

Discussed: Focus on the Family, religious right, restored Israel, cheap grace, committed saints, femininity, contemporary culture, progressive politics, pluralism

American Evangelicals: History, Politics, and Apocalyptic

By Gregory Schneider

By some accounts, Seventh-day Adventists are evangelicals. By other accounts, we are a cult with no right to be counted in the club of true Christians. Although I do not care much whether or not the gatekeepers to the kingdom of the evangelicals want to let us in, I do think it important to keep track of who these Christians think they are and what they are doing.

It is important because they are culturally the closest of all Christian groups to who and what Seventh-day Adventists are. It is important also because evangelicals are influential. Adventists tend to listen to them whether we realize it or not. Think of your local Christian radio station, the broadcast and print media empire of Focus on the Family, and the various publications of the *Christianity Today* group (led in part by senior editor and former Seventh-day Adventist, David Neff), just to name almost at random a few prominent culture shapers.

They are also the prime recruiting ground for today's avowedly Christian political culture warriors. Think (again) of James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, and, at a very different and much smaller spot on the political map, *Sojourners* magazine and Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA).

Randall Balmer. *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

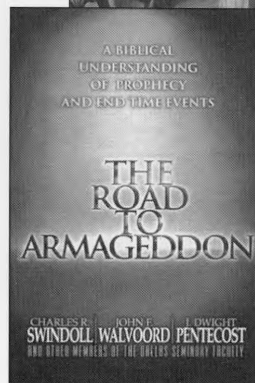
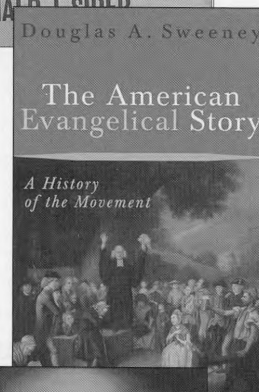
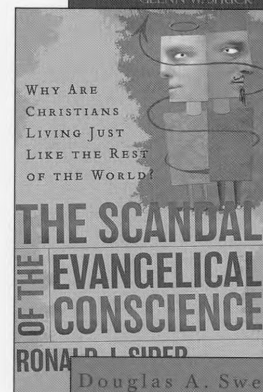
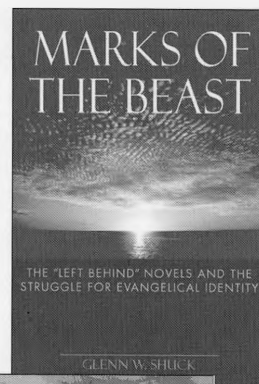
Glenn W. Shuck. *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Ronald J. Sider. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2005.

Douglas A. Sweeney. *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005.

Jim Wallis. *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

Timothy P. Weber. *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005.



Two short, accessible histories of evangelicalism in America are Randall Balmer's *Blessed Assurance* and Douglas A. Sweeney's *The American Evangelical Story*. Although born in an evangelical subculture, Balmer writes as an outsider who accents the populist and political meanings of evangelicalism, including an especially intriguing chapter on the political uses of the ideal of femininity.

Balmer dispenses deftly, as any honest historian must, with current claims that the United States was founded as a "Christian nation" and guesses that leaders of the Religious Right now reject the principle of church-state separation because they no longer feel "that they can compete in the free marketplace of religion in America" (101).

Sweeney wrote his book to be used as a text in colleges and seminaries, and his pervasive use of the first-person plural "we" makes it clear that these will be evangelical insider institutions like his own Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Sweeney's accent is on the theology, practices, and institutions of the evangelical movement.

Whereas Balmer will help us understand religious passions underlying debates over Supreme Court nominees, Sweeney gives us insights into how and why praise songs and "celebration" so pervade the way we "do church," or at least define the terms of our squabbles over worship.

Many observers may be puzzled over how many evangelical Christians have become so militantly pro-Israel. The answer is found in the premillennial dispensational view of the Bible. Many Adventists, using a small part for a complex whole, refer to dispensationalism as "the secret rapture." Timothy P. Weber's *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1982*, established him twenty years ago as the preeminent historian and critical interpreter of this way of reading Bible prophecies. Now he has updated and extended his work in *On the Road to Armageddon*.

"Without a restored Israel, there could be no Antichrist, no great tribulation, no Armageddon, and no triumphant second coming of Jesus" (155). Thus does Weber encapsulate the logic connecting evangelical eschatology to pro-Israel politics. Weber warns us that since the 1970s the dispensationalists have left the bleachers and jumped onto the playing field of Earth's history to lend their support to the most extreme elements of Israeli society, working to create a world of

apocalyptic conflict, a world in which they do not expect to have to live (18).

In a sweeping study of eleven *Left Behind* novels, Glenn W. Shuck discerns a trajectory pushing the novels' protagonists, and possibly their readers, in a direction much like what Weber describes. Shuck's *Marks of the Beast* describes a political engagement in the later novels motivated by a sense of acting out the inevitable will of God as scripted in dispensational prophecy.

In Shuck's judgment, this is an activism that surrenders believers' free agency and subordinates the living God to the interpretations of his followers. This dangerous position contrasts with a more fluid model of evangelical adaptation to contemporary culture that Shuck finds in the earlier novels.

From the aforementioned Sojourners community and ESA come two books by the respective leaders of those groups. Jim Wallis has a better subtitle in *Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* than in his title *God's Politics*. A *New York Times* best-seller for many weeks this year, the book is the culmination of the Sojourners community's decades-long effort to lead toward a progressive politics inspired by Christian faith and affirming of the full range of pluralism in the American public square.

Ron Sider, founder of ESA, has long been a latter-day Mennonite prophet calling American Evangelicalism to serve the common good of the nation and of the world. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* is a short and readable but scathing indictment of where the American evangelical community has taken itself by means of a "cheap grace" version of the doctrine of justification by faith.

The American evangelical salt has pretty much lost its saltiness, Sider says, with a lot of eyebrow-raising data to back himself up. Nevertheless, there is hope, if the churches will follow the lead of their deeply committed saints who hold to an orthodox biblical worldview in a manner that actually changes their behavior. "Interestingly," he notes, "a disproportionate share of the saints were women, African Americans, and persons earning less than \$25,000 per year" (126).

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