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Abstract

"It is humbling and heartening to remember that the church is wider than evangelicalism, and that the kingdom of God is bigger than our local experience of it."

Posting about the book *Struggling with Evangelicalism* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/better-than-we-found-it-a-review-of-struggling-with-evangelicalism/>

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“Better Than We Found It”: A Review of *Struggling with Evangelicalism*

Justin Bailey

November 4, 2021

Title: *Struggling with Evangelicalism: Why I Want to Leave and What It Takes to Stay*

Author: Dan Stringer

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In case you haven't noticed, evangelicalism is in crisis. Two recent, widely shared articles come to mind, bearing the titles [“The Evangelical Church is Breaking Apart,”](#) (*The Atlantic*) or the [“The Six Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism”](#) (*Mere Orthodoxy*). The historical movement that sought a middle way between fundamentalist and mainline Christianity—the evangelicalism of Billy Graham, and numerous American denominations and Christian institutions—seems to be collapsing under the pressure of the culture wars.

The term “evangelical” is a contested and contentious label, one that many younger Christians are reluctant to own. Meanwhile, a recent study showed that the number of Americans who identify as evangelical has increased among those who do not regularly attend religious services. ¹ Indeed, instead of being a theological label, evangelicalism is seen by many as a political brand, synonymous with conservative politics.

There is also evangelicalism as a cultural movement, embodied in its material artifacts that testify to shared values: radio programs, Contemporary Christian Music, the Christian publishing industry, and all the Christian celebrities it produces along the way. There are also many non-white Christians who are evangelical in their theology but reject the label, which they see as a white Christian band. Finally, there is a movement of “exvangelicals,” who are leaving evangelical institutions as loudly as possible.

So, who is an evangelical? And does it matter? Is evangelicalism worth saving? I teach at a confessionally Reformed, evangelical adjacent institution. But it strikes me that most of my students would be indistinguishable from mainstream evangelicals—whether we go by theological, political, or cultural markers.

There are a good number of my students who are adept in their ability to articulate and defend their evangelical beliefs, along with evangelical culture. It is not that they are unaware of the problems, but they are more likely to see these problems as distortions and aberrations rather than something woven into evangelicalism itself. These students want to focus on what's best about evangelicalism.

Then there are students (a much smaller number in my case) who are ready to leave because of evangelicalism's pathologies (they mention things like toxic masculinity, abuse of power by leaders, purity culture, homophobia). Many of these students have experienced these things personally, and they are more likely to want to burn it all down.

For my own part, I see the pathologies and am deeply troubled. I sometimes wonder, if the culture wars continue, whether the boundaries will be re-negotiated, leaving me on the outside. Some of my friends feel that this has already happened. And yet, I still identify as an evangelical. I think what I mean by this is that I hold to traditional evangelical emphases, have been formed by evangelical institutions, and make my living in evangelical spaces. As a former fundamentalist, I am grateful for evangelicalism. But the tensions continue to grow.

A recent book by Dan Stringer, *Struggling with Evangelicalism: Why I Want to Leave and What it Takes to Stay*, has helped me wrestle with these tensions. Here is its central question: what if evangelicalism is not just a brand, but a space? If it is just a brand, it is easier to reject and walk away from. But if it is still the space we live with others, we have a responsibility to make it "better than we found it."

Stringer's story gives him a unique vantage point from which to appraise evangelicalism. He is a graduate of evangelical institutions (Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary), a pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church, and a team leader for InterVarsity in Hawai'i. As a person of mixed ethnicity and a "third culture" missionary kid, he has lived in five countries on three continents. He has been a part of churches in 9 (!) different evangelical denominations. This diverse background provides him with unique lenses to appreciate evangelicalism's strengths and weaknesses.

Stringer's assessment neither excuses evangelicalism's pathologies nor advocates for evangelicalism's end. Though he has decided to stay in hopes of making things better, his book is not an apology for the evangelical movement. He is not necessarily trying to convince all strugglers to stay. Rather, he seeks to offer the gift of a non-anxious approach in assessing evangelicalism. The heart of the book is a process for struggling well, in four stages: awareness, appreciation, repentance, and renewal.

The first stage, awareness, encourages readers to place themselves and the sorts of evangelicalism they have encountered within the larger church. It is humbling and heartening to remember that the church is wider than evangelicalism, and that the kingdom of God is bigger than our local experience of it.

The second stage, appreciation, advocates a “strengths approach” from the world of social work. Appreciation comes from starting with resources, looking for signs of health and vitality. We may be tempted to begin with a list of evangelicalism’s ills, Stringer writes, and there are many. But the biblical pattern is first to remember God’s past action, and then to repent (see Rev. 3:1-3). As he writes: “Before you can solve your family’s problems, it’s worth acknowledging that you wouldn’t be here if not for them” (78).

The third stage is repentance. Anytime someone makes a critique of evangelicalism—whether abuse of leadership, misogyny, or racism—one of the first impulses that evangelicals feel is defensiveness, the desire to defend the larger movement, and to say that these ills are a distortion of true evangelicalism rather than issues woven into the movement itself. But Stringer points out that saying “#notallevangelicals” misses the opportunity to practice the sort of corporate repentance found in the pages of Scripture, wherein we take responsibility for the wrongs being done in and by our communities.

The final stage is renewal, and Stringer emphasizes that this requires more than “re-branding” or cosmetic change. It requires a willingness to listen to those who have left, a shift in our practices and processes, and a commitment to make it a hospitable space for those who remain, one in which true discipleship can continue.

After reading this book, some of his readers may still decide to leave. But whether we stay or go, Stringer helps us face the decision with integrity. All of us are called to care for the ecosystems of meaning in which we find ourselves. And that means wrestling with what it means to live here, why some want to leave, and what it takes to stay.

1. Ryan P. Burge, “So Why is Evangelicalism Not Declining? Because Non-Attendees Are Taking On the Label,” *Religion in Public*. December 10, 2020. <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/12/10/so-why-is-evangelicalism-not-declining-because-non-attendees-are-taking-on-the-label/>