

Evangelicalism – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 57

Rebecca Parker 00:07

Welcome back to the Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

John Stackhouse 00:26

Imagine an evangelical. He's white, middle aged, and middle class. He pastors a large Baptist Church in the American Midwest or Sunbelt. He also holds large meetings in various other cities, which combine a rally of the faithful with an invitation to newcomers to convert. He probably has his own radio or television show, or at least a popular podcast. He preaches frequently on current social controversies, and he aligns himself conspicuously with the political right. Now, this we should say, more carefully, is a stereotypical evangelical, at least in the minds of many. The truly typical evangelical in the world of the early 21st century looks very different. The typical evangelical of the 2020s is not a he. She is also not white, and she is probably a shopkeeper, clerk, or artisan, living somewhere in Sub Saharan Africa, or in a Latin American city. She has no public voice, but she sings in her church's choir, teaches the Sunday School class of one of her children, and leads a literacy workshop for poor women in her neighborhood. She rarely discusses social or political issues, but she beams when she relates how her husband's conversion ended his alcohol abuse on wild weekends. This is your statistically typical evangelical Christian. However, not only the news media, but also the historical accounts of evangelicalism are dominated by white, middle class, English-speaking, male preachers. Who are all the evangelicals then, really? Answering that question, is the chief goal of my new book.

John Stackhouse 02:24

I'm John Stackhouse, author of *Evangelicalism: A Very Short Introduction*. I'm an evangelical myself, born and raised in Canada and the United Kingdom among evangelical Christians, and educated among evangelicals in the United States as well. In fact, I became a scholar of evangelicalism fairly early on, writing a master's thesis under Professor Mark Noll, at the Wheaton College Graduate School outside Chicago, and then going down to the University of Chicago for my doctoral degree, where I wrote about Canadian evangelicalism in my doctoral dissertation under Martin Marty, which became my first book published by the University of Toronto Press. Since then, I published several more books about evangelical history, and even more on evangelical theology. I write about this because I'm intrigued about how this modern form of religion makes its way in the modern world. Evangelicalism is, at once, so in tune with modernity. It emphasizes individualism, and also a kind of corresponding emphasis on community. It has mass appeal. It features a kind of populist polity. It's very willing to technologically innovate. And it has an entrepreneurial dynamic, so consistent with the modern world. And yet it's in such tension with modernity. Jesus is Lord and Lord of all, everyone should convert to Christianity, and evangelicals evangelize. They believe in miracles. They trust the Bible as the very

Word of God written. How does such a modern religion in such tension with modernity make its way in the modern world?

John Stackhouse 04:20

That's key to my own investigation of evangelicalism. Now, I should say, whatever evangelicalism is not. It is not mere Trumpism. It's not even particularly conservative in its reflexive politics. Evangelicals over the last several 100 years have ranged right across the political spectrum, from defenders of conservative politics, including the monarchy, all the way over to evangelicals supporting left-wing labor movements and parties in the United Kingdom, in Canada, in Australia, and elsewhere. Evangelicalism, therefore, is not merely to be identified with the hard right in politics anywhere, even as many of evangelicals in some places have aligned themselves with authoritarian, right-wing presidents, whether in the United States or in Brazil. Evangelicalism is also not mere revivalism or mere enthusiasm. Revivalism has a kind of up and down dynamic. Sometimes it's here. Sometimes it's gone. We want it to come back. It ebbs and flows. Evangelicalism is a constant identity at a constant style of being a Christian. There is no time for an evangelical to undergo a lull, or a decline, from which he or she, or which a whole congregation, should be revived. Evangelicalism that is not serious, and constant, simply isn't evangelicalism. That's why it's erroneous to talk about evangelicals as simply people who talk about being evangelical themselves.

John Stackhouse 06:11

That's like saying somebody as an athlete who watches football games on Sundays. Evangelicalism is a participation sport, and its leaders, from John Wesley in the 18th century to Billy Graham in the 20th, would say that a nonpracticing evangelical is simply a contradiction in terms. And finally, evangelicalism is not conservative Protestantism, either. If you know about the Church of England, or the Anglican Church around the world, you know, there are prayer book Anglicans, who devote themselves to the same service every Sunday according to the words of the 16th century prayerbook. There are hidebound fundamentalists who have an established way of thinking and doing everything, and you jolly well better fall in line. There are traditionalist Lutherans, and so on. These are truly conservative Protestants. Evangelicalism or not that way. Evangelicals hold to a traditional center of the Christian faith, the center of Christian faith you could find in any world religions textbook that talks about the center of Christian commitment. But evangelicals have always been free to innovate and to allow each other to disagree on secondary and tertiary matters of the Christian faith, so long as those primary commitments were there, and the desire to cooperate in worthy mission was evident. Evangelicalism, then, I'm saying in this little book, is a style of modern Protestantism between a liberal form of Christianity, liberal meaning free to take or not, the Bible as God's word, tradition, as inspired, liberals are free to make their way in the world according to their best lights.

