

1976 Was a Turning Point for Evangelicalism

Christianity Today [George Marsden](#) July/August 2026

A historian of the movement surveys the five decades since “The Year of the Evangelical.”

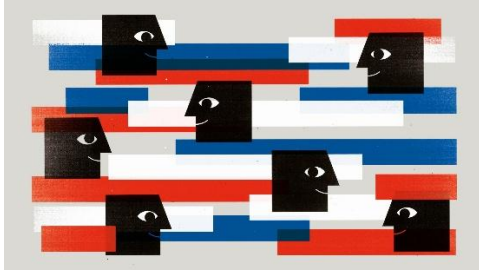


Illustration by The Project Twins

“Evangelicals suddenly find themselves number one on the North American religious scene,” *Christianity Today* editor David Kucharsky [enthusiastically proclaimed](#) in the cover story of the October 22, 1976, issue of CT, which marked the magazine’s 20th anniversary and explored “The Year of the Evangelical.”

That was not the self-congratulatory claim of an insider. Just three days later, *Newsweek*, then one of America’s most influential outlets, put “[Born Again!](#)” in large print on its cover. It too used the phrase “the year of the evangelical,” borrowed from pollster George Gallup. And both candidates in the year’s presidential race, Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, claimed to be “born again” themselves.

In January of ’76, neither *evangelical* nor *born again* was familiar to American media. When Carter declared himself “born again” that winter, reporters started calling experts to ask, in effect, whether the phrase might suggest some strange religious proclivities. But by Election Day, everyone knew both terms.

As someone who has been studying American evangelicalism since the 1960s, I see the 1976 “year of the evangelical” phenomenon as both a turning point for evangelicalism and the most pointed illustration of why the subject is so elusive. That phrase is itself the most prominent example of the ongoing—and perhaps ineradicable—tendency to turn a widely variegated plural into a singular. There is no one “evangelical.” Rather there are, in the United States alone, hundreds of different types of evangelicals. And around the world, many more.

One analogy: Think of evangelicals like the biological class of mammals. Different mammal species have some traits in common, but we wouldn’t generalize about what all mammals are like by looking only at dogs, cats, rats, humans, or a hundred other examples. Yet newspeople and many other observers of evangelicals, especially in America, do something like that all the time, speaking of “evangelical” behavior as though it were just one species.

It’s true that evangelicals all have some traits in common. The most-used shorthand is the “quadrilateral” [defined by](#) British scholar David Bebbington: emphases on the Bible, individual conversion, activism, and the Cross. Wide varieties of Christians around the world, from wild Pentecostals to the staid Reformed, share these emphases.

Yet beyond recognizing such commonalities, one should be careful not to generalize about the whole by looking at only some of its parts. In the United States, perhaps the clearest example is that many African American churches are evangelical in teaching even while they may differ from their white American counterparts on many other traits and attitudes.

To understand the impact of 1976, we should consider how American evangelicalism looked just prior. Already there were widely differing types of Bible-believing, fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and other evangelism-focused Christians who could be classified as evangelicals in the sense that they shared these four core emphases, inherited from at least the 1700s in the days of the Great Awakening.

But before 1976, *evangelical* was not so widely used as a self-designation as it would be later. Christians who fit the description were more likely to identify with their denominations or to call themselves “born-again” or simply “Christian.”

There was one prominent exception, one group that self-described as evangelical and thought of evangelicalism as a movement with a center and a degree of unity. These card-carrying evangelicals, as we might call them, were those associated with institutions and ministries that were, broadly speaking, in the orbit of evangelist Billy Graham.

These were the heirs of the neo-evangelical movement, as it was first called, founded in the 1940s. That movement had grown out of the fundamentalism of the 1920s and 1930s and, under the leadership of Harold J. Ockenga, Carl F. H. Henry, and others, had revived the term *evangelical* to build a more positively oriented coalition.

Graham's successes in the 1950s and 1960s made this movement a major presence, and by the early 1970s, it had institutions worldwide. *Christianity Today* was the flagship American publication.

Card-carrying evangelicals wanted to recover classical theologies and expand Christian higher education, and they encouraged more nuanced approaches than their fundamentalist predecessors. Yet innovations also led to tensions, and early coalition leaders often acted as though evangelicalism were a quasi-denomination with boundaries to be policed accordingly. In the 1960s and 1970s, this most prominently meant the "[Battle for the Bible](#)," a debate over the nature and meaning of inerrancy.

