Before moving into the substance of the book, I want to provide readers with a sense of how I deploy the term “evangelical.”¹ “Evangelical” is a much-misunderstood descriptor, owing in large measure to the many different ways it has been used. Throughout American history it has indicated related but politically and culturally dissimilar groups. Even evangelicals occasionally disagree about which groups belong in the fold and which count as heretical. In this text I am describing what evangelical media theorist Quentin J. Schultze calls the phenomenon of “popular evangelicalism,” emphasizing “people in the pews” who mix and match beliefs, rather than denominational leaders who hold to more precise definitions.² I understand a popular evangelical first as a conservative Protestant who holds the Bible as a guiding authority. Second, a popular evangelical will also cite the necessity of a saving experience of Christ (sometimes called a “born-again” experience). Third, an evangelical understands “witnessing,” or the need to share one’s experience of Christ with others, as an important responsibility for the believer. Fourth, popular evangelicals believe that each individual must freely choose to either accept or deny Christ. Finally, and perhaps most important for the purposes of this study, popular evangelicals believe that Christ will return soon to establish his literal, millennial kingdom on Earth.

Put differently, despite using various forms of the term “evangelical,” I am actually talking about prophecy believers, most of whom are evangelicals—at least in the popular sense. Prophecy belief represents what historian George M. Marsden calls a kind of folk piety.³ It overflows theological and denominational boundaries and proves most influential at the popular level. Prophecy believers cluster within denominations associated with evangelicalism, to be sure, but they can also be found outside its bounds even among progressive denominations or among traditionally
nonmillennial groups such as Lutherans. Denominational leaders of most groups, in fact, typically deride prophecy belief. Yet it keeps springing up via its own networks in Christian media, especially television networks and bookstores. Prophecy belief is indeed what historian Paul S. Boyer calls “a theology of the people.”

So if I am discussing prophecy believers, why do I not just use the term “prophecy believers”? This is the strategy Boyer uses quite effectively in his study. I try as often as possible to follow Boyer’s usage because it suggests that prophecy believers can be found throughout the American population, and not simply isolated in a few denominations. But the same is true of popular evangelicals, and again, I believe that prophecy believers are much more often than not popular evangelicals—or potentially so—hence, I think I ought to be explicit about the fact that this is a study of a major subset of evangelicals, not simply “prophecy believers.” Moreover, my overriding concern in this study is with evangelical identity and the potential consequences the acceptance of prophecy belief may carry for evangelical identity. Thus, I am concerned on one level with prophecy believers, but their beliefs may have repercussions for evangelicalism, too.

While recognizing that some may find my usage either too restrictive or too broad, my goal here is to avoid what philosopher Anthony Flew called the “death of a thousand qualifications,” or the excessive use of qualifiers that breaks the narrative flow. For example, the correct descriptor might read “conservative dispensational premillennial pretribulational American evangelicals”—quite a mouthful. Let me be clear: I am not saying who is or is not an evangelical in any definitive sense. Indeed, that is not my task. Those evangelicals who are not prophecy believers, for example, members of the Christian Reformed tradition, may take comfort that I am not denying their status as evangelicals. Nevertheless, most evangelicals are conservative—at least theologically—and many if not most conservative evangelicals are prophecy believers, even if they fail to accept everything that books like *Left Behind* preach to them. Hence, one will always find important exceptions, but the term—as unwieldy and riddled with qualifications as it necessarily appears—remains meaningful.

Finally, I have also chosen not to use the term “fundamentalist,” although a number of scholars I greatly respect do. This is not necessarily because the term has no explanatory value. Like “evangelical,” it has been used to cover a number of Protestant groups in many different ways. Sometimes writers label as fundamentalists conservative Protestants who
reject the world and cleave to their own communities. Often scholars add the necessity of prophecy belief. Still other writers, typically in the popular presses, label as fundamentalist any religious community whose beliefs exceed the bounds of what the writer considers legitimate. Nevertheless, it remains a useful term, but one I do not use here except when referring to the work of scholars who do use the term.

My avoidance of the term “fundamentalist” has more to do with my belief that the evangelicalism depicted by the authors is a transitional one. I think it fair to suggest that most of their beliefs could be considered fundamentalist. But I am attempting to track a sense of dynamic movement within the evangelical subculture, the tension one finds in the novels that asks which direction evangelicalism ought to go. Granted, the dominant voice within the novels points toward fundamentalism. The protagonists, especially late in the series, turn away from the wicked world and sharply—even militantly—define the boundary between “us” and “them,” surrendering their moral responsibility in deference to allegedly inerrant prophecies. But I also find another fainter, yet nevertheless significant voice that warns against the dangers of too narrowly defining the line between friends and foes, especially in a world of increasing ambiguity and uncertainty. In sum, the Left Behind protagonists explore a continuum of possibilities within the evangelical subculture, albeit the conservative side. Thus, I opt for the term “evangelical,” but with qualifications.