

*DECONSTRUCTING EVANGELICALISM:  
CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM IN THE AGE OF BILLY GRAHAM*

By Michael Gleghorn

In the preface to this intriguing volume D.G. Hart, the director of academic projects and faculty development at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Delaware, tells us that the burden of this book is to argue that “evangelicalism, as a form of Christian identity, needs to be abandoned” (back cover, 11).

**Introduction: Evangelicalism Deconstructing**

Hart sees the beginning of evangelicalism, at least as the term is often used and understood in *our* day, in the efforts of such neo-evangelical stalwarts as Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga and Billy Graham, as well as in the founding of certain institutions and publications like the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947), and *Christianity Today* (1956) (13). So effective was the movement’s early publicity that *Newsweek* magazine declared 1976 “the year of the evangelical” (14). In Hart’s view, this may have been a bit premature, for since the early 1980s “the proverbial wheels have come off this overachieving religious movement” (14).

So what’s wrong with evangelicalism anyway? First and foremost, says Hart, evangelicalism “as a religious identity . . . does not exist” (16). But if this is so, one might ask, then how does one explain all the people who identify themselves as evangelicals? How does one account for all the magazines, schools, and associations that claim to be evangelical? And how does one explain the immense scholarly output of books and articles that purport to deal

with the history, theology, culture, mission, beliefs and politics of evangelicalism? (17). If evangelicalism does not exist, then how do we account for all the apparent evidence to the contrary? According to Hart, “evangelicalism” is simply a “construct developed over the last half of the twentieth century” (19). But since this “construct” is novel, misleading, and even harmful to historic Christianity, “it needs to be deconstructed” (19). And that is what Hart intends to do in the remainder of this book.

He begins by discussing how the meaning of the term “evangelical” has changed over time. In the early twentieth century, for example, the distinction between “mainline and evangelical Protestantism did not exist” (20). Indeed, “to be part of mainline Protestantism was to be evangelical” (21). But all this began to change in the 1940s. At that time certain non-liberal Protestants (like Ockenga and Henry), who shared much in common with the fundamentalists theologically, broke with fundamentalism over the way it presented itself socially, culturally, and intellectually. “In so doing,” says Hart, “they opted for a new label—*evangelical* instead of fundamentalist” (23). The “organizational might” of those who referred to themselves as “evangelicals” was quite impressive. In very short order they founded colleges, seminaries, magazines, societies, and associations—most notably the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942 (24). But according to Hart there was a downside to all this activity. “In effect,” he argues, “the evangelical movement of the late twentieth century replaced the church with the parachurch, and it developed forms to match” (30). This is bad enough, but in addition (and partly as a result) evangelicalism also “leaves out important aspects of Christian belief and practice that are remarkably fruitful for understanding the place of Christianity in modern American society” (32). Thus, for reasons such as these, Hart thinks that we would all be better off if evangelicalism were deconstructed.

### **Chapter 1: Religious History Born Again**

Although there has often been interest in U.S. religious history, between “1980 and 2000, a tsunami of studies on evangelicalism in the United States deluged the field of American

religious history” (35). But it wasn’t just that *new* books were being churned out at a fast and furious rate. In addition, books written prior to 1980 “were by 1990 being classified differently” (37). Whereas previously “a book might have been listed in a section on Congregationalism, Puritanism, or revivalism, now the same work emerged as a book on evangelicalism” (37). But this raises an important question, for can the category of “evangelicalism” really do justice to all “the variety of Christian expressions in the United States?” (38). Indeed, asks Hart, might it even have contributed “to the neglect of important components of Christian faith and practice, even among those believers who might claim to be evangelical?” (38).

Hart briefly reviews some of the important works dealing with American religious history which were authored early in the second half of the twentieth century. He looks at books by Winthrop Hudson, Sidney Mead, Timothy Smith, and William McLoughlin Jr., all written in the 1950s and 60s, and observes that the concept of “evangelicalism” was not seriously explored—at least, “not as the concept has come to be used by contemporary historians” (39). Indeed, the concept of evangelicalism which tended to dominate the minds of these historians was largely “synonymous with revivalism and nineteenth-century mainline Protestantism” (42). Thus, says Hart, if the neo-evangelical version of “evangelicalism” was ever to be accepted by the wider scholarly community, “they would have to wait for a new generation of historians, many of whom came from within their own ranks” (47). And that, he thinks, is precisely what happened.

