

You've heard of evangelicals, but just who are they?

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February 15, 2012

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(RNS) Evangelicals have been in the news a lot lately, from the Denver Broncos' Tim Tebow and his take-a-knee prayers to the Texas pastor and his wife who spent 24 hours in bed preaching the virtues of sex in Christian marriages.

Mitt Romney is struggling to gain evangelical support for his presidential bid, and Rick Santorum -- a Catholic -- won the blessing of more than 100 evangelical pastors gathered at a Texas ranch.

So who are these Christians? What do they have in common and how are they different from other believers? Even famed preacher Billy Graham wasn't sure of the answer.

"Actually, that's a question, I'd like to ask somebody, too," Graham told religion reporter Terry Mattingly in a 1987 interview. "The lines (have) become blurred. ... You go all the way from the extreme fundamentalists to the extreme liberals and, somewhere in between, there are the evangelicals."

So here's a primer about these religious types, their history, faith and politics:

Who is an evangelical?

Technically, all Christians are, according to the Religion Newswriters Association's Religion Stylebook. The word comes from the Greek "evangelion," which means "good news" or "gospel." And all who claim to follow Jesus Christ feel obligated to share his gospel.

But the term "evangelical" has come to refer mostly to a type of Protestant, explains Pastor Corey Hodges of New Pilgrim Baptist Church in Kearns, Utah: Evangelicals

believe in the Trinity; that the Bible alone is the inerrant and infallible word of God; that salvation is by grace alone through faith and not accomplished by human effort or achievement; and that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, and his death and resurrection were the payment for human sin.

Notre Dame historian Mark Noll, author of "Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction," recommends a wider description, one penned by British historian David Bebbington. Bebbington identified an emphasis on the "new birth" as a life-changing experience of God and a concern for sharing the faith. The trouble, Noll notes, is that "these evangelical traits have never by themselves yielded cohesive, institutionally compact, or clearly demarcated groups of Christians, but (rather) ... identify a large family of churches and religious enterprises."

In other words, "evangelical" is not the name of a single church. Indeed, says John Morehead, director of the Western Institute for Intercultural Studies in Salt Lake City, "evangelicalism is a movement that encompasses a variety of denominations and independent traditions."

Mattingly, director of the Washington Journalism Center at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, expands the definition further, saying "evangelicals have always been a cultural niche/commercial product kind of thing. No set doctrines."

What sets evangelicals apart from fundamentalists?

Noll: The serious answer is the 'eye of the beholder.' I believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ, which makes me a fundamentalist in the eyes of some people, but I take an occasional glass of wine and don't worry about evolution, which means that, for many people, I can't be a fundamentalist.

Hodges: Fundamentalists generally believe that culture is evil and corrosive. Their views usually result in isolation from the culture and/or bigotry. Evangelicals believe the culture is redeemable and can and should be impacted by Christians.

Who came first, evangelicals or fundamentalists?

The 1910 Presbyterian General Assembly declared that all ministerial candidates had to subscribe "to five fundamental doctrines," according to a recent article in Christian History magazine, "the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the Virgin Birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the bodily resurrection of

Christ, and the historicity of the biblical miracles."

For the next decades, the magazine said, a battle ensued in nearly every mainline Protestant body between fundamentalists and "those who wanted to remain 'tolerant' and 'open-minded' in response to modern learning."

Fundamentalists lost.

Eventually, a new group emerged, calling themselves "the New Evangelicals," the article said, hoping "to distance themselves from the anti-intellectual, militant, culture-shunning traits that had begun to characterize much of fundamentalism."

How are evangelicals different from Pentecostals?

Pentecostals are a particular subgroup of evangelicals, who believe in the same basic doctrines but emphasize "the work of the Holy Spirit," including healing, speaking in tongues, and prophecy.

Hodges: They tend to focus more on existential and experiential faith. Pentecostal theology generally emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit, while other evangelicals focus more on the work of Christ.

Why don't some evangelicals think Mormons are Christian?

It stems, mainly, from the Mormon view of God and Jesus and the Mormon belief in extra scriptures, which are essentially the same objections that Catholic, Orthodox and liberal Protestants have.

Evangelicals and traditional Christians believe in the Trinity -- that God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one substance. Mormons believe God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are separate beings. Evangelicals also heed the Bible as the sole word of God, while Latter-day Saints believe in the Bible and other scriptures, including the faith's signature Book of Mormon.

Noll: I'm not sure all evangelicals would say categorically that all Mormons are not Christians. But the prominence given to revelation through Joseph Smith (and not just the Bible), doctrines like the materiality of God, rites that seem strange and unbiblical (temple rites and early day polygamy), and (sociologically speaking) the separated nature of Mormon religious life are all issues for evangelicals.

Morehead: Mormons and evangelicals approach the definition of Christian very differently. Evangelicals, with their emphasis on correct doctrine as developed within the history of the church and its various creeds, see Mormonism as presenting something quite different, and at odds, with the historic creedal statements of Christendom.

Can Catholics be evangelicals?

Hodges: No. The Protestant and, ultimately, the evangelical movement arose from frustration with the Catholic Church's theology. Some Catholic theology runs contrary to that of evangelicals. For instance, confession of sins to the priest runs contrary to the evangelical belief of the priesthood of all believers.

Mattingly: Using the word accurately, no. It is a Protestant term. Catholics can, of course, be evangelists.

Morehead: Typically Catholics are not evangelical in that they not only accept the authority of the Bible, but also give a prominent place to the authority of the church, the pope, and church tradition.

Noll: Yes, maybe. Fifty years ago, 'evangelical Protestant' and 'Roman Catholic' were mutually exclusive, but now there is considerably more overlap. Many traditional evangelicals would continue to insist that a Catholic simply cannot be an evangelical. But there are others, even quite conservative, who would say otherwise.