

# Confessions of a Non-Evangelical

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**The Lost Soul of American Protestantism**, D.G. Hart, Rowman & Littlefield 2002 (0-7425-0768-8), pp. xxxiv + 197, Hb \$37.50/Pb \$22.95

**That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century**, D.G. Hart, Ivan R. Dee 2002 (1-56663-460-1), pp. 246, Hb \$24.95

**Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham**, D.G. Hart, Baker Academic 2004 (0-8010-2728-4), pp. 224, Hb \$21.99

D.G. Hart has been a very busy man. Over the past three years, Hart has authored four books, co-authored a fifth, edited a sixth, and co-edited a seventh. Taken together, his work amounts to a trenchant critique of American evangelicalism and a sustained effort to promote confessional and liturgical Protestantism.

In *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, Hart argues that the prevailing categories for analyzing twentieth century US Protestant history, liberalism (or modernism) and evangelicalism (or conservatism), are fundamentally inadequate. Instead, he suggests that liberals and evangelicals are two of a kind, what he calls 'pietistic Protestants', and that another category is needed. This he finds in 'confessional Protestantism', located among liturgical Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other Reformed churches. This churchly confessionalism, which he claims is the true descendent of Reformational Protestantism, is the lost soul of the title.

Hart's argument is challenging, if ultimately unconvincing. He notes that both liberals and evangelicals understand Christianity to be a matter of public significance, not simply a private affair of individuals and their churches. Liberals and evangelicals believe religion should have practical utility in the everyday concerns of life, though they often differ on what those concerns are and how best to apply the Christian faith to them. Liberals focus on poverty, discrimination, and systemic injustices, and they run soup kitchens and homeless and battered women's shelters. Evangelicals focus on the decline of the family, sexual mores, and abortion, and they seek to evangelize the lost and support traditional values. Hart's confessionalists take a different

approach. By enforcing a rigorous separation between the sacred and the mundane, confessionalists refuse to make Christianity pragmatic, and thus avoid trivializing it. Holding a high view of the ministerial office and ecclesiastical authority, they understand the Church to mediate grace through the authorized channels of word and sacraments. The Church is the community of pilgrims who look ahead with great anticipation to heaven, and their liturgies foreshadow its splendours and give them strength for the earthly battle with sin.

On the question of just when American religion lost its soul, Hart gets murky. He cites the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s as a turning point, as revivalists 'transformed Christianity from a churchly and routine affair into one that was intense and personal', a matter of inward piety rather than outward observance, of lay dominance rather than clerical control (p. xxii). But it's far from clear that American religion was ever primarily churchly in this way. Certainly New England Puritans like John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, and the Mathers were intensely pietistic in Hart's terms, following the path of their English forebears. The Dutch Reformed minister Theodore Frelinghuysen found a ready audience for his pietism in New Jersey's Raritan Valley in the 1720s, and William Tennent promoted a heart-felt religiosity embraced by his son Gilbert and other New Side Presbyterians in the Awakening. Finally, lacking a bishop in the American colonies, Anglicanism in Virginia and elsewhere was known for its lay control and weak clergy. The geographic realities of transatlantic travel and large settlement areas made it extremely difficult to transplant church hierarchies in America, and movement toward democratization and individualistic piety quickly became the norm. In fact, Hart never establishes the historical reality of the soul he claims America lost; rather, in ways he does not acknowledge, his is a normative judgment as to what should have been and should now be the soul of American Protestantism.

If this is the case, can pockets of Old Light Presbyterians in the eighteenth century, faithfully confessional Lutheran and Reformed churches in the nineteenth century, and their limited numbers of descendents more recently be considered collectively one of the two main categories for analysis of American religion? Unfortunately for Hart's case, the numbers do not add up to anything approaching a critical mass. Admittedly, liberalism and evangelicalism are inchoate terms that lack rigour, but they have proven their usefulness as general descriptors of the broadly bifurcated state of American Protestantism. Hart decries the sloppy identification of confessionalists with an evangelicalism whose low-church, pietistic ethos they denounce, but this suggests the need for more specificity through additional categories like confessionalism rather than conflating evangelicalism and liberalism into one large category and opposing it to confessionalism. Perhaps

the rub for Hart is that evangelicals are regularly referred to as 'conservatives', and he sees them as dangerous innovators who have departed from the true faith in denying the centrality of creeds, sacraments, and high-church ecclesiology. His confessionalists, he wants us to know, are the real conservatives, the keepers of the soul, rather than populist, market-driven, parachurch-oriented evangelicals or the hopelessly lost liberals. Hart's promotion of the true conservatism may answer the question of why he does not include high-church Episcopalians, for their theology has too readily embraced liberal notions.

