



*Christ Among the Dragons:  
Finding Our Way Through  
Cultural Challenges*

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## Twenty-First-Century Evangelicalism

I recall a lunch in graduate school where a fellow doctoral student asked me how he could get networked with evangelicals and the wider evangelical world. His background was almost entirely within a denomination that was an island unto itself, but he knew that I had become a Christian through an evangelical parachurch group in college, was familiar with various evangelical leaders and was writing my doctoral dissertation on the subject of evangelical theology. In other words, the rumor on campus was that I was one.

I remember feeling somewhat flatfooted in my response. I reflected on how deep my sense of identity ran; what came to mind was that an evangelical was just something you *were*, not an orbit you entered or a collection of relationships you networked yourself into. . . .

I just knew I *was* a certain type of Christian—and knew what it meant to *be* that kind of Christian. I looked to Billy Graham for inspiration and C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer and John Stott for intellectual guidance. I believed the Bible to be true from Genesis to the maps in the back and the Scofield notes on the bottom. Thanks to Hal Lindsey and Salem Kirban, I thought the rapture had taken place every time I came home to an empty house. And, of course, I went to Christian camps every summer where, also every summer, I rededicated my life. Or at least tried to. . . .

Not every Christian shares this world, I know, but those of us that did, by and large, made up the kind of Christian I knew I was. . . .

Of course, evangelicalism is much more than this. David Bebbington captures the heart of its moorings as well as any: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. Big words, but simple ideas. *Conversionism* is the belief that an individual's life must be transformed. *Activism* is the conviction that we must not be passive when it comes to the gospel, but active in our expression, proclamation and application. *Biblicism* captures our high regard for the Bible—we go *to* the Bible, and then we go *with* the Bible. And *crucicentrism* is the emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. “Together,” Bebbington concluded, we have “a quadrilateral of priorities” that forms “the basis of Evangelicalism.” And, many would add, the basis of the gospel. . . .

My sense of evangelicalism was a tenuous foundation, at best, for an identity, as it was far more sociocultural than theological. But it *was* a foundation, and it actually felt strong and clear. I knew who our leaders were, the publishers that could be trusted, the schools I should attend. I knew how best to vote, and where to stand on matters of morality. Yet unlike a denomination, there were no centralized headquarters, elected leadership or official creeds. My sense of Christendom enveloped a wide range of theologically conservative Protestants as well as a small but increasing number of Roman Catholics (though we were never quite

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## BOOK EXCERPT

sure they were “in”). It was held together by a network of communities and organizations, churches and parachurch groups, and most of all through the singular personality and presence of Billy Graham.

Suffice it to say, that era of evangelical faith in America is now gone. Perhaps, in light of our present cultural challenges, it is even best that it is. What some fear is that the heart of evangelicalism itself is also fading.

And fading fast. . . .

At this point you may wonder why you should care. Most books of spiritual interest deal with personal spiritual formation or the application of biblical principles to core life issues. All well and good. Why leave such comfortable areas and worry about something as seemingly irrelevant and simultaneously overwhelming as the state of evangelical faith? Because it is not irrelevant, and it is precisely its titanic scope that demands our attention, for it is much more pressing than simply evangelicalism. . . .

While many are concerned about the loss of a shared social agenda or the increasing fragmentation of the patchwork mosaic once held together by Billy Graham and the parachurch movement, we are missing our real challenge: not simply a postevangelical America, but a post-Christian world. For this reason getting our bearings as evangelicals is more crucial than at any other point in recent history, if indeed, evangelicals bear witness to the gospel and its dynamic.

—from the introduction, “Here Be Dragons”