Hart traces “the construction of evangelical history” largely to a group of men associated with the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, which was founded in 1982. Members included Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, George Marsden, Harry Stout, Grant Whacker, and Joel Carpenter. According to Hart, “the Institute’s first book, *Evangelicalism in Modern America* (1984), almost singlehandedly established evangelicalism as a force to be reckoned with, not just in Reagan’s America but going all the way back to John Winthrop” (48). This book, along with others produced by ISAE historians, “solidified the new definition of evangelicalism and linked it to neo-evangelicalism” (50). That is, these books linked

evangelicalism with *conservative* Protestantism (52). This link was rather quickly accepted and as a river of books began to pour forth from the press it soon became something of an unquestioned dogma. Thus, according to Hart, “after 1980, religious historians were not defining evangelicalism as an older generation of church historians had, as a revivalistic form of Protestantism, but as *the* preservation of orthodox or conservative Protestantism” (56).

## **Chapter 2: Evangelicalism and the Revival of Social Science**

In this chapter Hart turns from history to sociology. As with history, he observes that prior to 1980, the “major books by American sociologists . . . reveal little awareness of evangelical Protestants as a segment of the United States citizenry” (63). For example, Andrew Greeley’s important work, *Denominational Society* (1972), “barely detected signs” that 1976 would be the year of the evangelical (64). Within a decade, however, “social scientists would find it impossible to write about American religion without devoting a large section to evangelicalism” (65).

The first sociologist to engage in serious research on evangelicalism was James Davison Hunter (66). Hunter accepted “the definition of evangelicalism” which had been put forth by neo-evangelicals, namely, that evangelicalism “was a conservative form of Protestantism” (66). In his 1987 book, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, he warned that contemporary evangelicals (especially the younger generation) seemed to be slipping away from the conservative Protestant theology and values of their past (70). In Hart’s view, of course, this naturally raises the question of whether evangelicalism should ever have been properly identified with conservative Protestantism in the first place. But however one answers this question, it appears to be the case that Hunter’s work lent further credibility to the notion that “Evangelicalism was *the* conservative faith” (72).

Not long after Hunter, political scientists became intensely interested in the voting habits of evangelicals (73). In particular, John Green, James Guth, Corwin Smidt, and Lyman Kellstedt added “statistical precision” to the identification of evangelicals as politically

conservative (74-5). Of course, there were certainly some exceptions. Not *all* evangelicals were loyal Republicans (75). Nevertheless, these researchers did establish that the more religiously committed the evangelical, the more likely he was to vote Republican. “In other words,” says Hart, “conservative politics was emerging as an indication of evangelical devotion” (76).

### **Chapter 3: Measuring Evangelicalism One Question at a Time**

Hart begins this chapter with an interesting comparison. Suppose you wanted to find data about Lutheranism in the United States. To do so, you would probably get statistics from “the largest American Lutheran denominations” (85). But now suppose that you’re interested in getting similar data about evangelicalism. How would you do this? Since “the movement is not ecclesial . . . a scholar needs to figure out a different strategy for assessing evangelicals’ significance” (85). In general, the strategy they have concocted is that of opinion polls and national surveys (86). Such surveys lend an aura of objectivity to the data collected by researchers. This has reinforced “the impression that evangelical Protestantism is one of the most influential, fastest growing, and conservative faiths in the nation” (86). But in Hart’s view this is something of a mirage, revealing once again that evangelicalism is little more than a “construction, this time of pollsters and the science of public opinion” (87).

