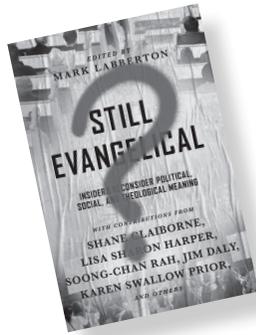


# Book Review



*Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Mark Labberton, ed. [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018], 180 pages, ISBN: 9780830845378)

## Whither Evangelical?

The current political moment in the United States has brought to light profound differences within US American evangelicalism. *Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* is structured for readers to benefit from a lively debate among evangelical leaders of various political stripes. The essays draw attention to those differences and also to our deeper commitments as evangelicals.

For editor Mark Labberton, the *evangel*—the gospel itself—puts a troubled, divided, and compromised evangelicalism “at risk.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, he turns the focus toward what evangelicalism will become, even if the general pattern of the essays draws

1. Mark Labberton, *Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 1, 2.

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on evangelicalism's roots in history, theology, practices, identity, or ethics. The fact that the book's title is a question reflects the disillusionment of many evangelicals who seek to distance themselves from the politics of other evangelicals.

The essays do not eschew the profound differences among evangelicals that are the cause of such disillusionment. The authors approach their differences and write side by side respectfully and productively. Reviewing *Still Evangelical?* is challenging not because of the politics but because the diverse perspectives represented make it difficult to generalize about the book. The authors themselves are diverse. Of the twelve contributors, four are from immigrant families. Five are white males. Authors represent Latino, African, Asian, multiethnic, and Anglo-dominant evangelical ministries, though the ministry context of some may not align with their personal ethnicity. Their politics are diverse: two or three voted for Donald Trump.

Two generalizations seem safe. First, all the authors work in evangelical institutions in the United States. Second, they seek a critical path through the cultural moment to chart an appropriate course for evangelical commitments.

At least two authors are tempted to answer the title question in the negative. Nevertheless, like the rest, they want an evangelicalism guided by its historical, doctrinal, and practical roots. Three take advantage of a location outside of white American Christianity to call white evangelicals to account.

Lisa Sharon Harper, pointing out that white evangelicals were the most cohesive group that voted for Donald Trump, calls out the dominance of white evangelicals who should "stop trying to be god...and join the rest of humanity."<sup>2</sup> Evangelicals must

2. Lisa Sharon Harper, "Will Evangelicalism Surrender?" in *ibid.*, 30.

confront evil not as the face of an empire<sup>3</sup> that confuses acts of compassion with work for justice. For evangelicals to decolonize theology will require repentance and action on behalf of injustice's victims.<sup>4</sup>

Sandra Maria Van Opstal identifies problems that white evangelicals create by practices of exclusion: "White evangelicals wouldn't say directly that they have nothing to learn from Latinx, African American, Asian American, or Native scholars—but they don't notice...that they assign books by men in their leadership classes...[and] exclude voices of women and communities of color from my education."<sup>5</sup> The inevitable result is that "When Latinx hear the word *evangelical*, they think of someone else. I don't know any people in my community, brown or black, on the west side of Chicago that would call themselves evangelical. Some might say, 'We're not evangelical, *somos evangélicos*'...it's a different expression of faith."<sup>6</sup>

Soon-Chah Rah is clear that "American Christian exceptionalism assumes the primacy and supremacy of American Christianity over and against other expressions of Christianity."<sup>7</sup> He also has something to say about how evangelicalism is becoming what it will be next: "To move toward a future evangelicalism marked by an integrated and healthy diversity, the current captivity of American evangelicalism to a Western, white cultural dominance must be overcome."<sup>8</sup> He does not just call for, but announces, the end of "the cultural captivity of evangelical theology to a form drawn from a particular context and not from Scripture and from the person and work of Jesus."<sup>9</sup>

3. *Ibid.*, 29.

4. *Ibid.*, 28.

5. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, "Remaining to Reform," in *ibid.*, 126.

6. *Ibid.*, 134.

7. Soon-Chah Rah, "Evangelical Futures," in *ibid.*, 83.

8. *Ibid.*, 82.

9. *Ibid.*, 87.

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It might be tempting to think that such calls to accountability stem from ideological commitments rather than from the positionality of authors outside of *white* evangelicalism. Each of these writers continues to identify as evangelical and, as contributors to *Still Evangelical?*, they do so alongside more “mainstream” writers, some of whom are among the 81% of white evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump and are supportive of his call to Make America Great Again (MAGA).

