

Moving On...

by **Brad Jersak**

I'm so over him! she sobbed, *I'm moving on!* confirming that she hadn't even begun the process of "moving on."

Theirs had been love at first sight—butterflies of infatuation assured her that she had found "Mister Right"—or, "the One" as she liked to call him. How had it come to this?

Not worth recounting, though she rehearsed the melt-down every sleepless night. If she was truly "so over him," why couldn't she let go and just move on?

Instead, she alternated between depression and panic, fits of rage and fountains of tears. "*Over him?*" Not as long as her identity was tied to his, even by resentment. Let's face it: he still filled her thoughts, however gloomy.

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Faith after Evangelicalism

Moving On...

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The Big Break-up

I'm speaking a parable. The 'boy' in this drama is not a boy, but a movement. The energetic, sexy movement some call **Evangelicalism**.

Evangelicalism gets its name from the old term, *evangel*—tracking back to its New Testament Greek roots, *euangelion*. *Evangel* in that context meant good news or gospel, from *euangelos*—*eu* (good) + *angelos* (messenger). That's where we got the term *evangelist*: messenger of the good news. Or *evangelism*—sharing the gospel.

In that sense, all Christians are evangelical (lower case 'e'), if we all believe in the good news of Jesus Christ and see ourselves as messengers of the gospel. We would hope so, anyway.

How is it, then, that one subset of Christendom took on the moniker "Evangelical" (upper case 'E') and ultimately became an -ism? While believers of various Christian tribes rightly claim to be small-e evangelicals, **let's coin a term for the movement or -ism in its current form. I'll use "Evangelicalist," mirroring the language of "Islamist" to identify the -ism's extremes and potentially violent nature.**

But I'm racing ahead. Back to the romance. Even "**Evangelicalists**" cannot be born into the movement. Every **Evangelicalist** (even toddlers) must discover their inherent "lostness" ASAP so that through "The Sinner's Prayer," they can

be "born again" and have "assurance of eternal life." The many quotation marks above indicate the heavy dose of insider lingo common to the movement, but the language is nevertheless "biblical" (another essential term in their glossary).

The brand of Evangelicalism I knew identified itself as the only true Christianity, as over against churches that were not Evangelical and therefore, not truly Christian. Why not?

The "mainline" churches (Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran) and the "mother church" traditions (Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox) all featured infant baptism, none seemed to believe in conversion or the

need to be "born again." And since Jesus and Billy Graham both said, "You must be ...," if they weren't, then they couldn't possibly be "believers."

In other words, when we asked if someone was Evangelical, that was code for, "Are they born again, saved and going to heaven?" True, we were being exclusive—just like heaven, just like Jesus, who said, "Narrow is the way that leads to life."

The Allure

So, what's the allure? What attracts so many to join the **Evangelicalist** camp? On positive notes, Evangelicals are unabashed in their worship of Jesus. If you want to meet Jesus, they are more than willing to pounce ... er, help. And I truly did encounter Christ in that context. I will forever be grateful to them for introducing me to Jesus.

They also presented the Bible in a way that made me ravenous for its life-giving words and wisdom. That, plus the array of enthusiastic worship music—from gospel quartets to swaying choirs to rockin' worship leaders—made for enthusiastic meetings that filled our hearts.

And of course, there was a shared sense of mission. We were often exhorted to participate in Christ's "Great Commission" of Matthew 28:18-20. Every child had it memorized early in grade school. Repeat after me:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything



I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Every one of us was enjoined to become a “soul-winner,” sharing the good news with anyone who would listen. Those who succeeded were hailed as heroes, because after all, what else were we born for? Our life goal and mission statement echoed popular *Evangelicalist* ministries: *to know Christ and to*

No, differences aren’t the problem. The drama occurs when differences are escalated into *us-them* tests of fellowship. When Evangelicals in the movement began to say, “If you don’t believe this, you aren’t even a Christian,” the boundaries became walls over which to throw opponents. At that point faith becomes an ideology, an *-ism*. That’s when an evangelical becomes an *Evangelicalist*.

that God created the entire universe in six literal 24-hour days no more than 10,000 years ago? Or could you interpret the creation narrative such that God initiated creation with a big bang 13.8 billion years ago?