Before 1976, there was no single evangelical mode of politics. One fundamentalist critique of their liberal, or modernist, counterparts in the 1920s was that the social gospel emphasized political means for social justice. Fundamentalists reacted with wariness of churches emphasizing politics beyond preservation of some traditional Christian norms. Many fundamentalists believed that because Jesus was coming very soon to set up his millennial kingdom, modern civilization was doomed, and politics were largely irrelevant.

In the three decades following World War II, prominent African American groups were working for racial justice, while many white Christians, especially in the South, opposed such activism and supported conservative political candidates. Some fundamentalists still shied away from politics, while others, like radio evangelist Carl McIntire and TV evangelist Billy James Hargis, emphasized anti-communism.

Fundamentalists in both camps tended toward a Manichaean view of reality, seeing the world as sharply divided between forces of light and darkness—like righteous America versus satanic communism. And by the 1960s, conservative Christians were increasingly vocal about the perennial fundamentalist theme of America forsaking its Christian heritage. As the country was, in fact, becoming more progressive, these sentiments were widespread and translated to votes for conservative politicians, beginning at the state and local

level with races like Ronald Reagan's 1966 election as governor of California.

At that point, the card-carrying evangelicals in organizations linked to Graham, though predominantly conservative, tended to be cautious about overt politicking. Like Graham himself, they hoped religious revival would make the nation righteous. But as CT founding editor Henry emphasized, they held that churches and ministries should avoid explicit political stances. Graham himself avoided *officially* endorsing presidential candidates—and then lobbied whoever won.

In the early 1970s, the big news in this orbit was the rise of vocal politically progressive evangelicals, especially [in the younger generation](#) and around the issue of racial equality. Some of these evangelical progressives, like those who founded *Sojourners* magazine—which [launched in 1971](#) as *The Post-American*—were more radical, in the Anabaptist tradition. Others sought to reshape the self-consciously evangelical movement.

Particularly notable was the [Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern](#), adopted in 1973 and often called the "Chicago Declaration." Though spearheaded by younger activists, it was endorsed by some mainstream figures, most notably Carl Henry, whose son Paul was among the organizers.

The next year, progressive social concerns again emerged at the Lausanne International Conference on World Evangelization. There, Latin American delegates René Padilla and Samuel Escobar argued for the necessity of progressive social action as part of the evangelical message, and England's John Stott, one of the principal organizers of the conference, lent his prestige to affirming that social concerns were an integral part of the gospel.

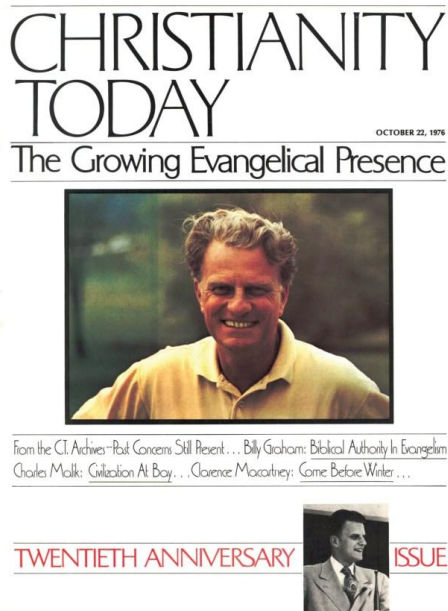
Back in the States, Jimmy Carter, a moderate progressive Democrat, was elected president in 1976. His candidacy brought new attention to evangelicalism, and it seemed that perhaps a new day was dawning for evangelical politics.

It was—but it would not be what the progressive evangelicals hoped. Conservatism was far more embedded than progressive sentiments among the grassroots.

That year was also the US bicentennial, and for those prone to Manichean thinking, a time to observe God's special favor bestowed upon the United States. One of the most popular books among Bible-believing Christians at the time, *The Light and the Glory* by Peter

Marshall and David Manuel, described original Christian America as God's chosen light—and from there it was one easy step to see progressive America as the darkness.

After the turbulent 1960s, many conservative Christians were alarmed that the nation was forsaking its Christian heritage. Prayers were no longer mandated in most public schools, and Christian formalities were no longer routine at most public events. Longstanding Christian moral standards were being abandoned, especially on sexuality, gender, and family. Divorce laws were more lenient. Women were being encouraged to find vocations beyond those of wife and mother. Contraception was more accessible. Abortion was legalized. And public culture in general was more permissive about sex.



