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OPINION

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The Line Between Good and Evil Cuts Through Evangelical America

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By **David French**
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I'm afraid that an exit poll question has confused America.

Every four years, voters are asked, “Are you a white evangelical or born-again Christian?” And every time, voters from a broad range of Protestant Christian traditions say yes, compressing a diverse religious community into a single, unified mass.

It's not that the question is misleading. People who answer yes do represent a coherent political movement. Not only do they vote overwhelmingly for Republicans; they're also quite distinct from other American political groups in their views on a host of issues, including on disputes regarding race, immigration and the Covid vaccines.

But in other ways, this exit poll identity misleads us about the nature and character of American evangelicalism as a whole. It's far more diverse and divided than the exit poll results imply. There are the rather crucial facts that not all evangelicals are white and evangelicals of color vote [substantially differently](#) from their white brothers and sisters. Evangelicals of color are far more likely to vote Democratic, and their positions on many issues are [more closely aligned](#) with the American political mainstream. But the differences go well beyond race.

In reality, American evangelicalism is best understood as a combination of three religious traditions: fundamentalism, evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. These different traditions have different beliefs, different cultures and different effects on our nation.

The distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism can be the hardest to parse, especially since we now use the term "evangelical" to describe both branches of the movement. The conflict between evangelicalism and fundamentalism emerged most sharply in the years following World War II, when so-called [neo-evangelicals](#) arose as a biblically conservative response to traditional fundamentalism's separatism and fighting spirit. I say "biblically conservative" because neo-evangelicals had the same high view of Scripture as the inerrant word of God that fundamentalists did, but their temperament and approach were quite different.

The difference between fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism can be summed up in two men, Bob Jones and Billy Graham. In a 2011 piece about the relationship between Jones and Graham, the Gospel Coalition's Justin Taylor [called them](#) the "exemplars of fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism." Jones was the founder of the university that bears his name in Greenville, S.C., one of the most influential fundamentalist colleges in America.

Bob Jones University [barred Black students from attending](#) until 1971, then banned interracial dating [until 2000](#). The racism that plagued Southern American fundamentalism is a key reason for the segregation of American

religious life. It's also one reason the historically Black Protestant church is distinct from the evangelical tradition, despite its similar views of the authority of Scripture.

Graham attended Bob Jones University for a semester, but soon left and took a different path. He went on to become known as “America’s pastor,” the man who ministered to [presidents of both parties](#) and led gigantic evangelistic crusades in stadiums across the nation and the world. While Jones segregated his school, Graham [removed the red segregation rope](#) dividing white and Black attendees at his crusades in the South — before Brown v. Board of Education — and shared a stage with Martin Luther King Jr. at Madison Square Garden in 1957.

But since that keen Jones/Graham divide, the lines between evangelicalism and fundamentalism have blurred. Now the two camps often go to the same churches, attend the same colleges, listen to the same Christian musicians and read the same books. To compound the confusion, they’re both quite likely to call themselves evangelical. While the theological differences between fundamentalists and evangelicals can be difficult to describe, the temperamental differences are not.

“Fundamentalism,” Richard Land, the former head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, once told me, “is far more a psychology than a theology.” That psychology is defined by an extreme sense of certainty, along with extreme ferocity.

Roughly speaking, fundamentalists are intolerant of dissent. Evangelicals are much more accepting of theological differences. Fundamentalists place a greater emphasis on confrontation and domination. Evangelicals are more interested in pluralism and persuasion. Fundamentalists focus more on God’s law. Evangelicals tend to emphasize God’s grace. While many evangelicals are certainly enthusiastic Trump supporters, they are more likely to be reluctant (and even embarrassed) Trump voters, or Never Trumpers, or Democrats. Fundamentalists tend to [march much more in](#) lock step with the MAGA movement. Donald Trump’s combative psychology in many ways merges with their own.

A Christian politics dominated by fundamentalism is going to look very different from a Christian politics dominated by evangelicalism. Think of the difference between Trump and George W. Bush. Bush is conservative. He’s

anti-abortion. He's committed to religious liberty. These are all values that millions of MAGA Republicans would claim to uphold, but there's a yawning character gap between the two presidents, and their cultural influence is profoundly different.

While the difference between evangelicalism and fundamentalism can be difficult to discern, Pentecostalism is something else entirely. American evangelicals can trace their roots to the Reformation; the Pentecostal movement began a little over 100 years ago, during the [Azusa Street revival](#) in Los Angeles in 1906. The movement was started by a Black pastor named William Seymour, and it is far more supernatural in its focus than, say, the Southern Baptist or Presbyterian church down the street.

At its heart, Pentecostalism believes that all of the gifts and miracles you read about in the Bible can and do happen today. That means prophecy, speaking in tongues and gifts of healing. Pentecostalism is more [working class](#) than the rest of the evangelical world, and Pentecostal churches are often more diverse — far more diverse — than older American denominations. Hispanics in particular have embraced the Pentecostal faith, both in the United States and in Latin America, and Pentecostalism has exploded [in the global south](#).

When I lived in Manhattan, my wife and I attended Times Square Church, a Pentecostal congregation in the heart of the city, and every Sunday felt like a scene from [the book of Revelation](#), with people “from every nation, tribe, people and language” gathered together to worship with great joy.

Pentecostalism is arguably the most promising and the most perilous religious movement in America. At its best, the sheer exuberance and radical love of a good Pentecostal church is transformative. At its worst, the quest for miraculous experience can lead to a kind of frenzied superstition, where carnival barker pastors and faux apostles con their congregations with false prophecies and fake miracles, milking them for donations and then wielding their abundant wealth as proof of God's favor.

The Pentecostal church, for example, is the primary home of one of the most toxic and dangerous Christian nationalist ideas in America — the [Seven Mountain Mandate](#), which holds that God has ordained Christians to dominate the seven “mountains” of cultural influence: the family, the church, education,

media, arts, the economy and government. This is an extreme form of Christian supremacy, one that would relegate all other Americans to second-class status.

Pentecostalism is also the primary source for the surge in prophecies about Trump [that I've described before](#). It's mostly Pentecostal pastors and leaders who have told their flocks that God has ordained Trump to rule — and to rule again. Combine the Seven Mountain Mandate with Trump prophecies, and you can see the potential for a kind of fervent radicalism that is immune to rational argument. After all, how can you argue a person out of the idea that God told him to vote for Trump? Or that God told him that Christians are destined to reign over the United States?

When I look at the divisions in American evangelicalism, I'm reminded of the [Homer Simpson toast](#): "To alcohol! The cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems." The American church has been the cause of much heartache and division. It is also the source of tremendous healing and love. We saw both the love and the division most vividly in the civil rights movement, when Black Christians and their allies faced the dogs and hoses all too often unleashed by members of the white Southern church. We saw this on Jan. 6, when violent Christians attacked the Capitol, only to see their plans foiled by an evangelical vice president who broke with Trump at long last to uphold his constitutional oath and spare the nation a far worse catastrophe.

I've lived and worshiped in every major branch of American evangelicalism. I was raised in a more fundamentalist church, left it for evangelicalism and spent a decade of my life worshiping in Pentecostal churches. Now I attend a multiethnic church that is rooted in both evangelicalism and the Black church tradition. I've seen [great good](#), and I've seen [terrible evil](#).

That long experience has taught me that the future of our nation isn't just decided in the halls of secular power; it's also decided in the pulpits and sanctuaries of American churches. [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#) wrote that the line between good and evil "cuts through the heart of every human being." That same line also cuts through the heart of the church.

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is ["Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation"](#). You can follow him on Threads ([@davidfrenchjag](#)).

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