

Evangelicals' Public Face: Reflections on a Flawed Reflection

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Abstract: *This article begins by summarizing recent research findings related to the Canadian news media's perceptions and portrayals of evangelicals. It discusses how the media's depictions, in conjunction with evangelicals' own actions, contribute to a primarily negative public image for this faith community. Referencing key concepts from Christian doctrine and communication theory, this article concludes with suggestions as to how evangelicals in the West might improve their collective reputation with the non-evangelical population-at-large.*

It was in the late 1990s, while employed as a TV reporter, that I became interested in the news media's portrayal of evangelical Christians. It wasn't often that my station, a mid-size bureau in southern Ontario, Canada covered issues or events in which evangelicals featured prominently. However, on occasion, stories about conservative Protestants engaged in "evangelical causes" found their way into my station's line-up. As a professing believer myself, I probably paid closer attention to those particular reports than most and, over time, I began to notice several recurring themes.

I noted that when evangelicals were engaged in what society-at-large would deem positive behaviours the religious motivation behind their actions was either ignored or made exceedingly vague. I observed that when an issue or event related to evangelicals presented several potential storylines, the angle that was most controversial was highlighted in a report while other, less controversial angles were diminished or ignored. I also found that when the topic of evangelicals came up in the newsroom, inevitably one of my colleagues would voice discomfort or distain for "those kind of people."

Anecdotal observations from one news station cannot be counted as valid research. However, such observations can serve as the catalyst to research. They did for me.

At the dawn of the new millennium I made the change from full-time journalist to full-time academic; my experiences in the media shaped my research agenda. I set out to determine empirically how evangelicals are portrayed in Canadian news by analyzing a decade's worth of national TV reports from Canada's three largest networks in conjunction with a narrower case study of stories from national newspapers. As my research progressed, I also turned my eye to why evangelicals are portrayed in the manner that they are.

Just last year, the culmination of my research was published as a book. The title is *Through a Lens Darkly: How the news media perceive and portray evangelicals*.

The major results found in my book will provide the starting point for this article but my intention is not go on at length at into what I've already written. Instead, I want to move beyond *what is* and discuss *what could be*. Specifically, I want to present a few proposals which, if followed, might transform the public image of evangelicals in the West for the better. With that destination in mind, I'll begin describing where research suggests Canadian evangelicals find themselves at present. And while my findings here will relate primarily to Canadian evangelicals, other studies and anecdotal accounts from outside my home nation suggest most evangelicals in developed, English-speaking countries share a similar experience.

HOW EVANGELICALS ARE VIEWED BY THE PUBLIC AND THE MEDIA

Through a Lens Darkly starts with the line: "Canadian evangelicals have an image problem." I buttress my claim by referencing a number of well-known negative stereotypes typically applied to "born-again" Canadians. Among other sordid traits, evangelicals are perceived to be pushy,

simplistic and closed-minded.¹ However, my most convincing evidence of evangelicals' image problem comes from survey data. I reference a nationwide survey that shows nearly a third of Canadians—31%—say they would be uneasy meeting an evangelical.² Having made my key observation regarding evangelicals' public image, I spend the remainder of my book outlining how news media professionals contribute to and exacerbate this negative image by manipulating coverage.

At one point I detail findings from my longitudinal analysis of Canadian national TV news stories. I demonstrate that in a significant portion of reports my country's elite journalists use omission, exaggeration or misrepresentation of information to make evangelicals appear more negative and less credible.³ For example, in 25% of national TV news reports, facts were excluded or distorted in order to depict evangelicals as intolerant.⁴ In 13% facts were omitted or misrepresented to depict evangelicals as criminally-minded and in 8% facts were excluded or slanted to portray evangelicals as un-Canadian (that is, dissimilar to "normal" citizens in Canada).⁵

Past studies of news media bias have been criticized for finding bias where none exists; it's said that they provide little evidence for the claims they make.⁶ With this criticism in mind, I was careful to employ a method of analysis that controlled against researcher fiat. I had trained coders examine the news stories for clear evidence of factual omission, exaggeration or misrepresentation of information. Only when clear

¹ John G. Stackhouse, "Three Myths about Evangelicals," *Faith Today*, May/June, 1995, 28. See also, John G. Stackhouse, "Who's Afraid of Evangelicals?" *Faith Today*, January/February, 2005, 29.

