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Footnotes: What is an Evangelical? w: Palmer+Hicks+Howell+Huffman

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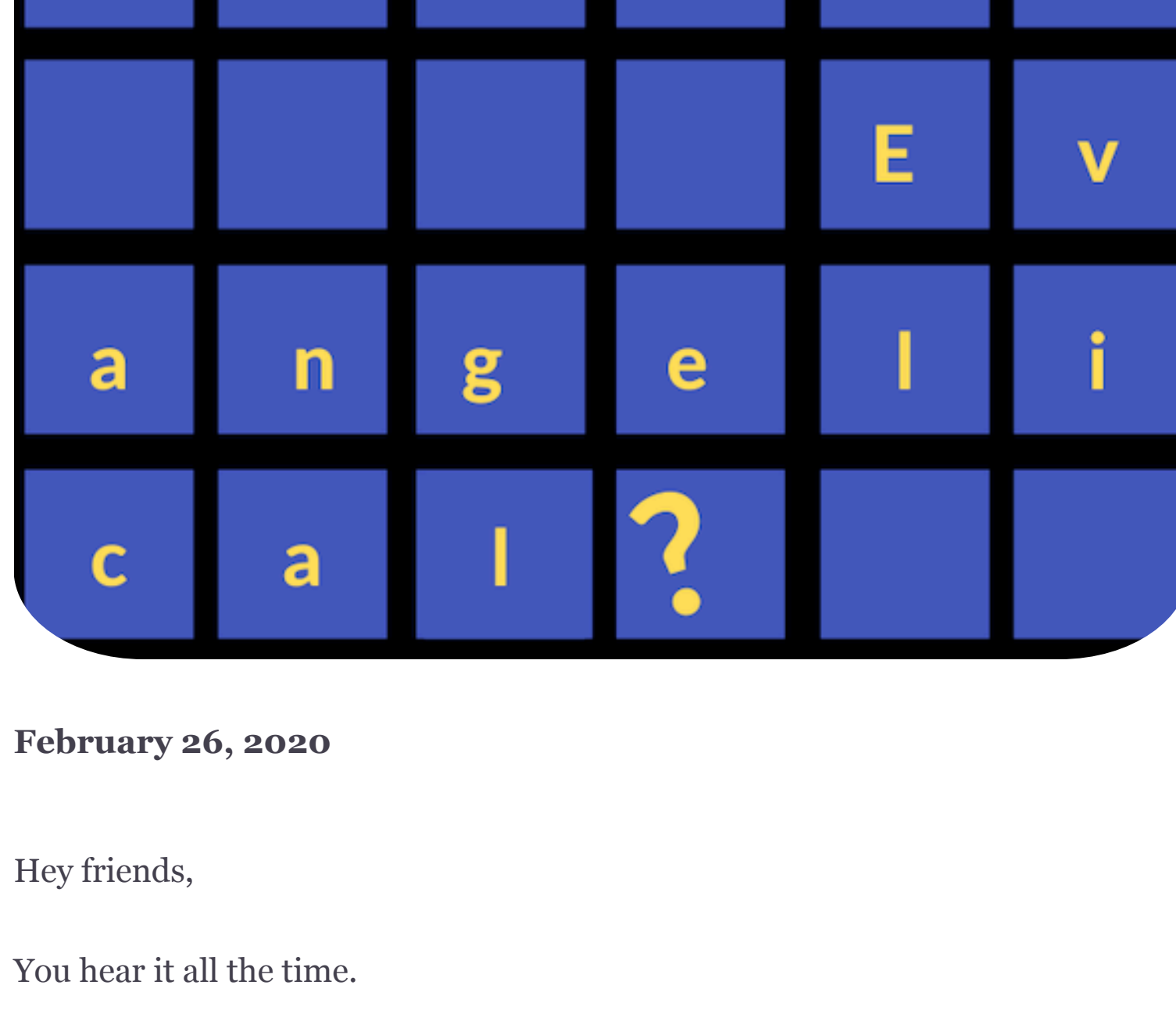
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Footnotes¹

¹Curated Resources for Ministers



February 26, 2020

Hey friends,

You hear it all the time.

Evangelical Megachurches,
Evangelical publishers,
The Evangelical vote,
White, Evangelical males.

It's everywhere. They're everywhere. You can't escape them: those Evangelicals. That not-terribly-specific religious group who gets all the press. I'm not sure I know who they are. I'm a bit unsure of what they believe. Most importantly...am I one of them? We'll find out in this issue. I have a roundtable with three great thinkers who know Evangelicalism from the Church of Christ side, in addition to a second roundtable with prominent Memphis Evangelical pastor, Cole Huffman.