For example, in 1979 George Gallup Jr. teamed up with *Christianity Today* to conduct of poll “of religious belief and practice among Americans” (89). One of the main purposes of this poll was to gather information about American evangelicals. After much debate about “the meaning of evangelicalism, they arrived at two kinds of evangelical adherents”—1) “orthodox” Protestants, who held traditional views about Christ and the Bible, and 2) those who claimed to have had a conversion experience in which they accepted Christ as their personal Savior (91). This combination produced big numbers. The survey indicated that “one out of every five adults eighteen years old and older—31 million people—is an evangelical” (91). While on the surface such numbers were encouraging, a deeper look produced a much different impression. For example, many of the people who affirmed that Jesus is “fully God and fully

man” didn’t seem to have a very clear idea about what this actually meant (93-4). As *Christianity Today* put it, even “the barber on the street in ancient Constantinople had a sharper understanding of the deity of Christ than does the average evangelical today” (94). As Gallup continued to conduct polls over the next two decades, his hopes for American evangelicalism seemed to fade (99). Nevertheless, notes Hart, his work had been instrumental “in helping journalists and pundits find the path to . . . the faith of ordinary Americans” (99).

Another pollster who has helped put evangelicalism on America’s religious map is George Barna (99). Not only has Barna produced polling data on the beliefs and practices of American evangelicals, he has also acted as something of a “consultant” to pastors and congregations hoping to become more effective in ministry (101). His polls have produced results similar to Gallup’s—the number of “evangelicals” in America is fairly high, but their comprehension of Christian doctrine and positive impact on society is very low (102).

So what are we to make of this data? In Hart’s view probably not much. Such polls have helped construct “the popular conception of evangelical Protestantism as a large and traditional faith” (105). But when one probes beneath the surface, this conception seems to be based much more on appearance than reality. This is partly due to the very way in which pollsters have gathered their data. “Sound-bite questions end up breaking down profound religious truths into bite-sized portions to which those surveyed may respond positively with little reflection or conviction” (106). Thus, when contemplating the latest opinion polls, it may be wise to bear in mind Disraeli’s admonition about being wary of statistics.

#### **Chapter 4: One, Holy, Catholic Movement**

In this chapter Hart argues that American evangelicalism is largely a parachurch phenomenon. While in many respects the origin of the evangelical movement, at least as that term is used today, dates to the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942 (111), nevertheless, says Hart, the denominational Association has never been able to effectively compete with the popularity of personality-driven parachurch ministries like those of

Billy Graham, Chuck Colson, Pat Robertson, or James Dobson (114). In the “religious free market” of the United States, denominational Christianity has often been viewed as “too formal, cumbersome, and elitist” (117). The parachurch ministries are where all the action is (118). Small wonder, then, that Billy Graham—and not the NAE—“would emerge as post-World War II evangelicalism’s poster boy” (118).

But is the cult of personality strong enough to hold the evangelical movement together? Hart doesn’t think so. After all, there is no evangelical figurehead who occupies a position of authority comparable to the Pope in Roman Catholicism. Instead, evangelicalism is often characterized by the sort of situation which Paul was forced to confront with the Corinthians. That is, some follow Billy Graham, others follow Chuck Swindoll, and still others follow James Dobson (111). George Marsden has likened this situation “to the feudal system of the Middle Ages” (120). Popular leaders establish little fiefdoms that must then compete for loyalty with the fiefdoms of other popular leaders (120). “Marsden attributes this sense of competition to evangelicals’ ‘general disregard for the institutional church’” (120). What sort of problems might this cause?

First, it may actually detract from some of evangelicalism’s spiritual goals. To many people, such competition can send the message that evangelicals are engaged “in a perpetual frenzy of trying to get more—more money, more contributors, more access, more zeal, and of course more believers” (124). Second, as a general rule, parachurch ministries cannot offer those loyal to them any opportunities for regular fellowship, corporate worship, or personal accountability (124). Although parachurch ministries have done a great deal of good and have helped advance the cause of Christ in numerous ways, they cannot replace the church. They may give one the feeling of “belonging to something big.” However, says Hart, “that feeling comes with an anonymity resembling that faced by frustrated shoppers at Home Depot: The wealth of goods is truly remarkable, but it is so hard to find assistance” (126).