² Reginald W. Bibby, *The Boomer Factor* (Toronto, ON: Bastian, 2006), 24.

³ David M. Haskell, *Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals* (Toronto, ON: Clements Academic, 2009), 132-138.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-136, 137.

⁶ For example, arguing from this position the former head of CBC television news, Tony Burman criticized researchers Lydia Miljan and Barry Cooper's analysis of CBC's coverage of America and Americans. See, Tony Burman, "Reporting a Statement Doesn't Prove Bias: Is the Public Broadcaster Anti-American?" *National Post*, June 17, 2005, p. A16.

evidence could be found, was a finding of bias, be it positive or negative, catalogued.⁷

Although above I describe my analysis in terms of "bias", in my original research I rely upon frame theory for my theoretical underpinnings and, as such, in my book I describe the coders' findings in terms of neutral, positive, or negative frames.⁸ To allow for better understanding of how the coders interpreted the textual data, and to provide a clearer idea of what constitutes a neutral, positive, or negative frame, I'll briefly describe frame theory in the context of my particular study.

Frame theory acknowledges that journalists must condense the information they glean when covering issues and events. However, it also holds that they should strive to be as objective as possible when presenting their repackaged information so that we, the public, might come to our own opinions and decisions about events taking place around us. In cases where hard-news reporters (as opposed to a designated opinion writer or columnist) radically interpret an issue through their own personal worldview—deliberately framing it (that is, slanting or shaping the information) in such a way so as to accentuate its negative, or positive, characteristics—they take away the audience's right to decide how they feel about the information. On the other hand, a neutral or objective frame relays to the audience the ideas that the subjects (that is, the people the story is about) are putting forward, as *they intend* those ideas to be understood. The ideas of the subjects are not interpreted or filtered by the journalists according to their personal worldview.⁹

This is not to say that reporters must be uncritical of what their interview subjects are presenting as fact. If the subjects' information is wrong or misleading and reporters can prove it by producing objective, empirical data to the contrary, they should do so. Showing that an interview subject is incorrect or purposely twisting the truth is not negative framing, it is simply thorough reporting.

⁷ Haskell, *Through a Lens*, 109-119.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 116-118. See also, James W. Tankard, "The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing," in *Framing Public Life*, ed., Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy and August E. Grant (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 101.

⁹ Ibid., 93-102. See also, Jim A. Kuypers, *The Art of Rhetorical Criticism* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2005), 189–190.

Frame theory also insists that a neutral news frame will place events in perspective by providing relevant background and will allow those who are criticized in the body of the report to respond fully to the accusations of their critics. Finally, in cases where opinion, and not fact, is relayed, a neutral frame clearly distinguish it as opinion.¹⁰

To be clear, reporting on a negative situation is not the same thing as framing a situation negatively. People do terrible things—they kill, steal, lie, and make offensive comments. Journalists are required to report on these terrible events and can do so neutrally. As long as journalists at an event let the facts and the human subjects involved speak for themselves, they are not “guilty” of negative framing. Journalists are only “guilty” of non-neutral framing (be it negative or positive) when their selection of information and language usage is affected by their personal worldview and thus, their reports exhibits tangible signs of promoting one side or perspective over another.¹¹ Doris Graber at Columbia University refers to this breach as moving from “ordinary agenda-setting activities” to “deliberate agenda-building.”¹² To use Graber’s phrase, my study of Canadian TV news analyzed for “deliberate agenda-building” as evidenced through the appearance of positive or negative frames.

Elsewhere in my book I turn my attention to newspapers and describe a study I conducted that analyzed coverage of Canada’s same-sex marriage debate in two national dailies. On one side of the debate were evangelicals and others of conservative beliefs supporting the traditional definition of marriage: the union of one man and one woman. On the other side were those wanting legislation that would make legal the union of two people of the same gender. The debate was at its height between 2004 in 2006—it was during this period that same-sex marriage legislation worked its way through Canada’s federal parliament—and I examined all reports from this period that referenced evangelicals in conjunction with said issue.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 101-102. I am grateful to Jim Kuypers at Dartmouth College for his definition of what constitutes the neutral role of the press. My definition of a neutral frame relies heavily on the ideas he sets out. In particular, see Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 190.

¹¹ Ibid., 102.

¹² Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 288.

¹³ Haskell, *Through a Lens*, 224-225.

