



How to Be Evangelical without Being Conservative
Copyright © 2008 by Roger E. Olson

Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Olson, Roger E.
How to be evangelical without being conservative / Roger E. Olson.
p. cm.
ISBN-10: 0-310-28338-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-310-28338-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Evangelicalism. 2. Christian conservatism. 3. Conservatism. I. Title.
BR1640.O47 2008
270.8'3--dc22

2007045560

Scripture taken from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers printed in this book are offered as a resource to you. These are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement on the part of Zondervan, nor do we vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Interior design by Ben Fetterley

Printed in the United States of America

08 09 10 11 12 13 • 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Foreword 9

Introduction:

*Who's an "Evangelical" and
What Does "Conservative" Mean?*..... 13

1. *Being Biblical without Orthodoxy* 29

2. *Building Character without Moralism* 43

3. *Celebrating America without Nationalism*..... 58

4. *Seeking Truth without Certainty* 73

5. *Taking the Bible Seriously without Literalism* 87

6. *Being Religionless without Secularism* 101

7. *Transforming Culture without Domination* 114

8. *Redistributing Wealth without Socialism* 128

9. *Relativizing without Rejecting Theology*..... 143

10. *Updating without Trivializing Worship*..... 157

11. *Accepting without Affirming Flawed People*..... 170

12. *Practicing Equality without Sacrificing Difference*..... 184

Conclusion:

Toward a Postconservative Evangelicalism 200

BEING BIBLICAL WITHOUT ORTHODOXY

Every year I take a class of students to visit an Eastern Orthodox worship service. We are mostly Baptists, so we sit, stand, observe, and listen, but we don't participate. That's because we're not Orthodox; even the priest of the Greek Orthodox church we visit lets us know in a most friendly way that, while we are welcome there, we are not there to partake of the Eucharist (Lord's Supper). We're not Orthodox *or* orthodox in their eyes. In fact, to them our churches are not even really churches; they are "religious clubs" or parachurch organizations. The priest is quick to explain that he doesn't mean we're not saved. That's God's business, and he assumes people who have repented and believed in Jesus Christ are saved, but the church of Jesus Christ is identical with the fellowship of churches under Eastern Orthodox bishops. Many Orthodox Christians would now include the churches under the pope—the bishop of Rome (Catholics).

The Many Meanings of Orthodoxy

I used to explain to my students that we Baptists and other evangelical Christians think we're the truly orthodox Christians. I enjoyed the irony that this other fellowship of churches from Eastern Europe and the Middle East call themselves "Orthodox" while we are really more orthodox than they are! This play on words is confusing, so let me explain.

HOW TO BE EVANGELICAL WITHOUT BEING CONSERVATIVE

In religious jargon “orthodox” may simply mean “theologically correct.” You’ve heard of “politically correct.” Well, orthodox with a small “o” is simply theological correctness. Every branch of Christianity thinks it is more orthodox than others; otherwise there would be little reason for existing as a separate denomination. The Eastern Orthodox family of churches has long embraced and used the “O” label because they highly value being theologically correct; to them it is of greatest importance after right worship, which is also part of being orthodox in their eyes. They affirm the ancient creeds of Christendom, such as the Nicene Creed, and repeat them often. And they seek to adhere to the teachings of the church fathers of the first eight centuries. As one Eastern Orthodox priest told us, “All important questions were answered in the first eight centuries”—by the church fathers and the ecumenical (universal) councils of the church.

Traditionally, then, religious scholars use “Orthodox” with a capital “O” to refer to that family of churches looking to the ancient church fathers and councils of the first seven or eight centuries and in submission to the great patriarchs of the ancient capital cities of Christendom (e.g., the Patriarch of Constantinople, a city in Turkey now called Istanbul). We often use “orthodox” with a small “o” to designate theological correctness. The first use is descriptive whereas the second one is prescriptive. To adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy, of course, the two are the same.

There’s another, less scholarly but more popular meaning of “orthodoxy” I use in this chapter. In popular parlance orthodoxy means being locked into tradition and closed to new ways of thinking, living, believing, worshiping, and practicing the Christian faith. An orthodox Christian, in this sense, is any Christian who stands firmly for tradition—however that is perceived. But orthodoxy in this sense especially relates to doctrine; orthodoxy is firm and unwavering adherence to a set of doctrines that are usually expressed in some creed and/or confessional statement. In other words, it is more than just “theological correctness” because everyone who thinks about God would like to be theologically correct. Theological correctness is an ideal identical with right thinking. We all want to think we think rightly.

The sense of orthodoxy I'm talking about now is more that just thinking rightly because it enshrines a particular set of doctrines carved out of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral) and carved into stone at some time in the past by some group of people. The people who defined this orthodox set of doctrines may be bishops (as in Roman Catholic councils) or ministers or theologians (as in many Protestant denominations). In this sense, orthodoxy is affirming allegiance without mental reservation or qualification to these traditional beliefs.