Both MAGA and the call to evangelical faithfulness invoke historical imagination as the starting point for renewal. Imagined historical and theological roots of evangelicalism figure prominently throughout the entire book. A certain continuity in the development of evangelicalism is assumed: US American evangelicals appropriate and transform original British evangelical ideas, while global evangelicalism continues to appropriate and transform the same underlying commitments received from Europeans and US Americans. In this telling, the discontinuity between “evangelical” and *evangélico* cited by Van Opstal somehow gets lost. But something else is also lost—the awareness that evangelicals beyond the evangelical homelands have a great impact not only on the idea of what constitutes evangelicalism but also on the future of the cosmos.

The trouble with *Still Evangelical?* is that it fails to decolonize the idea of evangelicalism. “Whence evangelicalism” is offered as a sourcebook for “whither evangelicalism” as if evangelicalism were the result of ideas and not the outcome of actions taken by people in a particular time and location. Even the essayists who position themselves outside white evangelicalism to call their fellow US American evangelicals to account draw on an imagined evangelical moment that was visionary in its origins and produced concepts and principles useful for every age and in every place. They fail to decolonize when the renewal that they call for, and that should bless the world, first

requires that the evangelical homeland become more faithful and *return* to faithfulness. Even Mark Labberton's call for revival, while true to Fuller Seminary's roots, also gives the appearance that the work of the *evangel* among US American evangelicals is a necessary step for healing evangelicalism's differences. However, a decolonizing approach does not focus on resolving difference.

A decolonial perspective recognizes that the primary influence of European and US American evangelicals on global evangelicalism is not the transmission of ideas. Their influence has been very material and concrete. White American (and European) evangelicals have exercised powerful (and insistent) influence over global evangelicalism through their missionary outreach. US American and British evangelicals actively supported the emergence of many church movements around the world that identify today as evangelicals.

A decolonial perspective watches for the influence of the formerly colonized over the future. Global evangelicalism itself is already the fruit of decisions by non-white, non-Westerners to follow Christ. They identified as evangelicals *for their own reasons*. They are not simply reenacting (or even contextualizing) some imagined set of timeless, placeless evangelical principles, this time in non-Western contexts. It is not the same old script with new actors. In the global advance of the *evangel*, new communities of disciples enter the unfinished gospel story, locate themselves in it, and carry it forward toward fulfillment of the promise.

A decolonial perspective does not know if Western evangelicals will get "back on track." One result of the move of the Spirit that draws outsiders into the church is new positionalities from which disciples participate in the unfolding story of God fulfilling his promise to Abraham. Indeed, a decolonial perspective recognizes that God has placed new people at the table. New

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leaders will expect evangelicals in the West to answer for what we have done with the gospel.

I have experienced these processes personally. I am a classic evangelical. I grew up in a mainline Protestant church and made my choice to give my life to Christ at a Billy Graham crusade. Movements like Lausanne '74 consolidated my identity as an evangelical, created a space for evangelicals to think and work alongside each other independent of our denominational affiliation, and shaped our vision of global mission. I became part of a growing and lively evangelical undercurrent that flowed against a tide of theological liberalism that we characterized as weak on biblical authority, strong on social causes, and weak on the lordship of Christ.

While still in my twenties, I left the US American evangelical scene and joined a different one. Latin American evangelicalism was more conservative than my own in both doctrine and practice, and it was growing fast.<sup>10</sup> I became an *evangélico*.

*Evangélico* has never quite been equivalent to “evangelical” in the USA. This is an area of difference that never resolves. Unlike “evangelical” in the USA, *evangélico* does not refer to a movement *within* Protestantism. In the USA, Protestants (and some Catholics) became “evangelicals” when we “accepted Jesus.” My conversion was to a more personal spirituality and a more literalist approach to the Bible. My social location changed very little. My testimony tells about turning from my sin and deciding to follow Jesus and invites others to join me.

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10. See John Maust, *Cities of Change: Urban Growth and God's People in Ten Latin American Cities* (Coral Gables, FL: Latin America Mission, 1984); William R. Read, Víctor M. Monteroso, and Harmon A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

However, for most Latin Americans, becoming *evangélico* requires conversion to another religion. It often results in a dramatic and visible change in social location. *Testimonios* are given inside the *evangélico* community—in the church—to tell stories about God’s intervention in the lives of community members and for the purpose of learning together how to live biblically.<sup>11</sup>

Latin American *evangélicos* are not a Latinx version of US American evangelicals. *Evangélico* is also an adjective used in reference to churches, denominations, and movements that have never existed in the USA. Some who include *evangélico* in their name are impossible for US American evangelicals to understand or accept.<sup>12</sup> I suspect that there may have been *evangélicos* on both sides of some guerrilla conflicts in revolutionary Latin America.