Prior to analyzing the news reports, I gathered and explored the public documents Canada's major evangelical organizations had produced to persuade politicians and the population-at-large to support their position in favour of the traditional definition of marriage. From examining these documents—speeches, press releases, posters, brochures, talking points, advertisements, and the like—it became clear that three core arguments were singularly and repetitiously employed by these organizations. None of the core arguments were faith-based—that is, none appealed to the Bible or God for their legitimacy; instead, all were empirically or philosophically derived. In summary, one core argument discussed how legalization of same sex marriage could pave the way for polygamous and other types of unions, another core argument discussed how legalization could harm families and children, and the third core argument reflected on how legalization might lead to persecution of Christians and others who publicly opposed the practice of same-sex marriage.¹⁴

It's not surprising that these evangelical organizations, when constructing a public lobbying campaign, would employ "secular" arguments to garner support for traditional marriage. First, the majority of the Canadian populace are not devoutly religious and thus arguments founded in scripture would gain little traction. Second, decades ago Canada's Supreme Court ruled that public policy rooted in religious tradition was at odds with the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and was thus legally untenable.¹⁵

For this study, the goal of my analysis was simple. I sought to determine whether the core arguments that Canada's major evangelical organizations used to lobby for their position made their way into the news reports of the national dailies.

The results of my analysis revealed a disconnect. Despite a concerted effort to craft and employ a decidedly secular lobbying campaign composed of three, religion-free, arguments for traditional marriage, in print news coverage the evangelicals' faith-neutral arguments were virtually absent. In the total population of news reports, 74% (N = 76)

¹⁴ Ibid., 225-228.

¹⁵ Ibid., 213, 226. See also, *Regina v. Big M Drug Mart Ltd.*, [1985] CanLII 69 (Supreme Court of Canada). This Supreme Court decision established that legislation could not be based on a single faith's religious doctrine.

made no mention of the evangelicals' religion-free arguments against same-sex marriage. And while three-quarters of the news reports didn't mention the core arguments that the evangelicals were at pains to present, many articles did offer faith-based reasons for the evangelicals' opposition. That is, somewhere in the article it was suggested that evangelicals opposed same-sex marriage because of their religious beliefs. This finding is somewhat ironic given the evangelicals' careful attempt to steer away from "arguments from faith" when conducting their public lobbying. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was most often in reporter paraphrases or columnist commentary, and seldom quotes from the evangelicals themselves, where this suggestion was made.¹⁶

As discussed previously, an objective or neutral news report relays to the audience the ideas that the subjects (that is, the people the story is about) are putting forward, as *they intend* those ideas to be understood. The ideas of the subjects are not interpreted or filtered by the reporter according to his personal worldview. By that definition, I argued, Canadian national newspaper journalists, did not provide fair or objective coverage of evangelicals' involvement in the same-sex marriage debate. Rather than relaying the religiously neutral, pro-traditional marriage messages of evangelicals (as the evangelicals intended), reporters virtually omitted those messages. Because the journalists in question were the most expert and elite in the country, I felt justified in dismissing unintentional "sloppy" reporting as a credible explanation for their quantitatively significant oversight.

Moving from how evangelicals are portrayed, my book uses survey research—primarily my own, but some conducted by other Canadian researchers—to uncover why Canada's elite media professionals breach the journalistic code of objectivity so as to slant certain stories against these conservative Christians. The survey data gleaned from national journalists shows that they tend to be far less religious and far more socially liberal than the public-at-large. When compared to evangelicals the difference is far more extreme with journalist and evangelicals occupying opposite ends of the belief-values spectrum. This extreme dissimilarity manifests as negative perceptions: the journalists tended to

¹⁶ Ibid., 231-233.

see evangelicals' religious beliefs and social values (especially in terms of sexuality, homosexuality, and abortion) as wrong. The conviction that their own more liberal beliefs and values are correct, and thus best for society, in turn leads journalists to slant their coverage against evangelicals.¹⁷ Journalists are most apt to slant their coverage against evangelicals when they move outside their immediate religious community and seek to elicit change in the wider society.¹⁸

Evangelicals are right to be concerned about the manipulation of their public image; how they're seen by others directly impacts their ability to advance God's kingdom. In his parable of "The Sower," Jesus notes poor soil and hostile climate affects the growth of seeds.¹⁹ Similarly, a hostile cultural climate negatively affects the spread and growth of the gospel.