Also:

- [Across the Spectrum](#)
- [All-Pro Dad](#)
- [A Few More Footnotes.](#)



Footnotes Roundtable: *Are Churches of Christ Evangelical?*

John Mark Hicks teaches at Lipscomb University. His most recent book Searching for the Pattern was [recently reviewed in Footnotes.](#)

Rachel Howell is a student at Harding School of Theology and former missionary to Mozambique.

Sean Palmer is the Lead Pastor of Ecclesia Houston. He holds degrees from Abilene Christian University. Follow him @seanpalmer.

BT: What traits come to mind when you hear the term "Evangelical?"

JMH: In the current climate, conservative social and/or political agendas, particularly abortion and same-sex marriages, come to mind. In this climate, this quickly becomes indistinguishable from a political ideology in the form of a desire for a conservative judiciary, etc. to protect Evangelical morality. However, I also hear "Evangelical" with a small "e," that is, a shared confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord guided by Scripture and interested in discipling others into a holy life that follows Jesus. The media dominates this discussion, however. Consequently, Evangelical typically refers to the former rather than the later.

RH: I would say: 1) a biblicist approach to Scripture (that includes inerrancy or infallibility), [sometimes listed first before God](#) 2) Penal substitutionary atonement as the only definition of Cross/Gospel/Salvation. 3) An emphasis on evangelizing the lost for conversion in order to be born again. 4) A Calvinist understanding of eschatology and election.

SP: Evangelical has come to me "white, middle-class, Republicans." They are widely understood as a Republican voting bloc and a consistent source of support for conservatives causes, with an unwavering and total commitment to overturning Roe vs Wade.

BT: There seems to be a type of theological Evangelical and a political Evangelical that may be the same thing but may not be.

JMH: I would want to distinguish between the two. I think we saw this with *Christianity Today* and the impeachment of President Trump. While those who unite the theological and political into one movement sided with Trump for the most part, others rejected the political connections to affirm an evangelical critique. However, in practice they are often united, but they are not the same thing. One can be (and should be) disconnected from the other. Sometimes the political Evangelical is nothing more than civil religion, and sometimes the theological Evangelicalism (perhaps small 'e' here) demonstrates an integrity independent of civil religion.

RH: In the US, it's true - the conservative political association has, for a couple decades, increasingly eclipsed the theological description. For many people that may be the definition now - we need to wrestle with the question: how has the political association become a liability for Evangelical witness and integrity?

SP: Theological evangelicals find their roots in people like Billy Graham and institutions like *Christianity Today* and Wheaton College. They have a high view of scripture, a "big tent" ecclesiology, and were born in opposition to fundamentalism. Political evangelicals are not really evangelicals. They give verbal assent to Christianity, but are marked more by contemporary Republican politics than by the teachings of Jesus. Worse, the media does not know what or who an evangelical is, therefore many fundamentalists and charismatics are widely known as evangelicals are not theological evangelicals.

BT: Would you say that people in Churches of Christ are Evangelicals?

JMH: Probably. Most people in Churches of Christ are Evangelicals in the sense of conservative political ideology as well as sharing a conservative (in contrast to a progressive) religious faith. At least in my experience, by any measure of the cultural meaning of Evangelical, most people among Churches of Christ would fall into this category. But it is not uniform, and there is a strong and perhaps growing minority that rejects the political dimensions of Evangelicalism while sharing the common tradition of evangelicalism.

RH: The identity statement on the website of the College Church of Christ, across the street from Harding University, is nearly identical to the "Statement of Faith" on the National Association of Evangelicals website above, with only a couple differences (Holy Spirit regeneration is dropped, and water baptism and weekly communion are added). This similarity is interesting since historically, many in Churches of Christ would have self-excluded themselves from the Evangelical category due to defining salvation more narrowly. In Mozambique the categories and the conversations are different. More importantly to me, though, doctrinal descriptions are very helpful for introspection, self-understanding, and repentance (individual and corporate), but any labels used to exclude others are not a fruit of the One Spirit of Christ.

SP: Growing up in the Church of Christ, I would say "no," but increasingly, yes. This development seems to be only 20-25 years old. As Churches of Christ became less sectarian, we adopted some of the programs and philosophy of greater American Christianity. That said, Churches of Christ appear to be far less politically evangelical, while holding to virtues like a high view of scripture which were initially hallmarks of evangelicalism. Because evangelicalism is so ill-defined, it's impossible to say who or what an evangelical is. I suspect most people could not define what evangelicalism is historically.