One of the principal virtues of confessionalism, Hart suggests, is that through the doctrine of the spirituality of the Church it keeps Christianity private, a matter of churchly observance rather than public policy or cultural engagement. This is good not only for the Church, but for the body politic, for it keeps the public sphere 'religiously neutral' (pp. xvii–xviii). Hart claims this will spare American society the heavy-handed moralism and self-righteousness of religious dogooders who mistake Christian conviction for public ethics. While Hart's privatistic Christianity provides a helpful counterweight to those who would turn the pulpit into a political rostrum, his radical separation between Church and world is overdrawn. The absence of religion, of course, does not equal religious neutrality in the public sphere or any other arena. Further, religion inherently is invested in public issues like divorce, abortion, bioethics, and homosexuality since they raise moral questions about human beings and the nature of life. Are Christians to divest themselves of their faith when they enter the public sphere to discuss and debate these issues? Hart acknowledges that nineteenth century abolitionists and prison reformers, twentieth century civil rights advocates, and other countless other American reformers have had religious motivations, but he argues these are more than offset by Prohibitionists and other meddling Christian activists. Even in the ecclesiastical realm, however, one wonders if the Church can adequately care for souls, as Hart calls upon it to do, without attending to the failing marriages of its members, for examples, and the factors contributing to such problems.

In *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*, Hart takes clearer aim at his faux conservative nemesis. He again traces the conversionist, experiential, behavioral religiosity of evangelicalism to the Great Awakening, then notes its cultural dominance in nineteenth century America, when it served as the functional equivalent of an established church at least from 1800–1860. But growing cultural, intellectual, and social changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries overturned this privileged position, and subsequently evangelicals have been unable to forget their lost status. Hart's book focuses on this 'reversal of evangelical fortunes'

in the twentieth century (p. 18). He wonders, 'How did born-again Protestants, who were by most accounts among the most respected Americans, become in the minds of many at best an annoyance and at worst a threat to civil society?' (p. 18).

Hart begins to answer this question by attending to the modernist-fundamentalist battles of the 1920s. This is a peculiar place to start, for he indicates that the first phase of twentieth century evangelical history can be dated from roughly 1880–1920. By neglecting this period, and its increasing differentiation between theologically liberal and evangelical parties, he is able to claim that the groups associated with these labels were really indistinguishable until the 1920s. This begs the question of where the Scopes Trial and the other decisive fissures of the 1920s came from if not decades of friction. It was the evangelical understanding of the Bible, on display in the Scopes Trial, that marginalized them in the first half of the twentieth century. As science and other modern developments raised questions of traditional biblical readings, evangelicals clung to a high view of Scripture as the literal word of God with minimal human influence. Combined with a socially pessimistic dispensationalism, this biblicism united evangelicals and led them into a 'self-imposed intellectual exile' marked by the creation of dozens of Bible colleges (p. 49). Their broad nineteenth century intellectual world shrank in the twentieth century to 'little more than Bible study and the most effective means of evangelizing' (p. 50). This mistake, Hart implies, could have been avoided had evangelicals not built their understanding of the Bible upon the democratic conceit that people could read and interpret it for themselves and the correlative 'distrust of mediated authority' in the form of the duly ordained clergymen, creeds, and liturgies of confessional churches (p. 29).

Withdrawing in defeat from mainline denominations, evangelicals built a vibrant subculture in the middle decades of the century. Central to this enterprise were hundreds of parachurch groups and faith missions that united evangelicals across denominational lines. A common identity also came through the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, the spirituality of the Keswick movement, and behavioural prohibitions. With its upbeat music and presentational ethos, evangelicalism 'was emerging as a young people's faith', and by the late 1940s it had its first 'superstar' in the figure of Billy Graham, whose populist appeal and simple evangelism made him the grand unifier of twentieth century evangelicalism (pp. 77, 80). Graham also reflected evangelical politics in his support for the American way of life and opposition to godless communism. But the evangelical impulse to infuse the public realm with religion and morality also issued in figures like Gerald Winrod, the notorious antisemite and white supremacist who sought to protect America from the dark conspiracies that agitated his mind.