PLAYING THE "BLAME GAME"

When I speak with evangelicals who have read my book or other research their response is often a mix of vindication and relief. They're pleased to know that their long-held "gut-feeling" of media mistreatment has some empirical support and, likewise, they're pleased to have someone—besides themselves—to blame for their negative image. It's the latter portion of their response that troubles me because the truth is, in many ways evangelicals contribute to their own tainted public perception. While I say little about this in my book, the truth is that stereotypes must be rooted in reality if they are to live and grow. To be sure, the roots of evangelicals' stereotypes never languish for want of fresh dirt. But let me be less cryptic.

The problem, quite simply, is this: in North America the majority who lay claim to the title of "evangelical" don't *live* a committed gospel-lifestyle and others have begun to notice. A nationwide survey conducted in the US by the Barna Group showed that non-evangelicals consider

¹⁷ Ibid., 149-160, 171-174.

¹⁸ Ibid., 161-163, 173-174.

¹⁹ Luke 8:5-15

hypocrisy to be the major defining trait of evangelicals.²⁰ My own survey of Canadian journalists had a similar finding.²¹

Near the end of my book I discuss how evangelicals might overcome media bias and public prejudice. However, the remedy I suggest in those final pages—with its emphasis on effective message-making, public relations strategies, and persuasive techniques—is only the half of a full prescription. In fact, it’s the easiest part of complex rehabilitative regime, akin to the taking of a small pill or applying a topical cream. The more difficult half of the full prescription—which I’ll elaborate on below—is akin to major reconstructive surgery. Like reconstructive surgery, it’s a lengthy and painful process but the results can be radically transforming and enduring.

There’s no doubt that “major reconstructive surgery” is necessary. Strategies for crafting better messages—like those I highlight in my book—are useless unless the world begins to see significant changes in the *messengers themselves*.

MAJOR RECONSTRUCTION

Evangelicals are seen as hypocrites because we claim Jesus has transformed us and then we behave, in many instances, like everyone else.²² And while much about us needs to change, I’ll restrict myself to just three proposals that I believe, if acted upon, will result in the greatest improvements to our public image. Knowing the formation of a group’s public image is based on a history of visible actions, my proposals focus primarily on measures that would manifest outwardly and would be easily noticed by those outside the evangelical community.²³ Admittedly, the

²⁰ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why it Matters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 41, 46, 48.

²¹ Haskell, *Through a Lens*, 152.

²² Extensive survey information supporting this claim is found in: Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2005).

²³ It is a well known convention in the field of public relations that to build one’s reputation/brand one must do the right thing AND be seen doing the right thing. See,

proposals I'm presenting are not completely unique. While the context from which I argue is distinct, other voices from the evangelical community have recently articulated similar ideas.²⁴ However, communication research shows us that for an idea to achieve resonance, clarity and impact it must be re-articulated and re-circulated multiple times.²⁵ Furthermore, for many readers this may be their first exposure to these ideas.

Proposal #1

When we speak, we must speak out of love with a voice of humility. In large part, the well of goodwill toward evangelicals has been exhausted because of harsh words delivered by those more concerned with winning arguments than winning hearts for Christ.²⁶ We need deliverance from this habit of self-righteousness. Before going in front of the media to make a public statement, or before going in front of a neighbour or co-worker to make a statement tied to faith, we must imbue our message, regardless of content, with a spirit of deep humility, compassion, and love for others. If a message can't be crafted in such a way as to resonate with humility, compassion and love for others, it should be scrapped altogether. When speaking, keep this in mind: if your overriding goal is to prove that you're right—you're already wrong. A second but no less important reason for imbuing our communication with words of love and concern is that

James Hoggan and Richard Littlemore, *Do the Right Thing: PR Tips for a Skeptical Public* (Toronto, ON: Capital Books), 4-5.

²⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons' *UnChristian* and Sider's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, referenced above, are excellent examples of works by other evangelicals that are positing similar proposals to my own.

²⁵ For example: Celeste Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 46–47; Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, 43, no. 4 (1993), 53; Robert M. Entman, "Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents," *Journal of Communication*, 41, no. 4, (1991), 7; Stephen Hiltzgarner and Charles L. Bosk, "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 1 (1988), 65–66; William A. Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson, "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 18 (1992), 381–384.

