

Bad news evangelicals: Reactionary evangelicalism needs to be born again

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

For a practice to qualify as “evangelical” in the functional sense means first of all that it communicates news. It says something particular that would not be known and could not be believed were it not said. Second, it must mean that this “news” is attested as good; it comes across to those whom it addresses as helping, as saving, and as shalom. —John Howard Yoder

Since its apogee in the 1950s, American mainline Protestantism has been in decline on many fronts. Its church membership rolls have steadily dwindled. A number of its seminaries are dying. Mainline Protestantism is a tradition that knows it is in trouble.

American evangelicalism, on the other hand, shows strengths in all the areas where the mainline has stumbled. Membership in evangelical churches has swollen. Its seminaries are the largest in North America. Its leaders have become regular advisers to the White House, its lobbyists the most powerful religious lobbyists on Capitol Hill. Evangelicalism is a tradition that does not know it is in trouble. But I think it is, in fact, profoundly in trouble.

I say this in light of the recent forced resignation of Richard Cizik as vice president of governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals. In 2007 Cizik was roundly condemned by some conservative evangelical political activists because of his attempts to raise concerns about global warming among evangelicals. Late last year Cizik in a radio interview spoke cautiously in favor of the legalization of civil unions (though not marriage) for gays. The consequent fire storm resulted in Cizik’s resignation.

What the Cizik episode reveals, and not for the first time, is conservative evangelicalism’s deeply reactionary tendencies. In wider religious and national

circles, the position Cizik took on gays—and his other views, such as his confession that he voted for Barack Obama—are hardly extreme or radical. Truth be told, they are not anathema to many American Christians who own the name evangelical. Yet the NAE has had to officially stigmatize Cizik and these positions because an element of its constituency will not abide them.

Modern North American evangelicalism began in reaction. Those who embraced the term *fundamentalist* reacted against late-19th-century biblical criticism and biology, removing themselves from denominations and other Christian bodies that were less alarmed by such developments. Reacting against perceived liberalism in the realm of political involvement, fundamentalists separated themselves from the social gospel so decisively that they removed almost any hint of social dynamism from the biblical gospel.

In the middle of the last century, neoevangelicals such as Harold Ockenga and Carl Henry sought to nudge fundamentalists (and what we now know as conservative evangelicals) in a more socially aware direction. Yet the movement retained an ongoing vulnerability to its reactionary impulse. Evangelicalism (then and now predominantly white) was slow to support civil rights for blacks. Anticommunism was long a hot node of evangelical galvanization.

A newfangled dispensationalist eschatology (promulgated first in the 19th century) has regularly cycled into prominence through the aegis of the movement, repeatedly reincarnated to react to changed threats. Hal Lindsey proclaimed it in *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s and tailored the Christian gospel to resist the Soviet Union, European unification and the ecumenical movement. In the 1990s, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins retooled dispensationalism to rescue American conservative Christians from Arabic terrorists, one-world government and moral decline. Pop apocalypticism aside, playing defense has long been a major mode of discourse for evangelical media—arming the faithful against religious cults, then the New Age movement, then feminism, then secular humanism, and so on and so on.

Still, evangelicalism remains wealthy by any number of quantitative and sociological measurements. How can I suggest that it is in trouble?

It is in deep trouble because it faces a significant cultural and generational shift. Identifying itself with the wedge tactics of the political right, which is now falling (at least for a time) out of power, the movement cannot easily shake the image of being

primarily negative and destructive. Indicators show that it is losing attractiveness not only among unconverted fellow Americans, but among its own young.

More significantly, evangelicalism is in deep trouble because the gospel really is good news, and reactionaries are animated by bad news, by that which they stand against. Undoubtedly Jesus Christ faced and even provoked conflict. But he embraced conflict as a path or means to the health and liberation—the salvation—of the world. And he hoped for salvation even, perhaps especially, for his enemies. If evangelicalism is innately reactionary, then it can follow Christ only by being born again.