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**Just Who Are Evangelicals, Anyway?**

By Freddy Davis

During this political season, there's a lot of talk about "the evangelical vote." While the focus of evangelicals is not on politics, they do tend to vote somewhat as a block based on their preference for a point of view that corresponds to the teachings of the Bible. As such, they are an identifiable group, and political parties tend to target identifiable groups in order to get their votes. But exactly what is an evangelical?

**Who are Evangelicals?**

The term "evangelical" comes from the Greek word euangelion, which means "good news" or "gospel." The word is used primarily to refer to the central message of the Christian faith – that is, the belief that Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity, and that those who believe in Him can have eternal life.

There are various organizations that have a particular interest in serving evangelicals, and these special groups have attempted to provide a clear definition of who they are trying to cater to.

One group is the National Association of Evangelicals. They have defined evangelicals based on four categories of belief

1. Conversionism - the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a life long process of following Jesus
2. Biblicism - a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority
3. Activism - the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts

4. Crucicentrism - a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity

LifeWay Research is another entity that has defined evangelicals. Their approach is to more directly express what evangelicals believe. They have identified four key beliefs.

1. The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
2. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
3. Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
4. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

Christian pollster George Barna lists two broad categories that define evangelicals:

1. They have a commitment to biblical authority.
2. They place a strong emphasis on salvation through Jesus Christ

Recently Barna has done some polling that indicates evangelicalism in America is breaking down. Not only has he found that the percentage of self-identified Christians in the country is way down, but the number of people who specifically identify as evangelicals is down, as well. But that is not the worst part. A deeper finding is that people who self-identify as evangelical are identifying with that label while gradually stepping away from the actual beliefs of evangelicalism. These are typically people who have adopted the tenets of some form of "liberal Christian theology," and no longer fully adhere to biblical beliefs.

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So what really defines an evangelical? It is not the title. A person can claim to be an evangelical yet not actually be one – in the same way a person can self-identify as a Christian and not actually be one. The distinctives and theological convictions listed above are what actually define evangelical thought – not various political, social, or cultural trends. In fact, most evangelicals rarely use the term "evangelical" to describe themselves. Rather, they simply focus on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith in Jesus Christ, salvation, evangelism, and discipleship.

### The Real Core Issue

But the question needs to be asked: What is causing the breakdown of evangelical Christianity? Why are people drifting away from authentic Christianity and genuine evangelicalism? I think there are a couple of answers to that question.

First, in many churches and "Christian" institutions, false teachings have taken over. Many of the theological schools that are feeding leadership into churches have adopted a form of theological liberalism that uses Christian vocabulary, yet redefines the words to promote non-biblical beliefs and values.

The second answer is that with non-biblical teachings being taught in many churches, the world's values have come to dominate the minds of those who are in the church.

So what, exactly, is the cure for this breakdown? That is, actually, not difficult to tease out. The cure for false beliefs is true beliefs.

1. It starts with a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. Many people don't think of God as an actual person who can be known in an objectively real personal relationship. They think of Him more as

an abstract "something" out there. But He is a real person, and when we know Him, our entire perspective on life changes.

2. It continues with a knowledge of the truth. Too many self-identified Christians have never taken the time, or made the effort, to actually learn the basics of their faith. You can't act on what you don't know.
3. Finally, there must be a willingness to stand strong against false teachings. Once you know the truth, you must be willing and able to stand for it.

Genuine evangelicals have all three of these. It is a watering down of the truth that has put us in the situation in which we now exist.

### Evangelicals for Harris

Recently, the Harris for President campaign has rolled out a group called "*Evangelicals for Harris*." This group actually existed previously as "*Evangelicals for Biden*," but changed its name when President Biden was brushed aside and replaced by Vice President Harris. *Evangelicals for Harris* claims to be a group of evangelical Christians who believe that Harris better represents Christian values than President Trump.

But what is this group really?

1. *Evangelicals for Harris* was created by a pop-up nonprofit, and is led by Jim Ball, an environmental activist. In other words, it was deliberately created for political purposes.
2. *Evangelicals for Harris* promotes standard Democrat talking points. There is nothing on their website that indicates any importance in pointing people to Christ. When they use religious talking points, it is based on notions that have nothing to do with the actual purposes for God for the world. It has a purely political purpose.
3. *Evangelicals for Harris* argues that she is a pro-family Christian. She

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simply is not. She advocates strongly for abortion (even up to the time of birth), and for all forms of non-traditional family. The group defines pro-family policies in terms of such things as: ObamaCare expansion, universal pre-K, gun control, student loan forgiveness, and environmental protections.

4. In their advertising, *Evangelicals for Harris* puts an emphasis on "Christian love" without explaining what that actually means. Again, "love," for them, is defined by the kind of policies mentioned above. At the same time, actual Christian doctrines that define evangelical Christianity are nowhere to be found.

Essentially, *Evangelicals for Harris* is a political action group that has as its exclusive purpose to convince evangelicals that Kamala Harris is a genuine Christian, and that her policies correspond to the teachings of the Bible. However, to make that point, they have to literally set aside evangelical Christianity.

## Other Christian Groups That Mirror the Beliefs of *Evangelicals for Harris*

The fact is, people claiming to be evangelicals are not the only ones playing the "Christian" card.

New York Times opinion columnist David French, a life-long Presbyterian and political conservative, said he's voting for Harris "to save conservatism from itself." His reasoning is that Donald Trump is so bad that even voting for a hard-core

socialist who advocates for policies that are solidly anti-Christian is better than voting for Trump.

Black Protestants and white non-evangelical Protestants have long supported the Democrat party and their socialist policies.

The National Baptist Convention, of which Harris' church is affiliated, has also long held the kind of progressive beliefs that are expressed in her policy positions.

## Politicking like a Real Evangelical

The purpose of this article is not to discourage Christians from engaging in politics. In fact, just the opposite. When God created man, He gave us the responsibility to be faithful stewards (managers) of His creation. This involves not only the earth's physical environment, but also its spiritual and

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cultural elements. God has a purpose for the world, and He has chosen to allow human beings to partner with Him to take care of it.

In American society, because we have a government that is based on the priority of the citizen as an individual, Christians have a unique opportunity to advocate for God's purpose and values through the political process. The opportunity we have is not for the purpose of accumulating human power, but to advance God's purposes in the world.

Evangelical Christianity, while certainly not perfect, expresses that purpose in ways other religious forms do not. However, if the biblical message becomes corrupted and other purposes begin to be prioritized, we actually move away from His purposes.

As Christians, and God's appointed stewards, we have a responsibility to be up to speed on the issues that are important to God, and to faithfully act on His behalf in the world. At the very least, that means Christians should vote – and vote based on the purpose and values God has revealed in Scripture. Beyond that, we need to be sensitive to how God wants to use us in society to share the gospel. Changed hearts, not political policy, are the only thing that will ultimately cause the kind of change that will make a long-term difference.