Meanwhile, through Fuller Theological Seminary, *Christianity Today*, and academic organizations like the Evangelical Theological Society, mid-century evangelicals sought to develop a distinctive evangelical mind to counter the perils of secularization. This effort achieved only limited success, Hart claims, because of a narrowly defined faith that insisted upon biblical inerrancy and a naïve pragmatism that claimed that right beliefs and ideas produce right behaviors. Oddly, Hart overlooks a strong group of evangelical intellectuals of recent decades, such as the philosopher Alvin Plantinga and the historian George Marsden, focusing instead on popularizers like Francis Schaeffer. In addition to intellectual resistance to American culture, evangelicals mobilized politically in response to the seismic cultural shifts begun in the 1960s. Feeling besieged and worried about their capacity to pass on their faith to their children, evangelicals formed groups like the Moral Majority and Concerned Women for America to counteract the influence of the sexual revolution, the removal of prayer and Bible reading from public schools, and abortion. But even as evangelicals have decried the degradation of American culture that has occurred in part through television and other media, they have proven themselves masters of entertainment and popular communications, innovators who look for new ways to spread an old faith. This hardly makes a media organization like Focus on the Family a reflection of evangelical assimilation to mainstream culture, as Hart suggests – after all, they produce oppositional content – but one can see powerful signs of accommodation in Christian rock-and-roll, for example, and its profound influence in shaping evangelical church music in the last twenty years. As they have throughout their history, evangelicals continue to express their faith and evangelize the lost through the idioms of popular culture.

Hart concludes with a critique of ‘evangelical misunderstandings’ in which he reiterates the inapplicability of the common descriptor ‘conservative’ to evangelicals, citing the ‘incongruity between a timeless message and a perpetually novel cultural idiom’ (p. 203). In fact, he argues that ‘to call evangelicalism conservative is anachronistic’ since it predates the Protestant divisions of the twentieth century (p. 203). But were there not conservatives and liberals in earlier centuries, relative to their contexts? Can we not say that Charles Hodge was a conservative and William Ellery Channing a liberal? As pietists, evangelicals insist that their faith applies to all of life rather than just the sacred matters of the church. This claim enabled evangelicals to have substantial public influence during the culturally homogenous nineteenth century, Hart avers, but it makes them awkward and dangerous outsiders in a context of greater diversity. The religious and cultural heterogeneity of the twentieth century has necessitated secularism, which evangelicals can only view as a threat given their convictions. Hart acknowledges that some opponents of Protestantism have

endorsed secularism for their own partisan purposes, but he recurs to the philosophically untenable notion of 'religious neutrality', simplistically equating it with secularism (p. 207). Indeed, evangelicals are uncomfortable with their diminished influence in society and the ways secularism marginalizes their views, but they function similarly to other political actors in trying to ensure their moral convictions are represented in the public sphere. Secular abortion advocates and evangelical abortion foes both use moral arguments to try to shape public debate and policy. Apparently, for Hart, the former do so on neutral grounds and the latter are guilty of trying to Christianize American society.

After next writing a book promoting his positive agenda for confessional Protestantism, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (2003), Hart returns to evangelicalism in *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*. Having critiqued twentieth century evangelicalism and identified its eighteenth century origins in the Great Awakening, Hart now decides there is no such thing. Evangelicalism, in reality, is a 'construction' created by the fundamentalists known as 'neo-evangelicals' in the 1940s and 1950s, and scholars who have gullibly accepted neo-evangelical terminology and definitions. In a work he calls 'one part history, one part theological critique', Hart argues that the manifold weaknesses of evangelicalism – its pragmatism, thoughtlessness, excessive attunement to shifting cultural winds, and so forth – arise from the fundamental fact that there is no real evangelical identity (p. 10). He thus seeks to deconstruct evangelicalism as a category of analysis and religious identity. But Hart cannot seem to decide whether he wants to argue that evangelicalism is a nonentity which his deconstruction will reveal as such, or an insufficiently defined entity, which by virtue of its weaknesses has itself deconstructed.

In either case, the standard to which Hart holds evangelicalism is poorly chosen. In effect, Hart says that evangelicalism is not a church, which attention to polity, creed, and worship demonstrates. Thus it cannot provide the kind of normative, well-defined Christian identity Hart finds in confessional Protestant churches like his own Orthodox Presbyterian Church. But this critique entails a fundamental confusion of categories. By his standard, we would also have to jettison Protestant liberalism, fundamentalism, the New Age movement, and all the other general terms we use to group broadly like-minded, if disparate, believers. Religion in America has been exceedingly messy, with hundreds and even thousands of denominations and new religious groups of almost every conceivable variety. To begin to understand these groups in the aggregate, or to survey the landscape, we need general categories of analysis. All such categories have their weaknesses and require careful definition and usage, but rejecting them because

they do not provide the specificity of church labels hardly seems like the right solution. After all, Hart's standard would force us to set aside any number of denominational labels as well, such as Episcopalian and Methodist, which do not carry the normative weight he desires. Hart's criticism seems predicated on a religious economy of established churches, or at least a limited number of very well-defined and doctrinally unified churches. Terms like evangelicalism are helpful designators precisely because the religious context is so radically different today than in the seventeenth century, because freedom of religion – especially in the United States – has led to a profusion of religious bodies with complex and conflicting claims. Hart tells us he would prefer to be called a 'Presbyterian historian' rather than an 'evangelical historian', as he is often mislabelled, but given that there is not one but many Presbyterian churches, this only begs the question of whether 'Presbyterian' can provide a coherent religious identity as such.