The word "orthodoxy," then, has three distinct connotations: (1) that family of churches in submission to a group of patriarchs (super-bishops) of Eastern Europe and the Middle East called Eastern Orthodoxy, (2) theological correctness as an ideal, and (3) strict adherence to and affirmation of a formal set of doctrines expressed in written creeds and confessions of faith. For members of Eastern Orthodoxy, of course, all three are identical. The Roman Catholic Church also rolls them into one with the exception that it considers only the churches under the bishop of Rome (the pope) completely orthodox. Protestants have a special problem with orthodoxy number three because Martin Luther and other sixteenth-century Reformers rebelled against that orthodoxy. When Luther was asked to recant his beliefs such as that salvation is by God's grace through faith alone and not through faith and good works, he appealed to God's Word (the Bible) and reason against popes and church councils (i.e., against a magisterium of orthodoxy) and said they contradicted each other. In other words, he appealed to Scripture and reason against orthodoxy itself.

The Protestant Principle

Beginning with Luther, all Protestants have always affirmed *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) as the test of true belief. This was radical stuff in Luther's time. One hundred years earlier the Bohemian reformer John Hus was burned at the stake for the same rebellious attitude toward official orthodoxy. Of course, both

HOW TO BE EVANGELICAL WITHOUT BEING CONSERVATIVE

Luther and Hus wanted to be orthodox in the sense of theologically correct. But neither one wanted to bow down and accept without question traditional beliefs that could not be proved by Scripture and that went against reason. They were against being orthodox in that sense.

Later, however, successive generations of Protestants began to forget the value of checking every Christian belief, however ancient and widely accepted or enforced by an inquisition, by Scripture. They began to develop statements of faith that took on the aura of authority reminiscent of the Catholic Church's creeds. Luther's followers first wrote the Augsburg Confession as a statement of faith to show the Holy Roman Emperor that they were theologically correct according to Scripture. Later that same confession came to be treated as an inviolable and incorrigible creed by some conservative Lutherans.

Now there's irony. John Calvin, the Reformer of Switzerland and especially Geneva, the great organizer of Protestant thought, had "heretic" Michael Servetus burned at the stake for his refusal to accept orthodox doctrines. Catholics and Protestants alike hunted down and killed Anabaptists because they wouldn't conform to belief in infant baptism and insisted on baptizing adults only. They were killed for rejecting the orthodoxy of their day, which was shared by both Protestants and Catholics. Many Anabaptists also rejected the detailed, formal systems of doctrine developed by their fellow Protestants.

Protestants have always claimed to believe in Scripture above tradition; every doctrine is to be tested by Scripture and whatever cannot be proven by Scripture is not to be preached or taught as true. Of course, people may be free to hold opinions, but official teachings of the churches should be clearly biblical and not merely traditional. That's the meaning of *sola scriptura*—not Scripture as the only book to read but Scripture as the ultimate source and standard of truth especially for Christian faith and practice. However, many Protestants have faltered at this and insisted that people in their churches simply affirm doctrines without asking whether they are biblical or challenging them by Scripture.

Conservative Presbyterians have the Westminster Confession of Faith; conservative Dutch Reformed have the Canons and Decrees of the Synod of Dort (1618/1619). At that synod or council of Reformed “divines” (ministers and theologians), a group of Dutch dissenters known as the Remonstrants (which really means the same as “Protestants”) were tried as heretics because they were judged to have departed from the traditional doctrines of the Reformed churches of Europe. Their leader had been Jacob Arminius (d. 1609), who was widely acknowledged to be a brilliant biblical scholar and theologian of his day. He taught theology at the University of Leyden in the Netherlands and rejected the doctrines of absolute, unconditional predestination in favor of belief in free will and human cooperation with God’s grace in salvation. His followers, the Remonstrants, came to be called Arminians. The Reformed delegates to the Synod of Dort judged them harshly for rejecting what was considered traditional belief in God’s absolute sovereignty, and they were stripped of their positions and property and exiled from the Netherlands. One was beheaded—all this in the name of orthodoxy.

Of course, later, the Remonstrants and Arminians developed their own official versions of orthodoxy and in some cases expelled people who disagreed even if they marshaled biblical arguments for their views. This is the natural human tendency—“hardening of the categories.” As radical denominations seeking freedom from religious oppression at the hands of gatekeepers of orthodoxy become older and more established, they tend to create and enforce their own orthodoxies and oppress free thinkers who dare to challenge them.

Orthodoxy in this sense, then, is enforced adherence to a written doctrinal system under threat of punishment for daring to question it. Of course, not everyone who affirms this orthodoxy is doing so under threat of punishment (such as excommunication). Many gladly affirm orthodoxy without reservation. Others, however, find it imperative to question orthodoxies of this kind (written, formal, enforced) in order to keep the churches “reformed and always reforming.” That was also a major Protestant