BT: Would you recommend that Churches of Christ embrace their associations with Evangelicalism or distance themselves from it.

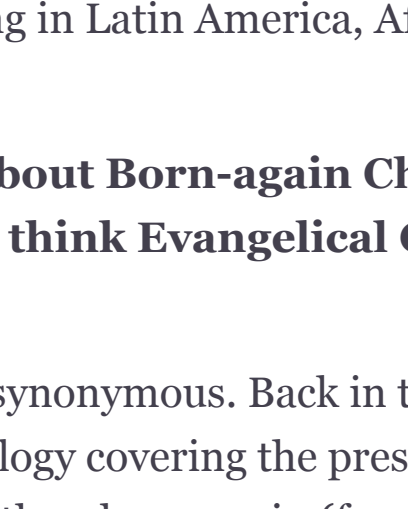
JMH: I don't like the terms "embrace" or "distance." I prefer something more like a friendly listener. I, if I may represent Churches of Christ in this statement, would not embrace it because of all the baggage "Evangelicalism" carries, much of which I find problematic. But neither would I distance myself from it as if to isolate myself from their gifts and the common faith we share. I imagine, as with other traditions, I want to listen, and I listen with an open, but discerning, ear because I share a common confession of the story of God with them.

RH: I am interested in the broader historical trajectories - much of what we now understand as "evangelical" was formed in reaction to specific theological trends during the past 200 years. I think we're witnessing the slow, steady death of Christendom, which is not necessarily a bad thing. From where I stand, I am captivated by a future of together trusting Jesus' invitation to a Kingdom of resurrection-based ethics that participates now in his coming New Creation. It has a much more portable, eumenical, light on its feet, all-hands-on-deck momentum to it. (So yes, let's embrace all our associations, learn from each other, and get on with interrupting the world by imitating Christ's suffering love.)

SP: Some associations may be mutually beneficial and a blessing to the kingdom while others would not. It is a matter of case-by-case discernment. That said, because of the unavoidable political connections associated with modern evangelicalism, I caution everyone -- both as individuals and institutions -- to be exceedingly careful about their associations. As citizens of the kingdom, all other identifiers will be unnecessarily limiting.



Across the Spectrum by Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy



If you're looking for a book that details the theologically-oriented issues of Evangelicalism, I'd recommend Boyd and Eddy's *Across the Spectrum*. I know, it looks like a lot. And you'll vacillate between, "I've always been curious about that" and "seriously, who cares?" The chapters cover it all: The inerrancy debate; The providence debate; The foreknowledge debate; The Genesis debate; The divine image debate; The sanctification debate; The atonement debate; The salvation debate; The soteriology debate; The baptism debate; The destiny of the unbelieving debate; The baptism debate; The Lord's supper debate; The charismatic gifts debate; The women in ministry debate; The millennium debate; The hell debate.

That's all.



Footnotes Roundtable with Cole Huffman

Cole Huffman is the Senior Pastor of First Evangelical Church in Memphis.

BT: If someone on the street asked you "What is an Evangelical?" how would you answer?

CH: An evangelical is a Christian with a born-again gospel experience to commend to others, who emphasizes the Bible as the Word of God because he/she follows Jesus, and who seeks to live by the Spirit.

BT: There seems to be a way in which term Evangelical can be understood theologically and another way it is used socially/politically.

CH: The term is primarily theological, as it comes from the Greek word for "gospel/good news." Sociopolitically, at least in American public perception, "evangelical" largely designates a white, partisan voting bloc seeking legislative power to impose morality. But that by itself is a deeply incomplete picture. Where Christianity is growing in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, it is evangelical in expression.

BT: I used to hear a lot about Born-again Christians. That term has seemingly faded. Do you think Evangelical Christians has been the term to replace it?

CH: The terms are virtually synonymous. Back in the 1970s, news outlets picked up the "born-again" terminology covering the presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter, who described his faith as born-again (from John 3:3). *Newsweek* declared 1976 to be "the year of the evangelical." From that point on, American media used "evangelical" to reference people who claimed a born-again religious experience and were politically active.

BT: When a network like NPR, MSNBC, FoxNews uses the term Evangelical, what is your typical response? Do you feel like your group gets represented accurately?

CH: Most often they're using the term in the Americanized sociopolitical sense. Journalists might have a notion of what one or two core evangelical doctrines are, but they otherwise seem biblically illiterate and rarely display any nuanced understanding of evangelical history, cultures, or doctrine.

