

# 2nd Opinion: Moderates, evangelicals together

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**By Ross Shelton**

I consider myself both a moderate Baptist and an evangelical Christian. Some people might be surprised to hear these two groups identified together. So, allow me to generalize:

Some Baptists consider themselves moderates, but they look with disdain upon the title “evangelical Christian” because of the controversy that took place in the Southern Baptist Convention during the past 27 years. Evangelical Christians often are thought of primarily in relationship to the Southern Baptist Convention and its leaders. Others would consider themselves evangelical Christians, yet they are uncomfortable with the title “moderate Baptist” because they assume moderates are halfway down the “slippery slope” of liberalism.

I have become increasingly uncomfortable as I have heard these groups speak poorly of each other. Having attended a northern evangelical seminary (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) for one year before transferring and graduating from a moderate Baptist seminary (Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary), I have connected and become close with each group.

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What each of these groups values needs to be valued by the other side. While self-ascribing members of each party rarely agree on everything, some fundamental tenants do exist. Evangelical Christians hold fast to the beliefs that the Bible is divinely inspired and authoritative for our life and practice; that the orthodox/historical understanding of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is correct; that people are lost and need to be born again through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit; that those who reject Jesus will experience eternity apart from God; and, finally, that we are to live and speak the gospel locally and globally. Moderate Baptists traditionally have valued soul competency in our relationship with God; the autonomous local church functioning democratically; pastoral leadership arising from the work of God in the midst of the congregation; encouragement to read the Bible for ourselves; and, finally, the imperative of religious liberty functioning as the separation of church and state.

A simple reading of these values would make one wonder why such suspicion exists between these two groups. For whatever reason, though, as these values are lived out among different Christians, a suspicious eye is cast over the other.

Imagine, instead, what it would be like for these two value systems and their strengths to be incorporated together.

For example, many moderate Baptists are uncomfortable with evangelism that focuses solely on repentance, the need to be born again through Christ alone, and the truth that hell awaits the person who rejects Christ. Drawing strength from our evangelical side, we nevertheless do as the Bible teaches and call people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the call to evangelism by some evangelical Christians might create in them the desire to use the mechanisms and finances of government to increase the work of evangelism. Here we find strength in the moderate Baptist value system and their continual and consistent focus on the full expression of the First Amendment and why using government for evangelism actually

hurts the cause of evangelism. This is just one of many examples.

What can be so helpful in merging these value systems is they can provide needed accountability to each other. I proudly consider myself an evangelical Christian and moderate Baptist. My prayer is that these two groups move beyond generalizations and caricatures.

This would mean moderate Baptists understand that not all evangelical Christians should be connected with the Southern Baptist Convention and their type of theology and methodology. Evangelicals are not monolithic and do not all align themselves with fundamentalism. Evangelical Christians also would stop viewing the moderate Baptist/Southern Baptist Convention struggle in Texas and the South through the lenses of what took place in the mainline denominations' evangelical/liberal wars. Moderate Baptists are not liberals who lost control. They are Bible-believing Christians who could not adopt the changes in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Therefore, my hope is that there might be unification between moderate Baptists and evangelical Christians, thereby strengthening our churches and increasing the kingdom of God.

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