### Chapter 5: No Creed but the Bible's Inerrancy

In this chapter Hart argues that evangelicalism's core commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy, "isolated from a broader theology of revelation and the rest of Christian dogma," was ultimately insufficient to keep such a diverse movement from "fracturing" (151).

At the end of 1949 the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) was founded (131). Since its inception, notes Hart, "the organization has insisted on only one doctrinal affirmation for membership: 'The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs'" (132). In many respects, since the end of World War II, the doctrine of inerrancy "became synonymous with evangelicalism" (132).

In addition to the Evangelical Theological Society, evangelicals were also instrumental in launching the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) in 1941 and the Conference on Faith and History (CFH), which began somewhat informally in 1959 (136-37). At least initially, both of these organizations were also committed to a conservative view of Scripture, which was understood to be the authoritative, inspired Word of God (137-38).

Over time, however, this core commitment to inerrancy began to unravel, most noticeably at Fuller Theological Seminary. Although the school had initially taken a firm stand on the doctrine of inerrancy, it slowly began to waver. In late 1962 and early 1963, when Dan Fuller became the academic dean and David Hubbard became president, a series of events was set in motion which eventually resulted in the school softening its position on inerrancy (142-43). Some fourteen years later Harold Lindsell, who had once been associated with Fuller, wrote *The Battle for the Bible*, in which he argued that inerrancy was crucial "not only for evangelicalism but for genuine Christianity" (144).

*The Battle for the Bible* began a battle over the Bible, with various evangelical scholars unsheathing their pens and entering into the fray. In 1977, evangelicals who embraced inerrancy founded the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). In 1978, they produced the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, which affirmed both that the Bible is "infallible" and "inerrant" (145). In 1979, Jack Rogers and Donald McKim countered with *The Authority*

*and Interpretation of the Bible*, a book which argued “that inerrancy was not the historic teaching of the Christian church but rather the creation of late-nineteenth-century Princeton theologians” (145). John Woodbridge then responded to the Rogers/McKim thesis by arguing that “the evangelical doctrine of Scripture” was actually in line “with the historic teaching of the church” (146). And so it went, with both sides battling it out over the doctrine of the Bible.

In Hart’s estimation, where the early neo-evangelical leaders went wrong “in their designs for an intellectual awakening was putting all their money on the narrow doctrine of biblical inerrancy” (150). What they needed was a full-orbed creed or doctrinal statement. But the more detailed the creed, the fewer “American Protestants who might rally behind it”—a real problem for a movement “desperate for the kind of clout that numbers apparently signify” (150). Although the doctrine of inerrancy did provide a temporary identity for conservative Protestants, in the end, says Hart, it was not enough to keep the movement from “fracturing” (151).

### **Chapter 6: Worship in Rhythm and Tune**

In this chapter Hart argues that evangelicalism’s capitulation to contemporary music, while working well to attract “young people and the unchurched to the faith,” has nonetheless become “another stick of dynamite in the deconstruction of evangelicalism” (174). He essentially offers two reasons for this conclusion: First, such music tends to segregate those claiming the evangelical label according to the generation in which they were born (171). Second, it makes any continuity within evangelicalism difficult because the styles of music and forms of worship are constantly changing (172). Thus, as religious historian Michael Hamilton observed in an article for *Christianity Today*, “A generation at odds with the traditions it has inherited is going to change the way it does church” (155). Hart offers numerous examples for us to consider in this chapter.

For example, in the early days of Billy Graham’s ministry, when the musical talent consisted of Cliff Barrows and George Beverly Shea, “the feel of the crusades was ‘as much Saturday night gospel variety show as traditional revival meeting’” (158). By 2002, however,

this music, which had originally been so “with it” and contemporary, was perceived as inordinately bland and traditional. Hence, in that year’s crusade, while Barrows and Shea performed one of the nights, there were also musical appearances by more contemporary artists, like Michael W. Smith and dc Talk (154).

