

# Will success spoil evangelicalism?

## Changes that come with prosperity:

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by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

"We're in the Money!" announces the cover of *Christianity Today* (June 12). "How Did Evangelicals Get So Wealthy, and What Has It Done to Us?" the subhead asks. Michael S. Hamilton's lead article defines the "us" as the parachurch organizations which, by Hamilton's estimate, have combined budgets of \$22 billion. Both he and, in another article, John Stackhouse Jr. wrestle with the meaning and ethics of having such wealth. Still needing to be assessed, however, is what having so much money means not just for evangelical ministries, but for evangelicals themselves.

The importance of evangelicalism in the nation's spiritual economy is clear when one considers the self-identified religious "preferences" of U.S. citizens. One-fourth are Catholic; slightly less than one-fourth are mainstream Protestant; one-fourth are Jews, Muslims, Mormons, African-American Protestants, Orthodox Christians, "others" and "none" or "no preference"; slightly more than one-fourth are evangelicals.

Evangelicalism includes self-described evangelicals, Pentecostals, fundamentalists, Southern Baptists and conservative Protestants such as Missouri Synod Lutherans, Nazarenes, the Christian Reformed and the Salvation Army. Variations between and among these groups are enormous, of course. Numerous social and economic classes and endless theological diversities are represented. But taken together, evangelicals make up a distinctive and evolving cohort.

Evangelicalism has generated its own chroniclers and critics, and may not need much help from outsiders like me. At evangelical gatherings, which are universally hospitable, I am introduced as "our guest nonevangelical." I have to remind my hosts that I am probably the only person in the room who belongs to a church body with the word "evangelical" in it; that we Lutherans (and Anglicans, etc.) had the

original patent on that word; and that many of us are borderline or crossover sorts. Still, I speak as an outsider. Yet outsiders can ask important questions. We would like to know how evangelicalism's drastic shift in what its self-critics call "cultural accommodation" has affected the lives and souls of evangelicals and the soul of evangelicalism(s).

To launch such an inquiry, I present 11 "from's" and "to's" that evangelicalism has traveled—all of which admit exceptions but, I believe, are substantiable over all. These might form a framework upon which further attention and research—some of it to build on studies already begun—can be erected.

- *From the religion of the disinherited and ascetic Protestantism to prosperity*

What has happened as those who made up what H. Richard Niebuhr in 1927 called "the religion of the disinherited" entered the economic mainstream and rose within and, often, above it? Recently a British visitor asked me to guide his tour of American religion. Knowing that much of historic evangelicalism had represented what the classics called "ascetic Protestantism," he asked me where to find examples of it today. In turn-of-the-millennium evangelicalism, I could show him only "nonascetic" Protestantism.

- *From otherworldliness to this worldliness*

Marxists and capitalists alike used to write off evangelicals for being otherworldly—advocates of deferred benefits, of "pie in the sky by and by." It would be bad faith to suggest that contemporary evangelicals' profession of faith in a life to come or in another world is bad faith. But otherworldliness takes on new coloration when those who profess it are among the worldliest citizens around.

- *From truth claims based on unpopularity to truth claims based on popular success*

The "infusion" (if you like it) or "infection" (if you don't) of wealth- and success-mindedness has produced a transvaluation of values. At midcentury, culturally beleaguered evangelicals often made the claim that "you can tell we represent the truth, because Jesus spoke of a little flock and Paul spoke of the despised of the world, and we are little and despised." Now evangelicals claim numbers and prosperity as the test of truth. After the 15.9-million-member Southern Baptist Convention recently passed resolutions designed to mark itself off from other

churches and cultural elements, the main drafter of the new creed boastfully claimed that it was precisely these resolutions, these creedal elements, that contributed to the burgeoning prosperity of this denomination. In effect: that there are so many of us, and that we are so powerful, must mean that we are faithful and true. That is but one example of many 180-degree turns, flip-flops and about-faces in the evangelical cohort during the time of its prosperity.