²⁶ Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 45, 60, 83.

research shows messages of that nature are far more likely to be listened to and to effect change.²⁷

Proposal #2

When a high-profile evangelical leader behaves unethically the reputation of all believers suffers through a process of guilty by association. Of course, such scandals also encourage the perception of evangelical hypocrisy. Accordingly, as evangelicals we must be proactive and refuse to support ministers and ministries of questionable integrity. In 1 Timothy 3:2-3, the Apostle Paul sets out very clear criteria regarding ministerial qualifications, saying, “So an elder must be a man whose life is above reproach. He must be faithful to his wife. He must exercise self-control, live wisely, and have a good reputation. He must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must be able to teach. He must not be a heavy drinker or be violent. He must be gentle, not quarrelsome, and not love money.” If a minister fails to meet these criteria, he or she should fail to receive support. In fact, I think it’s time that ordinary evangelicals seriously consider supporting *only those ministries* that are approved by credible, independent auditing bodies.²⁸

It’s not just ordinary evangelicals who have to begin practicing greater discernment. Not-so-ordinary evangelicals—those who run Christian radio and television stations—need to start sorting the wheat from the chaff when it comes to ministers they are willing to broadcast. As it stands now, even ministers with a verified history of financial impropriety are not denied air time in Canada. Raising their standards will inevitably result in loss of funds for owners of the Christian media—they get paid by clergy to air their programs not cancel them. However, on this matter, the owners must decide if they are more interested in the integrity of the gospel or the integrity of their bank accounts.

²⁷ Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1993), 167-207.

²⁸ For example, the Canadian Council of Christian Charities or, in the US, ECFA or Ministry Watch.

Proposal #3

My final proposal, I'm sure, will be the one that most find untenable. I can say this with certainty because I have a hard time with the idea myself. I propose that evangelicals—as a community—once again embrace anti-materialism as a defining characteristic of their faith. I emphasize “as a community” because it’s clear that there are individual evangelicals who already embody this ideal. It’s the majority of us who must make the commitment. I say “once again embrace anti-materialism” because the historical record shows that it has been a core principal of Christian life in the past.²⁹ In fact, its de-emphases in recent times should be seen as an aberration. It could also be seen as a glaring oversight given Jesus’ teachings resound with anti-materialist statements and in the entire New Testament worldly riches are only referenced as an impediment to salvation.³⁰

As a religious practice, anti-materialism is valuable because it creates the conditions necessary for fulfilling what Christ considered the supreme mandate for his followers. When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus gave a double answer saying, “You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength” and, “love your neighbour as yourself.”³¹ Certainly, it’s easier to love God with all your heart, soul and mind when you have committed, through actions, to loving “things” less. Likewise, when you spend less on your own material desires, you have greater resources to “love your neighbour as yourself.”

In addition to enhancing the lives of believers from within, anti-materialism would capture the attention of those looking at evangelicals from without. Even though mainstream Western culture promotes fulfillment through the accumulation of material possessions it’s still popularly held by most in the world that selflessness and self-sacrifice are the noblest of virtues. That being the case, followers of Christ who were devoted to giving away their excess wealth and living lives of simple

²⁹ For example, see Acts 2:45. See also, Francis J. McConnell, *Christian Materialism: Inquiries Into the Getting, Spending and Giving of Money* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2008).

³⁰ For example: Matthew 6:24; Mark 8:36; Luke 18:18-23.

³¹ Mark 12:30-31

necessity would certainly draw positive public acclaim. Even more important than transforming evangelicals' popular perception, such behaviour would give legitimacy to the transformative nature of Christianity and in turn increase receptivity toward the gospel within society-at-large.³²

A CONCLUDING REALITY CHECK

The proposals I've outlined are meant to enhance evangelicals' popular image; they constitute a simple means by which conservative Protestants can put their "best faith forward." However, I'm sure there will be some readers who take exception to the notion that evangelicals should strive to be popular. In general, I would have to agree. Sometimes, putting your "best faith forward" means offending people and being unpopular. Christians are called to be light in a dark world. Light shone into the eyes of someone living in the dark is an unpleasant experience. To be sure, as a Christian one should not strive to be popular—one should strive to be Christ-like. However, let me close with this word of caution: If you are unpopular, it should because you are ***too much like Christ***, not too little.

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³² For a longer treatment on this subject see Ron J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*.