirmed by the Baylor Religion Survey, an in-depth study of American religious beliefs and practices using data collected by the Gallup Organization. Instead of relying on questions about religious preference alone, as previous studies have done, the survey identified respondents by religious family, denomination, and local congregation.

This last identification is significant because of the declining importance of denomination in America. Nondenominational churches, almost exclusively evangelical, now represent the second-largest group of Protestant churches in America, and the fastest growing section of the American religious market. Many denominational churches, especially newer ones, avoid advertising or communication strategies that feature their denominational affiliation. Consider Saddleback

Church. All of its members know that their pastor is Rick Warren, but not all know that their congregation is Southern Baptist. Typical is Christ Community Church, near Nashville, Tennessee—a member of the Presbyterian Church of America that does not highlight this fact in Sunday services or sermons.

This trend has affected popular statistics and has also served to exaggerate the loss of religious faith and evangelical influence in America. Most previous research missed a new phenomenon: that members of nondenominational churches often identify themselves on surveys as unaffiliated or even as having “no religion.” Because traditional surveys do not provide categories that adequately describe those who attend nondenominational congregations, their members often check “unaffiliated” in typical surveys and questionnaires.

According to a recent survey by the Pew Forum, 44 percent of Americans have switched their religious or denominational affiliation. Much of the media coverage suggested that something much different had happened: that a significant portion of the American population had left the faith of their youth. But that is not what the research actually discovered. These are two vastly different stories, with profoundly different implications for American religion in general and evangelicalism in particular. Switching churches or denominations should not be interpreted as a proxy for losing one’s faith.

The Baylor Religious Survey took pains to find these nondenominational church attenders by asking them to identify themselves not only by their religious family and denomination but also by their local congregation. The researchers found: 1) that Americans remain connected to congregations, but less so to denominations or more generic religious identities; 2) that the unaffiliated are currently 10.8 percent of the population rather than the 14 percent or 16 percent claimed by other surveys; 3) that many of those typically identified as “unaffiliated” are not only affiliated with congregations but also attend evangelical churches; and 4) that America is considerably more evangelical than prior studies have found. Fully one-third of Americans (approximately 100 million) affiliate with an evangelical Protestant congregation. Indeed, evangelicals remain the numerically dominant religious tradition in the United States.

Among other things, this means that while Americans often voice dissatisfaction with organized religion, evangelicalism is not in retreat. Mainline Protestantism is, and evangelical congregations appear to be the beneficiaries. Membership in the mainline denominations declined 49 percent

from 1960 to 2000; membership in evangelical denominations increased 156 percent in the same period. (Because mainline attendance at worship is also significantly less regular than that in evangelical churches, the difference in active membership may be even more significant.) The best available data consistently document that the principal factor in the decline of mainline denominations and the growth of evangelical congregations is church switching.

Similarly, claims that Americans, including evangelicals, are falling away from the faith contradict seven decades of survey research confirming that only 4 percent of Americans are atheists. If Americans are becoming more secular, why has this percentage remained unchanged ever since systematic and nationally representative data have been collected on the religious beliefs and practices of Americans?

Researchers and the media are on to something—that huge numbers of Americans have been going out the backdoors of many churches—but they have missed the meaning of this exodus because they haven't kept track of these individuals. The 44 percent of American adults who switched affiliation did not fall away from faith. In fact, their defections confirm that Americans care enough about their religion that they are willing to abandon churches they think have abandoned the faith. Indeed, as Rodney Stark notes in *What Americans Really Believe* (2008), Americans mostly change churches in search of a deeper, more compelling faith.

Another false conclusion frequently drawn from the 2008 election is that young evangelicals are leaving the “Christian right” and becoming social liberals. Early in that election year, ABC *World News* ran a story titled “Are Young Evangelicals Skewing More Liberal?” The report claimed that young evangelicals were moving to the left on social issues. (The subtitle was “Observers Say Younger Christians Have Longer, Broader List of Social Concerns.”) Similarly, the conservative *National Review* ran “Among Evangelicals, a Transformation,” an article that drew the same conclusion. Pundits on the left seem hopeful this is true; those on the right fear it may be true. But what do the data tell us?

There is some evidence for this contention. Analyzing data from the Baylor Religion Survey, Buster Smith and I found that young evangelicals were more likely than older evangelicals to think more should be done to protect the environment (57 percent versus 43 percent) and less likely to say that the government was doing too much (52 percent versus 61 percent).

We found no statistically significant difference between younger and older evangelicals on other moral and political issues, however. Younger evangelicals were, in fact, sometimes *more* conservative than their elders. More of the young believed that abortion of a child conceived as the result of rape was almost always or always wrong (61 percent versus 50 percent of older respondents), and more believed that stem cell research was almost always or always wrong (61 percent versus 51 percent). Younger evangelicals were no less conservative than their elders on marijuana use (72 percent versus 73 percent thought it almost always or always wrong); on homosexual marriage (85 percent versus 83 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed); on government spending on health care (63 percent versus 61 percent thought the government was doing too little); and on the war in Iraq (39 percent versus 37 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that going to war was right).

Young evangelicals also remained remarkably more conservative than their nonevangelical counterparts: Fifty-five percent of young evangelicals affiliated with the Republican Party, compared with only 21 percent of young nonevangelicals, and fully 70 percent of young evangelicals identified themselves as conservatives, compared with only 19 percent of young nonevangelicals.

Leading religious observers claim that evangelicalism is shrinking and the next generation of evangelicals is becoming less religious and more secular, but (as we social scientists like to say) these are empirical questions, and the evidence shows that neither of these claims is true. The number of evangelicals remains high, and their percentage among practicing Christians in America is, if anything, rising. Young evangelicals are not turning to more liberal positions on controversial social issues; in some cases they are becoming more conservative than their parents. Perhaps young evangelicals have become more socially aware and have a longer, broader list of social concerns, but they remain socially conservative.

Religion in America is always changing. What has not changed, however, is that religion in the United States remains vibrant and that Americans continue to identify themselves as religious—and to identify with religious institutions—even if those institutions are now more local than they were for the parents or grandparents of the present generation. Those who argue that a new American landscape is emerging—one in which the conservative evangelicalism of the past few decades is losing numbers and influence—are simply ignoring the data.

Byron Johnson is Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences and director of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University.

© Copyright FIRST THINGS 2011 | Visit www.FirstThings.com for more information.