3. Evolution: Must you believe that Adam was literally and instantly sculpted from dust and Eve carved from his rib? Or could you integrate our creation story with evolutionary theory, allowing for common ancestry with other living things?

4. The Flood: Must you believe that Noah’s flood actually covered the entire earth? Or could we read the text to say the flood reflects on a story in which the waters covered the world as they knew it, in a more regional way.

5. Genocide: Must you believe that God literally commanded the extermination of whole people groups in the Old Testament conquest narratives? Or could we attribute some of those incidents to human violence done in the name of God to justify their actions?

6. History: Must you believe that the entire Old Testament represents historical facts of Jewish history? Or could some of these texts be historical fiction loaded with theological truth? (e.g. Job or Jonah?).

7. Judgement: Must we believe that the judgements recounted in the Bible were expressions of God’s anger and actual acts of direct divine violence? Or could we read the language of “God’s wrath” as the intrinsic consequences of sin itself?

8. Atonement: Must we believe that the wrath of God could only be appeased through divine violence against Christ on the Cross? Is *penal substitutionary atonement* the gospel? Or might that be just

... when we asked if someone was Evangelical, that was code for “Are they born again, ‘saved’ and going to heaven?”

make him known. Well said!

Some readers may think me cynical and others, not cynical enough. But try not to read between the lines. It is what it is. To this day, I continue to love Jesus, consume the Scriptures, enjoy some faith-based worship, and share the good news of God’s love wherever I go.

If I’ve packed my bags, that’s what I’ve taken with me. Enough to say I’m still small-e evangelical and play well with other evangelicals.

But there was a dark side to the relationship—not with God but with the movement, especially as it evolved in America. Where did things go sour? How did it get old and ugly?

The Souring

Those who self-identify as *post-Evangelicalists* cite differences that accumulate over time. But differences need not divide. Even conflict is constructive when based on trust. As I said, you can be evangelical in nearly every part of the Body of Christ, even while seeing and appreciating how body parts differ.

That’s when unChristlike reactions to otherness leads to hurtful disillusionment and it is why so many have divorced themselves from the movement.

Some Evangelicals remain in the movement and grieve over broken fellowship. They retain the label “Evangelical,” hoping to retrieve the word from the extremists. They say, “My beliefs have changed, but I’m still an Evangelical.” Not a few of these find themselves marginalized or even expelled as heretics.

Must You Believe?

The question comes down to whether one must hold to certain secondary elements of doctrine, and whether the *Evangelicalist* can even admit these are secondary. For many, to be faithful to God is to adhere to these as non-negotiable dogmas. Here are 12 examples:

1. Inerrancy: Must you believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God? Or could you affirm that only God is inerrant, while retaining the language of inspiration for Scripture?

2. Creation: Must you believe

one atonement theory among many (and not the best one)?

9. Equality: Must we believe that women should not teach or have authority over men, excluding them from pastoral or preaching ministries to the church at large? Or could we move to an egalitarian model that declares “in Christ, there is neither male nor female”?


humanity will be damned forever? Or could we hold out for a broader hope? Without being pluralists (i.e. all paths lead to God), might we hope that God’s love, revealed on the Cross, could extend to many who never hear the gospel?

Thus far in my Christian journey, these are just twelve areas where I and millions of

removed from teaching posts or cancelled from speaking at conferences. They saw it as their mission from God.

Moving On

Eventually, I accepted my fate and left the movement. My departure was never over the differences cited above. I was simply weary of the ongoing spirit of cruelty,

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera on a wooden railway bridge that curves through a dense forest. The person is wearing a light-colored jacket and dark pants. The bridge is made of wooden planks and metal rails, and the surrounding area is filled with lush green trees.

