

# Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Tears 1950 to 2000 | Iain H. Murray

Reviewed by Peg Montag in the May 2012 Philogian  
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*Iain Murray is a British Presbyterian minister and evangelical who served for a time as the assistant to Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones and is a founding trustee of the Banner of Truth Trust.*

**Introduction:** When I was first asked to write a review of this book, I was interested, but at the same time concerned. As someone who came to know Christ as Lord and Savior in 2004, I had no first-hand knowledge of the period and events covered in this book. However, I have run up against the issues analyzed by this author frequently and have been exposed to the passion these topics inherently evoke. My first thought was how to write this review without raising those same passions, and my second thought was to use a pen name to avoid becoming the target of anyone's direct wrath! But reason prevailed, and I decided to use my real name and let the consequences fall where they may. So here goes!

**Book Overview:** *"The health of the church has always been in proportion to the extent to which, in her teaching, the difference between Christian and non-Christian, has been kept sharp and clear."(p.296)*

Evangelicalism Divided, by Iain Murray, is a record of the change that took place in the American and British churches in the years 1950 to 2000. It records the rise of influences that ultimately changed the course of evangelicalism in both countries. The author takes a historical/chronological approach to laying out the cause and effect of individual choices that have had a broad impact on the wider church. The book takes a factual, well documented approach to the subject. The author's writing style is clear and concise and Murray appears to stay true to God's Word in his standards for critique.

Murray characterizes the present state of evangelicalism as being divided into two camps. One camp has stood for orthodoxy and biblical doctrine, while the second branch has dedicated itself to gaining recognition for evangelicalism as a whole. The author documents how decisions by some noted evangelical leaders, primarily for the sake of academic respectability, visible unity and results, compromised the true gospel and the church as a whole. Murray makes it clear that the goals of the two branches are mutually exclusive since success in one camp means defeat in the other. Murray also makes it clear that he is not a neutral observer. He places himself squarely in the first camp speaking out against false spiritual unity and its consequence.

Murray begins with Germany's Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a liberal theologian who made a definite distinction between the mind and the heart, i.e. between objective thought and subjective passions. In an effort to defend Christianity from the higher criticism of his contemporaries, Schleiermacher rejected the objective and taught that true Christianity was solely related to subjective experience, thus making it unassailable by higher criticism. Schleiermacher's liberalism had great impact. The author notes that even as early as 1857, two thirds of Germany and England were under Schleiermacher's sway. Murray defines the difference between liberalism and evangelicalism as follows: ***"The idea that Christianity is a form of feeling, a life, and not a system of doctrine, is contrary to the faith of all Christians. Christianity has always had a creed. A man who believes certain doctrines is a Christian" (p.15)***

Murray then outlines the events from the earlier half of the 20th Century to the present time and how the foundation Schleiermacher laid became an even greater influence in the church. In 1950, the author explains, evangelicalism was at a

crossroads. For the previous 50 years evangelicals had fought for biblical doctrine. Having separated from the main-line liberal denominations, evangelicals were a group looking for an identity. Well-meaning evangelical leaders in Britain and America attempted to gain respectability in the world in search of that identity.

Murray continues that the bursting of the evangelical dyke began in England with those seeking to undo the evangelical reputation as one of narrow partisanship and obstructionism. Turning from the previous fight for orthodoxy, these evangelicals fought instead for academic recognition, assuming that ***“unless concessions were made to the latest “scholarship”, the churches would lose their place in the modern world.” (p.304)***

In trying to advance evangelical belief within the academic community, they quickly ran into tension with non-evangelicals and found there was no way to gain wider acceptance without a toning down of biblical distinctives. ***“The fact is,” Murray writes, “the policy (of cooperating with liberals and other non-evangelicals) was seen as a necessary expedient designed sincerely for the best end, namely, to gain a wider hearing for the gospel.”(p.58)***

Pragmatism reasoned that any effort that boosted access to more people, was justified. This new policy of accommodation for the sake of influence required concessions such as working hand in hand with the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church. Increased pairing on social and moral actions led to joint documents like Evangelicals and Catholics Together (and more recently the Manhattan Declaration). The line between Christian and non-Christian was blurred and led to an embrace of non-evangelicals as brothers and sisters in Christ. Additionally, demand for visible numerical success led to the widespread use of non-biblical evangelism practices such as altar calls, ‘sinner’s prayer’ and ‘decisions’ for Christ. The surprise that Murray outlines is in how the very fundamentals of the Christian faith, (i.e. faith alone, grace alone, Christ’s sufficiency, man’s repentance and God’s wrath, etc.), were skirted over or removed by some evangelicals as they pursued their vision of the wider church.

