

Analyzing “Move-the-Dial” Evangelicals

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Scholars of religion and politics typically view Sunday morning activity as a key determinant of evangelicalism's influence in American life. Rightly so, as denominational membership, regularity of church attendance and messages from the pulpit are indeed related to evangelicals' ideological orientation and political participation. However, in *Faith in the Halls of Power*, sociologist Michael Lindsay finds that evangelical influence in American society has less to do with Sunday mornings and is more directly related to where and how evangelical public leaders spend their time Monday through Friday.

In this impressive study of evangelical elites in America, Lindsay finds that popular notions of evangelicals as Republican Party loyalists, “values voters,” *Left Behind* readers and even Sunday morning churchgoers are incomplete. After conducting 360 interviews with evangelical leaders in government, academia, the media, and business, Lindsay concludes that evangelicals are a more diverse group than previously thought. His account is not the typical story of evangelical pastors and their congregants, but of professors and professionals and how faith shapes their behavior in the workplace.

The book is brimming with well-known public figures willing to speak on the record about their faith; while this makes for a scintillating read, Lindsay could be criticized for employing a rather inclusive definition of evangelical identity. For instance, Lindsay's study includes Catholics (such as John J. DiIulio Jr., former director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives) and members of mainline Protestant denominations (such as former President George H. W. Bush) simply because they self-identify as evangelical and hold to what Lindsay defines as evangelical beliefs about Jesus Christ and the Bible. Lindsay is correct to assert that evangelicalism is a social identity and accepting the label has relevance, but his methods do call into question whether or not the diversity he finds within evangelicalism is real or simply an artifact of how loosely he operationalized evangelical identity apart from denominational affiliation.

Regardless, Lindsay's analytical voice in this book is soft-spoken and readers will appreciate hearing from evangelicals themselves. Lindsay adopts the language of one interviewee and calls these elites

“move-the-dial” evangelicals because they desire to change the culture from the inside out. In order to do so, these evangelicals believe it is best to occupy positions of influence within secular institutions and then live out their faith in that setting. For former Alaskan Airlines CEO, Bruce Kennedy, doing so involved placing cards with printed Bible verses on passengers’ meal trays. For some evangelical politicians, acting out one’s faith means pursuing legislation supporting human rights.

These “move-the-dial” evangelicals, according to Lindsay, are distinct from evangelicals ensconced in the evangelical subculture — a subculture which many evangelical elites describe as “cheesy” and “anemic.” Lindsay appears somewhat eager to draw a line between these two groups of evangelicals, perhaps in an attempt to counter the Sunday-centric ways in which evangelicalism traditionally has been understood. Lindsay classifies evangelicals who take a more nuanced approach to cultural engagement as “cosmopolitan” evangelicals; they are well educated and occupy positions of power in mainstream institutions. “Populist” evangelicals, on the other hand, tend to be more sectarian and rely upon “a rhetoric of dichotomies” (“Christian” music is good while “secular” music is bad).

The categories work on a number of levels. First, they will resonate with many in the evangelical community. (Evangelicals within academia are likely to see a distinction between themselves and the Christian Right, while evangelicals in Colorado Springs may doubt that evangelicals working for secular programs like *That ‘70s Show* in Hollywood share their religious convictions.) The distinction also serves to demonstrate that the evangelical community is not monolithic. Moreover, in an age when the Christian Right’s influence in politics is waning, identifying an alternative arena of cultural influence is a worthwhile enterprise.

However, Lindsay could have pursued the origins of these orientations more fully, and the social scientist is left wondering how best to operationalize these categories and whether or not they hold immediate political implications. What belief system is most readily associated with these categories? Is a cosmopolitan orientation simply a function of educational attainment? It is hard to know whether Lindsay has actually discovered something new here or if these labels are instead simply old wine in new wineskins.

Perhaps Lindsay’s most interesting finding has to do with the diminishing relevance of church life for evangelical elites. Many of the evangelicals with whom Lindsay spoke do not regularly attend a local church but instead rely on parachurch organizations as a place for worship and solidarity. (For example, the evangelical network for political leaders and professionals in Washington, D.C., is known as “the Fellowship” and brings together

leaders from across party lines for Bible study and prayer.) Lindsay suggests these parachurch organizations provide elites a social network, are consistent with the “entrepreneurial edge” of evangelicalism, and are a sign of the tradition’s durability. Soberly, he does note how the absence of evangelical elites in the pews on Sunday morning might bring about an unwelcome socioeconomic divide within evangelicalism, but Lindsay does not believe elite reliance on parachurch networks over the local church is a sign that evangelicalism is in decline. In fact, within this population, he says, “religious fervor is as strong as ever (p. 130).”

Nevertheless, some readers might take issue with Lindsay’s positive portrayal of the parachurch as a viable stand-in for the local church and might not be so quick to assume that it will increase the tradition’s durability. Throughout the book many of these evangelical elites describe their faith using pragmatic, individualistic terms. As others have pointed out, this is in fact an Americanized — some might say diluted — form of evangelical Christianity. According to political scientist Alan Wolfe, “American faith has met American culture — and American culture has triumphed.” Lindsay gingerly disagrees with Wolfe, saying this is instead a new form of evangelicalism altogether. He appears to believe his findings should make evangelicals optimistic about their influence on American public life. But some orthodox evangelicals in the pews on Sunday mornings might not be so encouraged.

Overall, the book is a well-researched, thought-provoking contribution to the study of evangelicals in American life. It answers important questions about the breadth of evangelical influence and reveals how evangelical elites approach their work in not-so-evangelical-friendly working environments. The questions it raises, particularly about the centrality of church life to evangelical Christianity, are important as well.

Evangelical Elites: One Voice or Many?

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Students of American evangelicalism must read Lindsay’s book. He listens to evangelical elites in a way that no one else writing about them comes