*As a post-Evangelicalist,
I must not allow the bitter
taste in my mouth to
become a bitter root
in my heart.*

10. Moralism: In the name of holiness, must we condemn and exclude those whose moral standards differ from ours? Doesn’t that obscure the gospel? Or might we make space in our lives and even our worship for those of differing convictions?

11. Hell: Must we believe that hell is eternal conscious torment in a lake of fire, with no hope of redemption beyond the grave? Or may we see God’s judgements with hopeful eyes—as restoration rather than retribution?

12. Inclusion: Must we believe that the door to eternal life is so narrow that the majority of

others have had a change of heart. Some might say I’ve been enlightened. Others would call me “apostate” and a traitor to true Christianity.

Some have said to me, “All these options are open to evangelicals. Don’t leave us; we need you.”

But others, *Evangelicalists*, have told me directly, “You are no longer one of us. You are not welcome.” They’ve publicly called me an “enemy of the Cross,” “a false teacher” and deny that I’m even a Christian.

Some successfully campaigned to have me

rooted I believe, in the literalist’s retributive theology. As I saw it, the *Evangelicalists* had ceased to be good news. I moved on. Sort of.

Why only “sort of”?

1. *Evangelicalist exclusivists don’t represent all Evangelicals*, so why should I become exclusive? Many of my family, friends and colleagues still identify as Evangelicals. We love each other and refuse to sever fellowship.

2. *Evangelicalist moralism does not represent all Evangelicals*, nor should it infect me. Many Evangelicals are not given to the extremes of the -ism. Their hearts are expansive and their

mission is love. I can work with that.

3. *Evangelicalists do not hold the monopoly on evangelical faith*—and neither do I. Faith arises wherever God pleases to reveal himself. For example, Muslims around the world are having visions of Jesus Christ and turning to him. Could he not also appear even among the *Evangelicalists?*

4. *As a post-Evangelicalist, I must not allow the bitter taste in my mouth to become a bitter root in my heart.* Many of our readers are, like me, “posties.” Others still identify as Evangelicals (without the *-ism*). They continue to experience spiritual nourishment and living faith where they are. It’s not for me to poison a good well with the toxins of my negative experiences.

In the end, we must all test the fruit of moving on. Will our moving take us closer to faith, hope and love in Christ—or away from him? My prayer and intent is to be an agent of love to those still in the movement and for those who’ve already made their exit. □

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WALKING AWAY

A lot of walking away will do your life good. Walk away from arguments that lead you to anger and nowhere. Walk away from people who deliberately put you down. Walk away from the practice of pleasing people who choose to never see your worth. Walk away from any thought that undermines your peace of mind. Walk away from judgmental people, they do not know the struggle you are facing and what you have been through. Walk away from your mistakes and fears, they do not determine your fate. The more you walk away from things that poison your soul, the healthier your life will be. — *Dodinsky*

SHE DROVE AWAY

Dear CWR,

For years, I have felt the frustration of having people ask me what church I go to when talking about my relationship with Jesus, automatically assuming I go to church. It seems more important to them to hear about what church I go to than to hear about my relationship with Jesus.

I describe myself as a non-denominational Christian who doesn’t go to church. But when I try to explain to someone why I don’t go to church or affiliate myself with any religion, most people don’t get it.

But you guys seem to get it, and you speak for those of us who don’t have the time, energy or intelligence to get across what we are feeling and have been feeling for years.

I understand and accept that ours is a path of discipleship, but still, when going down “the road less traveled,” it’s nice to bump into fellow disciples every now and then.

Thank you for being a voice for those of us outside the religious system.

Thanks be to God for you!

Warren, Ohio



It's Sunday morning. Sarah has driven to her church. She's parked. But she can't seem to force herself out of her car. She just can't do it anymore. She looks on, watching the people she has gathered with for years going into the building. Suddenly they all seem like strangers to her. She will watch them for a little longer. Then she will say goodbye to them in her heart. Then she will drive away.