The publicity of 1976 as the year of the evangelical, then, suddenly made it apparent that evangelicals could be a potent political force. Fundamentalist evangelicals—such as Bill Gothard, James Dobson, and Tim LaHaye—were establishing influential ministries emphasizing traditional family values. Political activists correctly recognized that, at the grassroots level, a theme of saving Christian America from radicals could be a powerful tool for mobilization. The simple light-versus-darkness motif could be especially compelling when paired with resentment of elites.

The most conspicuous leader to mobilize such sentiments was Jerry Falwell, who began in ministry as a separatist fundamentalist and had once condemned politically active Christians, particularly those working for civil rights. In the late 1970s, however, Falwell and his allies focused conservative evangelical attention on

abortion, which had just been legalized in many states because of 1973's *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Falwell allied with Catholics such as Phyllis Schlafly on abortion and other issues. And where President Richard Nixon had talked about “the silent majority,” Falwell and associates organized the Moral Majority. Other conservatives in the Republican Party welcomed the new coalition, and by 1980, conservative Christians were a considerable factor in the election of Ronald Reagan.

With such proven prospects for political power, there was no turning back. Manichean thinking on the moral state of the nation was compelling at the popular level, and during the 1980s, huge TV ministries—including Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart—flourished, often with politicized themes. Some of these ministries fell to scandal, but Robertson made a bid for the GOP presidential nomination in 1988.

In subsequent decades, Falwell's Moral Majority was succeeded by Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition. The aging Billy Graham faded from view, and President George W. Bush identified as an evangelical. Conservative politics came to dominate the wider American public's perception of evangelicalism, and white evangelicals (as identified by political pollsters) became the GOP's most reliable voting bloc, with about eight in ten supporting every Republican presidential nominee in the 21st century.

The nominee for whom this backing drew the most attention and consternation, of course, was Donald Trump in 2016, a candidate whose character was about as far from any New Testament ideal as could be imagined.

Much of that support was due to locked-in Republican loyalties—basically the same proportion of white evangelicals had voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 and Bush in 2004. And a great many conservative Christians were increasingly alarmed at the aggressive agenda of the “woke” left, which had its own self-righteous fervor and had successfully promoted gay marriage and transgender rights while vilifying anyone who so much as hesitated to conform to their practices.

Despite his own sexually libertine past, Trump seized on such issues and promised to be a strongman champion to counter such trends. He adopted other traditionally conservative causes too, including skepticism of climate change and opposition to gun control, endearing himself to Republican voters of many stripes. Most white born-again Christians who voted that year took the deal.

They took it again in 2020 and 2024, despite Trump's subsequent string of scandals, trials, and open disdain for constitutional constraints on the presidency. Prominent evangelicals who'd gone all in for Trump rationalized away his faults and insisted that his election remained an opportunity to bring the nation back to its Christ-ian roots. As Marshall and Manuel had proclaimed half a century prior, God always had a special plan for America as a Christian nation—and now, perhaps, the Almighty had provided the political clout to accomplish it.

In 2026, on another national anniversary, we should be careful not to exaggerate the degree to which white American evangelicalism has been corrupted by politics.

While there are indeed many evangelical leaders who have defended the indefensible, probably most ordinary evangelicals voted for Trump largely because they are Republicans in predominantly Republican communities with sincere and long-standing concern about abortion and LGBTQ issues. Again, white evangelical support for Romney and Bush was barely lower than for the far-less-upright Trump. And, though puzzling, Trump's success among evangelicals is not necessarily indicative of a whole new dark turn for American evangelicalism.

Moreover, the temptation to moral compromise in pursuit of power is not unique to politically conservative evangelicals. Left-leaning Christians have often given into the same temptation, especially in this era when politics is omnipresent, dominating traditional and new media alike.

It is no accident that one of the wilderness temptations of Christ was an offer of political power (Matt. 4:8–10). Satan showed Jesus the nations of the world and said, "All this I will give you...if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus answered, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

In broader perspective, it is helpful to be reminded that evangelicalism is a centuries-old, multifaceted movement with many manifestations worldwide. One of its long-standing traits—and sources of growth—is its invitation of free-enterprise innovation; and just about every evangelical innovation has had its evangelical detractors. Even so, most share the same basic gospel message, and for that we can rejoice.

Some American evangelicals have become politicized, yes. But that politicization does not characterize evangelicalism as a whole, nor even the whole of evangelicalism in America.

George Marsden is a historian of American Christianity and the author, most recently, of *An Infinite Fountain of Light: Jonathan Edwards for the Twenty-First Century*.

This article appeared in the [July/August 2026](#) issue of [Christianity Today](#) as "The Year of the Evangelical".

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