John Stackhouse 08:12

Evangelicals don't feel that way. Evangelicals feel they are bound to the authority of the Bible as God's Word written, and to the historic teachings of the Christian faith through the centuries. But evangelicalism, as I said, are not merely conservatives either, certainly not merely political conservatives, and not even reflexive conservatives when it comes to Christianity itself. Evangelicalism think that they've identified a kind of basic Christianity that everyone should hold to, and after that, they're relatively easy with difference and even divergence. So what is the core of evangelical identity?

I've borrowed from the well known work of English historian David Bebbington, and I've expanded on David's work to come up with six criteria taken together as a kind of constellation of traits. This is how I see evangelicalism today, and in fact, reaching right back to the 18th century revivals in Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America.

John Stackhouse 09:22

First, evangelicals are Trinitarian Christians. They believe in God, yes, but they emphasize also the divinity and ministry of Jesus Christ. But they also emphasize strongly the work of the Holy Spirit of God. Evangelicals, after all, are people who like to talk about being "born again." And we are born again by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Evangelicalism, are conversionist people; they believe in a life lived according to the power of God that is increasingly conformed to the pattern of Jesus Christ. How do we get the power for that kind of transformation? Again, from the Holy Spirit of God. And how does anyone convert to authentic Christianity? Not by dint of one's own will and will power, but by the power of God, working with our feeble faith to make us strong in our Christian commitment and our Christian walk. So evangelicals are Trinitarian

John Stackhouse 10:26

Evangelicals, secondly, are Biblicist. That trait won't come as a surprise to anyone. Evangelicals are Bible people. They revere the Bible, sometimes too much, as the very Word of God written. How do they revere it too much? Both sometimes by rituals, by which evangelicals won't allow another book to be placed on top of an actual Bible. But folkloric superstitions like this aside, evangelicals measure everything by what the Bible says and by the story the Bible tells. Thirdly, evangelicals are conversionist. They believe in the importance of individual conversion, and even at social, societal conversion. Evangelicals, that is, are not just interested in spiritual renewal, but in social reform. Evangelicals also believe that conversion takes place sometimes in moments of crisis, an instant of powerful change, but also overlong processes, what they call sanctification, the long term becoming more and more sanctified or holy or dedicated to God. So evangelicals are conversionist. Evangelicals are missional. They believe that God has given them a mission: to make disciples, as Jesus says, at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, "to make disciples of all the nations," teaching them to observe and to obey everything Christ commanded. Evangelicals have a mission to live out Christian ethics, in every respect, and, particularly, to try to help men and women become disciples of Jesus Christ.

John Stackhouse 12:11

Fifthly, evangelicals are populist. By this I mean, that evangelicals believed that leadership and the patterns of corporate life are validated by their spiritual fruitfulness, by the evidence that can be observed by one's fellow Christians. Evangelicals are not very impressed by inherited status, by worldly accomplishment. Evangelicals instead are impressed by spiritual efficacy, by the results of one's work. And if it seems that the Holy Spirit is working, then evangelicals bless that work, and bless those who seemed to be good at fostering it. This, of course, can sometimes lead to excessive power being concentrated in the hands of inappropriate people; it can lead to a kind of celebrity culture. And we've seen the downside of that culture in the fall from grace of evangelical leaders around the world. But the theological principle behind us is that God's Spirit works throughout the people of God and that one is blessed by God as one works in obedience to God. And so evangelicals believe that the priesthood of

all believers means, among other things, the ability to recognize the authenticity of what God is doing, and then to rally around those causes and those individuals who seem to be in the center of God's plan.

John Stackhouse 13:48

And finally, evangelicals are pragmatic. Evangelicals are busy people who like to get the job done, and whatever gets the job done, and whoever will help get the job done, are attractive to evangelicals. That's what helps evangelicals cooperate with each other over denominational divisions to get done what they all agree needs doing. Evangelicalism is growing all over the world. It's not growing very much in its places of origin--Europe, the United Kingdom, North America--but it is booming almost everywhere else: Sub Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia, throughout Latin America. Evangelicalism is currently shaping national life in Korea, in Brazil, and Nigeria. Increasingly, it will be affecting the life even of such unlikely places and societies as China. Even Indonesia. There are even a million evangelicals currently in Iran. Evangelicalism may be good, it may be bad. That's for other books to decide. But it is undoubtedly important. That's why I think it's worth a serious look. And a serious listen. Thanks for listening here.

Rebecca Parker 15:06

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