- *From theories of growth by strictness to growth by advertised benefits*

The drastic shift to “We’re in the Money!” evangelicalism is causing social science theorists to review their understandings of how the various evangelical groups market religion. That potential converts make “rational choices” in a religious marketplace has been accepted since Anglos arrived in the colonies in 1607. What was or should be marketed in various cultures remains in dispute. Two decades ago Dean Kelley, in his landmark book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, started a trend by observing that the most strict, world-denying, exacting churches—churches that called for the most sacrifice at the expense of cultural status—prospered.

That is hardly the case today. Some leftover separatist fundamentalists in the evangelical camp may make strict demands, but one does not get the impression that the people running Bob Jones University, for example, are demanding sacrifice. Students there like the way of life cherished and enforced by the university. The Jonesians are offering education that will lead graduates directly to the market and the world of media. Do the prospering megachurches preach hellfire and damnation, or lead their people out of the world? No. They build racquet-ball courts and swimming pools and offer courses on slimming and investing. Those who offer, not those who demand, prosper in market-era religion.

- *From imminent-end-of-the-world action to multigenerational investment*

Speaking of otherworldliness, one can observe a dramatic change on the apocalyptic front, as evidenced in the recent millennial observances. Once again, it would be bad faith to accuse premillennialists of bad faith, if by that we mean accusing them of no longer believing in an imminent, catastrophic second coming of Christ. The fact that they produce fiction that tops the secular best-seller lists, almost all of it apocalyptic, suggests that the charm remains. But that fiction is as preoccupied with high-tech artifacts used and cherished by the faithful as it is with the woeful fate

awaiting wrong-believers.

Meanwhile, the shift into politics—precisely by the most apocalyptic and millennial minded—reveals how cultural accommodation has changed the heart of the teaching. Today’s evangelicalism is known for its concern about the family, the grandchildren, the nation, the media projection of images that will shape the short and long futures. But why bother about the generations if the end is really near?

- *From private to public Protestantism in politics*

Shortly after midcentury I distinguished between then public Protestantism, a.k.a. “the mainstream” in its characteristic flow, and then private Protestantism, a.k.a. evangelicalism, which was only into soul-saving, separatism and the like. By 1976, dubbed “The Year of the Evangelical,” it was clear that some kind of musical chairs game was going on. The evangelicals had switched and, in a way, “won.” They had “gone public,” if with different nuances of theology and more blunt instruments of practice than Catholics, mainliners and Jews could muster. That the switch has occurred is obvious; how it has been systematically supported remains to be more fully investigated.

- *From “traditional” worship to “contemporary” entertainment*

At midcentury, Catholics or mainstream Protestants’ experiments with folk or rock or theater or dance—any “celebration” that might get out of hand—was considered to be frivolous, trivializing, even blasphemous by all evangelical groups but the Pentecostal churches, then still disdained within the rest of evangelicalism. Today it is precisely in the most successful and well-off evangelical churches that these forms of “contemporary” entertainment dominate, while the “traditional” more likely gets relegated to the precincts of the mainline, once described as liberal or modernist.

- *From disapproving of popular culture to adopting it*

When rock was born evangelicals massively opposed it. The swiveling hips, the sexually provocative gestures, the in-your-face costumery and staging made evangelicals regard rock as the devil’s music. Then, realizing that their churches would lose their youth if they continued to relegate youth’s music to the devil, evangelicals encouraged rock groups that changed their often-unintelligible lyrics about human love to some equally indistinct words about Jesus. The postures, gestures, costumes and settings that had been regarded as devilish were now

sanctified into a nearly \$1 billion annual business.

- *From an unadhered-to cultural agenda to new norms of what is acceptable*

No one can plausibly accuse the TV and radio preachers, the editors, the savants of evangelicalism, of being simple culture-affirmers. They rather consistently attack the Supreme Court, “the liberals,” “the media,” the pornographers, the feminists, the pro-abortionists, the homosexuals and the like. But this list is strangely different from the moral agenda that characterized evangelicals a half-century ago.

Back then Sabbath-breaking, drinking, gambling and divorce were the big four morality topics. One no longer hears Sunday-closing legislation proposed from evangelical pulpits. Now that so many women have added work outside the home to work inside the home, the preacher often finds congregants heading for K-mart or the supermarket or Nordstrom on Sunday. The preacher and his sons hurry off to the pro football game. Drinking? Like Catholics and mainline Protestants, evangelicals score alcoholic excess and tout moderation, but teetotalism is seldom urged from the pulpit. Gambling? How can the preacher preach against it when his congregation profits and the local economy is enhanced by legalized riverboat and casino gambling?