In the first part of *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, Hart claims religious historians, social scientists, and pollsters have embraced the category of evangelicalism created by neo-evangelicals like Carl F.H. Henry and Billy Graham and then read it back into American Protestant history. He recognizes the use of the term in the nineteenth century, for instance, but suggests it applied more broadly to the Protestant mainstream. Following the fundamentalist-modernist split, however, it came to apply only to the theologically conservative side of the divide, those who claimed to be upholding Christian orthodoxy. This understanding, then, animates historical studies of American religion, for example. This usage has increased with the shift from 'church history' to 'American religious history' as the object of inquiry in recent decades. Rather than study specific denominations in isolation, American religious historians tend to look at larger patterns among religious bodies in relation to the larger cultural and social context. Hart regrets this because it overlooks 'rites, offices, and creeds', but it is arguable that in a religious environment of mobility and voluntary affiliation where relatively weak denominations do not have the capacity to compel consistency across geographic and sociocultural lines, denominations *per se* are not the best tools of analysis (p. 60). Evangelicalism and liberalism better describe the theological and ideological divisions within the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), along with the inter-denominational commonalities of the respective subgroups, than do the denominational labels alone.

The second part of the book supplies a searching critique of evangelical weaknesses. In place of meaningful ecclesiology, evangelicals have relied on parachurch organizations and a 'culture of celebrity' which promotes figures like James Dobson and Pat Robertson to great prominence (p. 120). This has meant little in the way of binding commitment for typical believers, who take on the role of religious

consumers more than faithful church members. Evangelicalism holds together – to the extent it does – not by means of detailed creeds and catechisms, but by adherence to simple claims like the inerrancy of the Bible and affinity for trendy contemporary praise and worship music, which have proven incapable of providing strong theological, intellectual, and institutional coherence. Yet what Hart calls the ‘abstraction’ of evangelicalism has proven useful in supplying a sense of belonging and vigor to those eager to recover what they take to be the American religious heritage, and scholars looking to investigate large groups of Christians (p. 176).

In his conclusion, titled ‘Enough Already’, Hart changes his categories of analysis. Here he recognizes evangelicalism as a movement or coalition, but decries its traditionlessness. Despite the efforts of evangelicals like D.H. Williams, a Baptist who recommends a recovery of tradition as part of embracing the full evangelical heritage, Hart wonders whether what results is still evangelical or in fact draws decisively upon Catholicism and the magisterial Reformation. Is it impossible, he suggests, ‘to pour tradition into a vessel such as modern American evangelicalism, which is designed to hold only liquids that are traditionless’ (p. 183). Post World War II evangelicals tried to align themselves with the colonial Great Awakening, but the variety of their movement belied their efforts. The populist, lowest common denominator religiosity of evangelicalism has enabled it to mobilize the masses in impressive ways. Yet, Hart argues, ‘its breadth has come with the price of shallowness, while its mass appeal has generated slogans more than careful reflection. . . . At its best, it is a sentiment. At its worst, it is a solvent of tradition because traditions are too narrow for evangelical purposes; they are too dogmatic and therefore too confining’ (p. 187).

Therefore, Hart proposes a moratorium on the term ‘evangelicalism’ and instead suggests referring to American Protestants ‘by their church membership, from Baptist and Methodist to Lutheran and even the Willow Creek Association’ (p. 188). But this suggestion only raises the question of which Baptists and which Lutherans. The continued utility of the terms evangelicalism and liberalism is evident in the fact that the members of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, for example, have at least as much in common, if not much more so, with each other on theological and especially moral grounds as they do with members of mainline Baptist and Lutheran denominations. Thus, ‘Baptist’ and ‘Lutheran’ no more designate normative theological and ecclesiological traditions in the American religious context than do evangelicalism and liberalism, and the latter in some ways provide more analytical purchase. It is the tradition of freedom of religion, not evangelicalism, that has been the principal solvent of religious traditions in America. From the first colonial set-

lements, many Americans sought the freedom to express their religiosity in ways that broke from established European patterns. The resulting religious voluntarism, codified in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, combined with a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship, the availability of land, and the democratic and anti-traditional ethos of the American Revolution to create an explosion of new religious bodies and diminishing numbers of Hart's confessionalist adherents. In this setting, evangelicalism and liberalism as ecumenical endeavors have provided a broad measure of religious identification and coherence, and as general categories of analysis, they remain useful, if far from perfect. Hart's major categorical proposals are not persuasive, but his efforts to revivify confessional Protestantism and his critique of specific evangelical shortcomings are probing and instructive.

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