

Voices: Who gets to decide what an 'evangelical' is?

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On May 24, 1738, a young John Wesley was sitting in a Bible study reading the preface to Luther's "Epistle to the Romans" when he "felt his heart strangely warmed."

According to Wesley, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins." From then on, Wesley, along with his brother Charles and his friend George Whitefield, would preach tirelessly about the need to consciously commit oneself to Christ.

The heartfelt preaching of the Wesleys and Whitefield spawned the global movement we call "evangelicalism" today. Evangelicals are the spiritual heirs of the Wesleys and Whitefield, Protestants who believe that Christianity is not merely a set of facts to accept but a reality to be experienced and shared with others.

Taking a word

The word "evangelical" didn't become a political term until the emergence of the religious right in the late 1970s. Currently, it receives special ire in the year since the election of Donald Trump. Media outlets have [painted evangelicals](#) as the group responsible for Trump's surprise election, with estimates between 80 and 90 percent typically given for the percentage of evangelicals who voted for him.

By this supposed mass association with Trump, evangelicals have come to be identified by the media with all of the president's questionable policies

and moral shortcomings. Evangelicals are portrayed as [hypocrites](#) seeking to [force their religion](#) on others, in addition to charges of [racism](#), [sexism](#) and [homophobia](#).

In light of the negative connotation the word “evangelical” has gained in recent years, a number of religious leaders have called for dissatisfied evangelicals to “[drop the label](#).” The idea is that the reputation of evangelicals is beyond repair and no longer able to be reclaimed and that those uncomfortable with this use of the word should distance themselves from it.

I disagree.

Problems in polling

Evangelicals have existed far longer than the Republican party. Evangelicals exist in a myriad of countries other than the United States. To use the word “evangelical” to mean, as Baylor historian Thomas Kidd has [described](#) its current usage, “whites who consider themselves religious and who vote Republican,” is to completely ignore evangelicalism’s historical and geographical reality.

Polls from mainstream news outlets (both left- and right-leaning) typically decide who is or is not an evangelical by asking people to self-identify, a wildly irresponsible methodology. When media constantly forwards the narrative that all evangelicals are Republicans, we shouldn’t be surprised that only Republicans identify as evangelical. These polls rarely examine the beliefs and practices of people claiming to be evangelicals.

Even more problematic, many polling groups assume that only white people can be evangelical; they assume African-Americans, Hispanics and other groups not to be evangelical because of their race. This is extremely unfortunate, as these minorities make up a substantial portion of

contemporary evangelicalism, one that does not fit the contemporary narrative.

True evangelicalism

What do we find when we look at evangelicalism as primarily a theological and historical movement rather than a synonym for “Republican?” Recently, Lifeway Research issued an extremely insightful and well-designed [survey](#) examining that question.

Taking what historians and religious scholars typically believe to be the four key characteristics of evangelicalism — belief in personal conversion, evangelism, the atonement and the authority of Scripture — Lifeway first asked people if they considered themselves an evangelical and then asked them about their religious beliefs.

Of those who claimed to be “evangelical,” only 45 percent held these most basic historical evangelical beliefs.

Among people who actually held historical evangelical beliefs, only 58 percent were white, making evangelicals *significantly more diverse* than the general United States population. Likewise, conservatives made up only 65 percent of evangelicals — a majority, but not the overwhelming one the media portrays.

In short, the [Lifeway survey](#) demonstrates the massive degree to which popular media has misrepresented evangelicals by carelessly applying the term to people who don’t fit the historical description.

Don’t drop the label

Evangelicalism has been grossly misrepresented in national media, even by groups that normally do good, careful work. Should we drop the name

“evangelical” because of this misuse?

Absolutely not.

To say that the contemporary American political situation has made the name unkeepable is to forget that evangelicals existed before Republicans and that evangelicals exist in countries other than the United States.

Even worse, to accept the media’s definition of evangelicals as “religious whites who vote Republican” tells our Black and Hispanic brothers and sisters that they aren’t part of a movement that, historically, they have been integral to.

We shouldn’t capitulate to the mainstream understanding of evangelicalism, not when it is so blatantly incorrect and misguided. We should let these entities know that they have misunderstood us and that we do not appreciate being misrepresented.

Most importantly, we should not drop the name “evangelical” if we fit what the name *actually* means. Evangelicalism is bigger than our current moment, and it will still be here when the current moment has passed.

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