The change in music at the Graham crusades is, of course, just one example of what has taken place in “evangelical” congregations throughout the United States. Today, many churches have different services designed to appeal to the different musical tastes of their members. Some members prefer traditional hymns, others want contemporary praise and worship music. In order to appease both, worshippers must be segregated. Or, if the church has decided on a particular kind of music that will characterize its worship services, members who do not approve must go elsewhere (168-69).

The difficulty with all this, says Hart, is that musical tastes and styles change with great rapidity. But if evangelical worship styles change as quickly as contemporary music, then is it really possible “to identify a set of core convictions and practices that endow the word *evangelicalism* with a meaningful measure of coherence?” (174). Hart doesn’t think so, and this is just one more reason he feels called to preach the “deconstruction” of American evangelicalism.

### **Conclusion: Enough Already**

Hart’s conclusion, appropriately entitled “Enough Already,” argues that conservative Protestants would all be a lot happier and healthier if we would only abandon the rather unhelpful “evangelical” label and return to thinking of ourselves (and one another) in terms of our unique denominational distinctives. He begins with a story about the historian Ronald Wells who, irritated with fellow evangelicals, considered writing a letter of resignation from the movement. Although he ultimately decided against it, says Hart, we may still wonder just where he would have sent it had he ever in fact written it (175). In Hart’s estimation, this reveals

evangelicalism to be little more than an abstraction. We can contemplate evangelicalism as an idea, but it has little tangible reality.

According to Hart, the evangelical label has essentially functioned in two ways. “First, it was a concept that less belligerent fundamentalists constructed to fashion an alternative to mainline churches (read: liberal Protestantism), and second, scholars eventually adopted it as a way to account for greater nuance with American Protestantism” (176). Although this concept was useful for a time, it has now outlived its usefulness. Indeed, says Hart, the concept may now be doing more harm than good (178).

He references the work of John Stackhouse Jr., who interprets the problems of contemporary evangelicalism in terms of adolescent immaturity (178). Could this be one of the reasons why some evangelicals have abandoned the movement for traditional denominations “that are more mature and require loyalty”? (179). Hart cites the experience of Thomas Howard who, shortly after writing a book complaining about the anti-traditional and anti-liturgical nature of American evangelicalism, opted for Roman Catholicism (179-80). He then cites D.H. Williams, who describes the problem of American evangelicalism in terms of “amnesia” (181). Evangelicals have forgotten who they are and where they’ve come from. If they’re going to survive, they must retrieve the Christian tradition in all its depth and richness (181-82). While Hart is sympathetic to this proposal, he ultimately thinks it fails because it assumes that “it is possible to pour tradition into a vessel such as modern American evangelicalism, which is designed to hold only liquids that are traditionless” (183). While it may be appropriate to describe evangelicalism as a “movement” or “coalition,” it is certainly not a “tradition” (186). In Hart’s opinion, the days of this label’s usefulness are over and, quite frankly, hardly anyone would be hurt—and most would in fact be helped—if we declared a moratorium on the use of this term and returned to thinking of ourselves as Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians (187-88).

### Afterword

In the Afterword, Hart attempts to reconcile the apparent discrepancy between his argument in *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* and that of his previous book, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (193). In the present work Hart has argued “that evangelicalism does not exist, that it is in fact a construction of 1940s fundamentalists that late-twentieth-century academics found especially useful for interpreting American religion” (193). However, in his previous book, he admits that he “assumed more than argued that evangelicalism does in fact exist and that its reality is sufficient enough that the movement can be charted over the course of the twentieth century” (193). So how does he resolve this apparent discrepancy?

While initially he almost appears to undo the entire argument of the present work by acknowledging to us particular senses in which “evangelicalism” does in fact exist (194-95), he soon reveals that *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* is fundamentally an argument with the way that scholars have studied American Protestantism over the last half-century (i.e. without giving appropriate consideration to the various denominational expressions of Christianity) (197). As a result, he says, the present work “may be read as an argument against the writing of books such as *That Old-Time Religion*” (197). And there you have it.