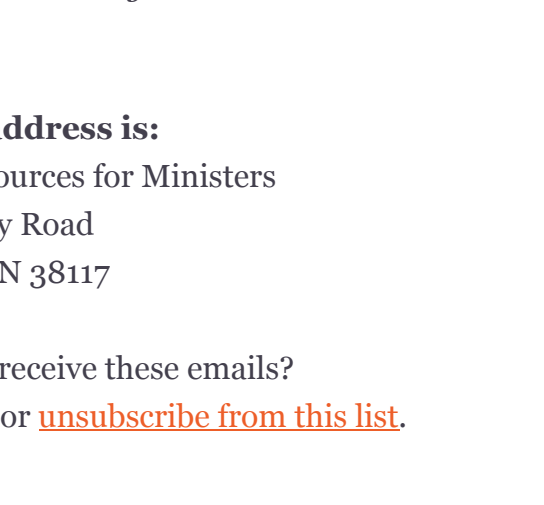
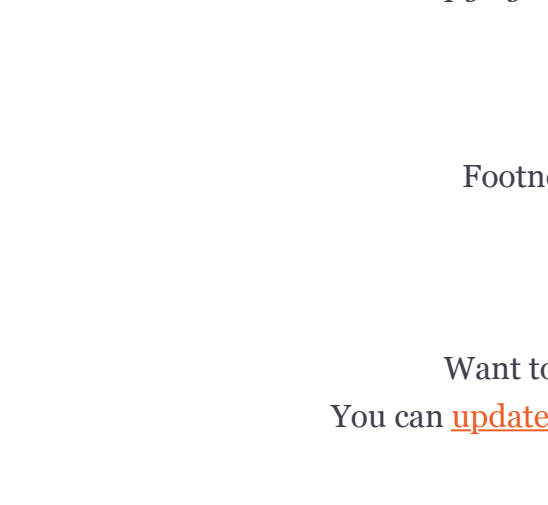
BT: I'm not sure how much you know about the Church of Christ. I'm curious if you would include us as Evangelicals?

CH: I grew up in northwest Alabama with many Church of Christ friends. While the Churches of Christ have evangelical roots, as a Restorationist movement the Churches of Christ became sectarian and strictly biblicist. Due to that ethos and emphasis on baptismal regeneration, most evangelicals I know do not consider traditionalist Churches of Christ to be doctrinally evangelical though they look sociopolitically evangelical.

BT: It seems that Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr have become the face of Evangelicals, at least for non-Evangelicals.

CH: Historian John Fea calls them "court evangelicals." Whatever evangelical convictions they possess, they are principals of American civil religion, which at best reflects a disordered patriotism, at worst a nationalistic heresy. GOP evangelical insiders like these keep the public perception of evangelicals (and evangelicals themselves) centered on culture warring, which often speaks louder than our gospel proclamation.

BT: Give a few books that we need to read to learn more.



BT: What do you wish more people knew about Evangelicals?

CH: Three things: that the only true multithetic movement in the world is evangelical Christianity; that the flawless Christ and His achievements for us is paramount; and that evangelical churches are not good people clubs. We are people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. We see our need for a Savior and Lord who loves us and gave Himself for us so that we can experience in life and in death everything God has graciously promised to be for us in Christ.



All-Pro Dad

Quick recommendation: [the All-Pro Dad emails](#). I know, cheesy title. But the quick, simple content in the morning is pretty decent. I've found it to be a helpful conversation tool with friends. Usually there is one topic with a few practical suggestions (how to listen to your daughters, how to discipline your sons, etc). One recent topic was, "How to Read Your Wife's Mind." So maybe a little overreach there. Overall they are good.

A Few More Footnotes

1. [32% of workers run out of cash before payday.](#) The article cites stagnate wages and higher cost of living. First, huge credit anyone who manages to squeeze a living out of a low-wage job. But there is a missing moral piece that this article doesn't bother to make: *people are spending more than they make no matter how much they make.* In fact, people who hauling in over \$200,000 per year are more likely to run out before their next check than those scraping together \$40,000-54,000. Let's sit with that. If you're making 200k and struggling to put food on the table, I think it's time to reconsider which foods you put on the table last month. We might have a character problem that is larger than our cash problem. Some will say this is insensitive to the poor; I'd argue otherwise, since somehow 50% of the ones making less than \$15,000 per year managed to hang on until their next paycheck.
2. Tony Evans on [Why Black History Matters.](#)
3. If you want to summarize the changes in family structure over the past century, the truest thing to say is this: We've made life freer for individuals and more unstable for families." David Brooks claims "[The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake.](#)"
4. Richard Beck's newest on Johnny Cash [featured in The New Yorker.](#)

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