The book of Revelation, written in true decolonial fashion, indicates that it is not our identity, evangelical or otherwise, that is at stake in the gospel, but rather the future of humanity and of creation. Possibilities for blessing, justice, peace, and beauty for all families on earth are in the balance.<sup>13</sup> The writer is directed

11. According to Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *testimonio* is received into a community gathering where Scripture, tradition, and experience come together and is validated “by the discernment of community understanding.” A community theology emerges in everyday life and is turned into stories of faith. See Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Testimonios: Relato, agencia y la mujer latina,” in *Vivir y servir en el exilio: Lecturas teológicas de la experiencia latina en los Estados Unidos*, eds. Jorge E. Maldonado and Juan F. Martínez (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2008), 129.

12. See John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 14, 15, 201, for how “prosperity-gospel” and “charismatic” evangelicals challenge one North American leader’s ability to include certain Latin American *evangélicos* within the limits of what he feels is biblical.

13. The purpose of Revelation seems to be to encourage this new people of God to stay faithful because the pathway forward is a shared project with the “one who is seated on the throne” and the Lamb who, with the participation of this new people, will fulfill the promised blessing to all families on earth (Ge 12:3, 28:14; Ps 22:27, 28; Ac 3:25). In John’s prophecy, a difficult but ultimately victorious pathway is configured for those who follow the Lamb and bet their lives on the hope that the Son of David (Rev 3:7, 5:5, 22:16) will eventually prevail as the “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5) and hold all other rulers accountable.

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by the Spirit to address new church communities in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) where the Son of Man manifests his redeeming presence and entrusts the future to gentiles (i.e., “the nations”). Gentiles are not mere recipients of a gospel *message*. The new people of God come from the nations and, rather than reproducing Israel’s history, they carry its story forward. John signifies this by using Old Testament labels with changed meanings. New labels are not necessary, perhaps because labels signify difference and tend to deny participation to those who do not bear the label.

Evangelicalism is actually a newcomer in this unfolding story and has introduced new elements into it, reinterpreting both “gospel” and “church.” According to Karen Swallow Prior, evangelicalism first appeared in Britain in the 1730s.<sup>14</sup> Many people and movements who currently claim the label “evangelical” do not act like or believe the same as the British founders and, very likely, they would not be recognized by those early evangelicals as being part of the same movement. Similarly, evangelicals around the world today practice their faith in many different ways and will introduce new elements into what evangelicalism will become next. Given the emergence of evangelical movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the contributions they bring will differ and even conflict with each other. These differences will make it possible, in a decolonial moment, for us all to be accountable to each other rather than all to the evangelical homeland. Issues of faithfulness to evangelical principles that play such a role in *Still Evangelical?* may end up being overshadowed as the numbers grow, as the geography expands, as new practices and even beliefs of newcomers are added to evangelical identity. Newcomers will transpose, transform, and diversify

14. Karen Swallow Prior, “Why I Am an Evangelical,” in *Still Evangelical*, 32.

evangelicalism and may question the most basic assumptions of what evangelicalism is.

In a decolonized context, the question of “whither evangelical” will have many answers. The focus of this review has been on the many *answerers* to the question. They are the ones who will exercise a variety of influences on futures of the gospel, including influence over the outcome of the present fraught moment in US American evangelicalism. Our counterparts, evangelicals around the globe, will also be interested in the impact of their faithfulness on us. They may even pray against us. They may force us to face our issues. They may point out *their* issues with *our* commitments. In mid-April of this year, Valdir Steuernagel, a Brazilian pastor—*evangélico*—with global influence, attended a meeting in Wheaton, IL of fifty primarily US American evangelicals on the topic: “The Future of American Evangelicalism.” In his comments, published in *Ultimato*, he reflected that, rather than strong and influential, the evangelical movement is fragile and too quickly loses its way. Together with other believers in other places, but in community and committed together to the Lord Jesus, we offer ourselves, in hopes that we might be able to testify to him and be worthy of his calling.<sup>15</sup>

Evangelicalism has become a global phenomenon, capable of questioning, isolating, and redefining US American and European evangelicalism but, more importantly, capable of defining and living out its own future. Are you still evangelical?

Timothy Halls

Executive Coordinator of Martureo, the Brazilian Center for Missiological Reflection

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15. Valdir Steuernagel, “O futuro do evangelicalismo,” *Ultimato*, July 10, 2019, <http://www.ultimato.com.br/conteudo/o-futuro-do-evangelicalismo#steuernagel>.