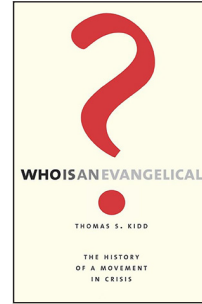


Book Review

Thomas Kidd.
*Who is an Evangelical?:
The History of a Movement in Crisis*
Yale University Press, 2020. Hb, Pp, 200,
\$26.00. ISBN 978-0-3002-4141-9.



Reviewed by, Geoffrey Butler. Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

Labelling it “arguably America’s most controversial religious movement” (p. 1), Kidd engages a tradition inextricably linked to right-wing politics for many. He writes as one “committed as ever to historic evangelical practices and beliefs” such as the centrality of Christ and the authority of Scripture, despite the movement’s “crisis” over self-identity.

Kidd’s 1st chapter traces evangelicalism’s origins. The movement owes much to figures like John Wesley and George Whitefield, whose 18th century ministries focused intently on the new birth. In their view, living under Christendom did not equate to being a true follower of Jesus. Chapter 2, along similar lines, discusses 18th century Americans who dissented from established denominations, with Baptists especially opposing religious taxes and the concept of a state church. “The First Amendment was a great victory for evangelicals,” Kidd claims, despite the ensuing “struggle to define disestablishment” (p. 33). A Southern Baptist, he expresses the hesitancy to link state and religion characteristic of some Baptist forerunners, claiming “Whether (America) was a Christian nation in substance is doubtful, given the harsh realities of slavery, Native American removal from the Southeast, and other glaring moral problems” (p. 38).

Chapter 3 explores early 20th century fundamentalism. Kidd argues efforts to “ban

Sunday mail delivery, the sale of alcohol, and the teaching of evolution” were “misguided” (p. 53), setting a precedent for the unhealthy politicization of evangelicalism. This era also witnessed the emergence of major African American denominations, Asian evangelical congregations on the Pacific coast, and an explosion of evangelicalism globally, as “Missionary advocacy helped to sustain long-standing connections among American, Canadian, and British evangelicals” (p. 61). Chapter 4 documents the rise of neo-evangelicals like Billy Graham. “Some observers today,” he explains, “use fundamentalist and evangelical as synonymous terms”, but this is inaccurate (p. 75). Evangelicals like Graham exhibited an ecumenical approach, envisioning “an intellectually robust, culturally engaged form of conservative Protestantism” (p. 75). For them, “cultural influence always centered around evangelism” (p. 88), a truly commendable distinctive.

In chapter 5, Kidd highlights American evangelicalism’s burgeoning alliance with the Republican Party. “It was Ronald Reagan,” he notes, “who truly began to charm rank-and-file white evangelical voters for the GOP” (p. 117), a demographic still crucial to its base. Kidd also observes, “During the twentieth century, the center of world Christianity shifted to the Global South”, and many immigrants to North America from the region are firmly evangelical (p. 108). “Demographically,” he asserts, “they

represent the evangelical future” (p. 110). Kidd’s 6th chapter, “Evangelicals from Reagan to Obama”, claims the former’s presidency “unified white neoevangelicals and fundamentalists in a way they had not been since the Scopes Trial in 1925” (p. 121). This unity was encouraged in part by renewed adherence to conservative doctrine within much of evangelicalism, eventually giving rise to organizations like The Gospel Coalition and Desiring God. This era also saw rapid growth within denominations like the Assemblies of God, “in which nonwhites make up more than half of the members” as of the 2010s (p. 128). Yet, “Many polls about evangelicals allow a category only for whites,” Kidd observes. Thus, although non-white Protestants may hold evangelical beliefs, they are often not categorized as such by pollsters. The term, therefore, is often detached from its theological meaning, failing to give an accurate picture of the movement’s nature

Kidd finishes by addressing, “Donald Trump and the Crisis of Evangelicalism”. In 2016, Black Protestants overwhelmingly supported his opponent, some of whom held evangelical convictions. Kidd points out one of Clinton’s last campaign stops was an African American Pentecostal church; thus, it is noteworthy that 81% of their white counterparts voted for the president. Some leaders in the former community expressed opposition to Clinton on LGBT issues and abortion, while some in the latter were aghast at Trump’s behaviour, including his rhetoric regarding immigrants and women – including the “infamous Access Hollywood video” (p. 145). Their objectionable options notwithstanding, however, the outcome indicated substantial disagreement among those with common theological convictions. Kidd contends that although many voted “against Hillary Clinton more than for Donald

Trump”, hoping the latter would appoint pro-life Supreme Court justices, “The damage caused by evangelical white voters’ support for Trump was substantial, leading many women and people of color to question the fundamental integrity of the movement” (p. 149). To support his claim, Kidd points to instances of minorities dropping the evangelical label or finding new churches after the heated election.

Political conservatives, at this point, might suspect Kidd of Democratic sympathies. However, he usually voted Republican prior to 2016, supporting neither Trump nor Clinton that year, though during the GOP primary he served on Marco Rubio’s religious liberty advisory board. Thus, his differences with evangelicals who voted for Trump cannot be attributed to affinity for Clinton. Nor does Kidd suggest evangelicals withdraw from the public square. He lauds their charitable work, noting “Two of the three biggest disaster-relief agencies in America are also evangelical: the Salvation Army and the Southern Baptist Convention” (p. 153), representing evangelicalism at its best. What Kidd rejects, rather, is a partisanship which has made it “uncertain whether the term evangelical can be rescued from its political and racial connotations “ (p. 154). I resonate with his concern, having attended an American evangelical college during the 2016 campaign. Though strengthened by the vibrant spiritual life on campus, I was deeply concerned with the combative posture taken by some during the election and its aftermath, sensing too many folks viewed “evangelical” as a more political than theological expression.

That said, Kidd might have helped his case by more explicitly detailing why many white evangelicals voted as they did in 2016. His historical work on the religious right is impeccable, yet non-evangelical readers

in particular may struggle with how many supported an individual of Trump's character. While he acknowledges the role abortion played, (p. 147), religious liberty is not addressed at length, although as part of Rubio's advisory board Kidd would be well equipped to articulate an evangelical perspective. Personally, I concur that it makes little sense to "see Donald Trump as a key player in the reassertion of America's godly values" although he "manifestly contradicts those values in his own life and rhetoric" (p. 154). Kidd's concerns about character and public witness are evident throughout the book; he rejects the position that policy alone is crucial to political engagement. Indeed, fully addressing this tension would require an entire book in itself. Nevertheless, evangelicals who consider issues like religious liberty and abortion determinative might appreciate an explanation of their perspective here.

While Kidd's work is centred on evangelicalism's history rather than political associations *per se*, the movement's complicated past with civic engagement should give pause to those who might link the gospel too closely with any political party or figure. As he correctly asserts, "partisan commitments have come and gone....but conversion, devotion to an infallible Bible, and God's discernable presence are what make an evangelical an evangelical" (p. 156). This may well serve as a timely reminder to the church in a highly polarized era. In short, students, pastors, and those interested in the history of the movement would be well served by Kidd's thorough, user-friendly introduction exploring "the religion of the born again" (p. 4).