Divorce? When the president of your denomination, the members of your family, and your favorite evangelical celebrities divorce at the same rate as their liberal and secular counterparts, you are far more likely to treat the subject as a tragedy than as a sin. Evangelical publishers produce books, mainly for women, on how to live after the tragedy of divorce. We are all sinners, these books say. Your spouse and, to some extent, you as well have sinned, or at least made mistakes, but there is forgiveness, and life goes on.

For now, most evangelicals draw the line at abortion, euthanasia and homosexual expression. Will preaching on these subjects change as cultural accommodation changes, or have evangelicals at last found the absolute lines and boundaries to which they will adhere?

- *From antiseccularization to religious change*

Mainline Protestants made similar accommodations a century ago, when they adapted to the new norms of a culture they had largely shaped. Something similar happened in Catholicism after the G.I. Bill and Vatican II, and after many Catholics

moved into the middle class. But the evangelical case has been the most sudden, drastic and disguised.

Sociologist J. Milton Yinger used to argue that what often got called “secularization” was really religious change under the symbols of nonchange. These symbols remain in evangelicalism, notably in adherence to concepts such as “biblical inerrancy” (though not all evangelicals hold to these). Their Jesus has taken on very different cultural guises as he switched from offering comfort in the “religion of the disinherited” to proclaiming “family values.”

- *From frugality to “supply-side” religious marketing*

One need only read the advertisements in evangelical magazines to note this shift. There is a product for every potential customer, and the promise of success if one purchases this or that evangelical product. There is much boasting about the size of funds raised. Evangelical bookstores overflow with self-help books. The last things one would expect to see featured in such bookstores are works on classic themes of Christian faith, such as the Trinity or the incarnation.

So evangelicalism has placed its bets, and they are, at least in the present cultural dispensation, paying off. As a fellow Christian I have no reason to detract from the half century of evangelical achievement, and many reasons to applaud many evangelical thrusts. Without them, one wonders whether American Christianity would not have followed Western European Christianity’s decent into indifference and apathy. The evangelicals, moreover, have often pushed things onto the agenda (e.g., “family” and “teaching about religion” in public schools) that other citizens, thanks to evangelical prodding, sometimes have had to take up in different ways.

As a historian and, marginally, a social scientist, however, I join the Hamiltons and Stackhouses, applying their questioning and criticisms of evangelical ministries to evangelicals and evangelicalism as such. In the March 1999 *Atlantic Monthly*, Harvey Cox wrote provocatively, and a bit impishly, about “The Market as God.” The end of the Soviet Union, of effective radical socialisms and the ideologies that propped them up, and the “working” of the market led to a new situation throughout the West, and particularly here. The move to the victory of the market was made without much ideology. Not many are reading Calvin or Adam Smith or even the more recent Milton Friedman to gain guidance or to legitimate it. But the market’s success has forced us to develop personal and social philosophies relating to it.

There seems little point in wishing for a world in which the market did not prevail. At least for now, it is part of the air we breathe, the atmosphere in which we move. It offers mixed blessings, but blessings nevertheless. Evangelicals and other Christians do often address the downsides of market thinking. Doing so is difficult, since we are all part of the world the market has created, and many of us have helped create the world in which it has prevailed. Theological thinking about the big change is beginning to emerge, but books on this subject remain in the minority among those written by theological ethicists.

Michael Hamilton quotes the cautionary words of John Wesley, who was “present at the creation” of what became evangelicalism. “Wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches!” So far so good. “And riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity.” Agreed, say the scriptures. “Now, if there be no way to prevent this, Christianity is inconsistent with itself and, of consequence, cannot stand, cannot continue long among any people; since, where it generally prevails, it saps its own foundation.” If evangelicals can work with that set of assumptions and apply them to their own success, they may well have lessons to teach the rest of North American Christianity, where the moves Wesley talked about have long been in place.