

# Moderate Baptists uneasy about evangelical baggage

October 7, 2010

Are [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) and Mainstream Baptists evangelicals? The answer is yes and no.

Formed in reaction to the Southern Baptist Convention's shift to the far right in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both the CBF and [Mainstream](#) focus on what they perceive as historic Baptist principles—a personal experience and relationship with Jesus Christ, priesthood of the believer and the responsibility to share the gospel. In that sense, they are evangelical.

Are Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Mainstream Baptists evangelicals? The answer is yes and no. But when the word “evangelical” becomes synonymous with a political movement, the CBF and Mainstream distance themselves.

Jimmy Allen

Daniel Vestal, the Fellowship's national coordinator, believes most individuals and churches that identify with the CBF would consider themselves as evangelicals. “I think they would ... because of their desire to share (the gospel). Missions and evangelism are at the heart of who Baptists have been historically,” he said.

“Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was focusing on the gospel before it became a hot-button word,” Vestal added. “Sharing the Good News is in our DNA. ... In our heart, it is who we want to be. ... We are both evangelical and ecumenical—committed to sharing the Good News and committed to the body of Christ beyond our tradition.”

Mainstream Baptists, too, sharply distinguish between the traditional spiritual definition of evangelicalism and its link to a political movement. “We are born-again Christians. In so far as evangelicals are born-again Christians, then yes, we are evangelicals,” noted Bruce Prescott, executive director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists.

“But as part of a political movement, then no, at least this individual Mainstream Baptist is not in anyway shape or form part of the Religious Right.”

Mainstream Baptists are evangelical because they are “concerned about euangelion,” concerned with sharing the gospel and having a personal relationship with Christ, Prescott emphasized.

Because they are “strong advocates” of the separation of church and state—a long-held Baptist stance—Mainstream Baptists “are not part of any secular political movement.”

Public confusion over the word’s meaning has created a problem in clearly communicating the stand the two entities take—serving Christ and advancing the kingdom through historic Baptist principles.

“When a word changes from a description of a concept to a brand, it becomes difficult to find a substitute term,” noted [New Baptist Covenant](#) Coordinator Jimmy Allen. A former SBC president, Allen is considered as the last moderate to hold that post.

He and Vestal were instrumental in forming the CBF as a separate entity, calling moderate Baptists together in the Consultation of Concerned Baptists in August 1990.

Evangelicalism used in its traditional sense “describes a historic commonality of believers who have rejected hierarchies and ritualistic religion for experiential religion, biblical authority, congregationalism and

urgent missional outreach,” Allen said.

He believes the [National Association of Evangelicals](#), a network of about 40 denominations that bills itself as “the gold standard of evangelical belief,” has co-opted the word.

Under the association, “the word has become a brand of its own,” Allen added. “It now stands for an ultra-conservative, fundamentalist-leaning fellowship.”