Murray also makes the point that many of the leaders he identifies professed no change in their doctrinal beliefs making the shift from doctrine to experience one that was difficult to recognize. Instead, terms were slowly redefined to mean something different than what the bible taught and what orthodox evangelicalism had previously professed. Overtime, these leaders came to accept the primary idea of ecumenism, that there is a shared experience of salvation in Christ which makes differences of doctrinal belief a secondary matter.

The author is not afraid to name the names of high-profile evangelical personalities on both sides of the Atlantic that directly shaped today’s contemporary evangelicalism but does so in a gracious manner, never resorting to personal attacks. Murray identifies Billy Graham, Alister McGrath, J.I. Packer, John Stott, Colin Buchanan, David Watson, Michael Sward, Bill Hybels, David Edwards and Harold Ockenga and others. He also names institutions and publications such as the National Evangelical Anglican Congresses (NEAC), Fuller Theological Seminary, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), Christianity Today, InterVarsity and Campus Crusade For Christ.

Murray gives example after example of the shift in attitude and approach from standing upon biblical truth, to compromise, in order to reach a bigger audience. Murray concludes that not only did their strategy fail to achieve what it purposed and promised but instead led to a stunning departure from God’s Word and the saving gospel itself.

Murray’s book raises the basic question for Evangelicalism today, “Who then is a Christian?”, which is dependent upon a more fundamental question, “Who is Jesus Christ, and how is He known?” According to Murray, one strain of evangelicalism would

answer 'primarily by God's Word and Biblical doctrine' and the other 'primarily by man's subjective experience'. Murray maintains that for over 100 years, a sustained attempt has been made to popularize the experiential definition of a Christian which possesses no biblical authority. The desire to have an experience of God over knowing doctrines about God has overtaken much of evangelical worship, thought and publication. Murray's book points out the irony that evangelicalism, while originally attempting to steer away from Schleiermacher and his beliefs, has in fact fallen into those same beliefs and most of its leaders don't realize it.

**Author's Conclusions: "Uniting with people of unbelief for spiritual reasons, does not appear to convert them to our view, but rather lowers the spiritual temperature of those who are staying among them and leads to an increased tendency to doctrinal accommodation and compromise." (Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones) p305**

Murray concludes that the type of evangelical co-operation introduced in the 1950s – which claimed no deviation from former evangelical principles – was in fact a major deviation. Despite the fact that the modern evangelical movement began with good intentions, it became a great catalyst for change, taking the evangelical movement from its biblically conservative stance of Christian separation, to something more akin to Christendom as a whole, which in effect was the door to global ecumenicalism. By seeking broader unity, modern evangelicalism created disunity within the evangelical camp. By removing the gospel's offence to reach a broader audience, the church lost its ability to stir the soul of the lost to be reconciled to a Holy God and therefore its true purpose in society. By moving off the authority of God's Word to pursue its vision, there was no longer any distinction in place between the church and the unbelieving world surrounding it.

Murray's book reminds us that the primary danger to Christianity is not necessarily from the forces of materialism, secular philosophy or paganism. The New Testament teaches that the greatest danger comes instead from false teachers who lead men away from God's Word concerning the Truth and sufficiency of Jesus Christ for salvation, all the while using the name of Christ. In the end, Murray concludes that the Church needs Truth more than unity as wrong belief is just as dangerous, or even more so, than unbelief.

**Recommendation: "Fellowship between faith and unbelief must, sooner or later, be fatal to the former'. The reason is not that error is more powerful than truth: it is rather that, without the Holy Spirit, spiritual weakness is a certainty. Therefore any alliance or course of action which does not put scriptural principle first is bound to grieve the Holy Spirit and lead to spiritual poverty." (p.305)**

I found the author's arguments well documented and convincing. It has now been 12 years since this book was originally published, and I believe the current state of the church gives credence to many of the author's conclusions.

I would recommend this book to all who have an interest in understanding where evangelicals have come from so they can work and encourage other believers to know and defend biblical principles especially as they relate to the purpose of the church, the fundamentals of the faith, the nature of the saving gospel and the identification of false teachers that the bible tells us will always be in our midst.

Thankfully, we know that Jesus promised ***"...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)***. Amen to that!