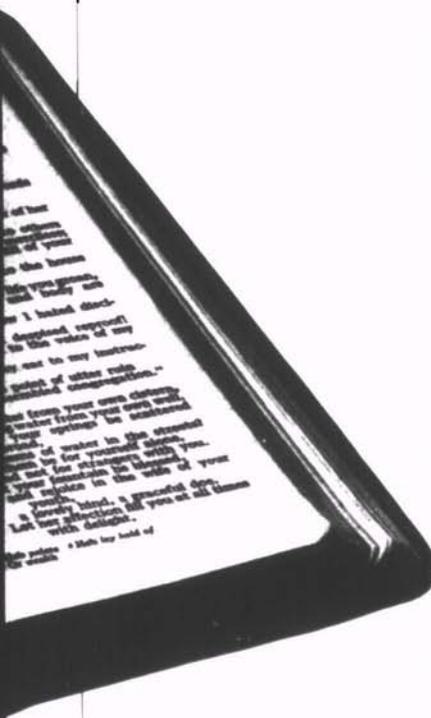


What Evangelical Parents Expect from Public School Administrators





Evangelicals are as much a part of the school community as others, and educators should recognize the legitimacy of their values.

In recent years, evangelicals and fundamentalists have become a significant political force in American society. There are approximately 40 to 50 million American evangelicals, and in spite of the Christian school movement, most send their children to public schools. Since public school administrators and teachers do not often come out of the evangelical fundamentalist religious tradition, they typically find it difficult to understand evangelical parents and their Bible-centered theology and lifestyle. Greater understanding would result in more favorable outcomes for administrators and teachers, as well as for the evangelical parents.

A Misunderstood Minority

Despite their large numbers, evangelicals often view themselves as a misunderstood minority. Because they believe that American society is hostile toward them and their moral agenda for the nation, they have come to believe that in order to preserve their

strongly held doctrines, they must establish their own Christian schools. This is an ironic development because evangelicals, with the exception of some ethnic Protestant groups, historically were once the strongest supporters of the public school. Fundamentalist minister Jerry Falwell (1980) has said that in the past, public schools were without question the best in the history of the world.

A Change in View

In the early 1960s, with the Supreme Court decisions in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) prohibiting prayer in schools and in *Schempp v. District of Abington Township* (1963) prohibiting the reading of the Bible in schools, evangelicals began to view public schools quite differently. Both prayer and Bible reading had been customary in public schools since they were first established, but this all changed with these two Supreme Court decisions. Since then, fundamentalists, largely the Baptist wing of evangelicalism,

Who Are Evangelicals?

Much has been written about evangelicals since presidential candidate Jimmy Carter claimed in 1976 that he was a "born again" Christian. Yet there still remains considerable confusion about evangelical Christians in the minds of many Americans. Until about the mid 1970s, not much attention was paid to this large segment of American society who claimed to be evangelical Christians.

Evangelicals fall into three major groups.¹ There is the mainstream evangelicalism of Billy Graham, the more emotional charismatic Pentecostalism of Oral Roberts, and the moral-crusading fundamentalism of Jerry Falwell.

Although there are important theological distinctions and modes of worship among these three groups, all evangelicals agree on two basic principles: the necessity of being "born again" and the belief that the Bible is the Word of God. Furthermore, the Bible to evangelicals is "inerrant" in its original form. Contrary to what many believe, evangelicals do not claim "inerrancy" for present versions of the Bible.

Some present-day evangelicals trace their roots back to the Puritans, yet others find their roots in the various ethnic groups of colonial times such as the Dutch Reformed Church. Although evangelical Protestant churches have existed since Reformation times both in Europe and in this country, their real beginnings are to be found in the Second Great Awakening in this country in the early 1800s.

After the Civil War the orthodox, or evangelicals as they came to be called, came in conflict with two powerful forces that would challenge them to their very core—Darwinian evolution because it brought into question the Genesis account of Creation and attacks on the trustworthiness of the Bible itself by higher criticism originating first in European universities and then later in this country.

The Pentecostal or charismatic evangelicals trace their roots to the Wesleyan or Methodist church tradition. Pentecostal church services are characterized by emotional worship and are today the fastest-growing Protestant group. Pentecostal services are characterized by speaking in tongues, a phenomenon that first occurred in this country in 1906 in Los Angeles.

The fundamentalist wing of evangelicalism, which has been the most militant, originated in the ferment over liberal theology called "modernism" that penetrated the Protestant mainline denominations in the 1920s and 1930s.² Although evangelicals like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Jerry Falwell differ on aspects of Biblical doctrine, they generally agree with a "dispensational" view of history. Dispensationalism (a dispensation is a period of time) is taught in the Schofield Reference Bible, which came to be called the "fundamentalist's Bible." This Bible, with its clear type and notes, divided history into seven dispensations and seemed to explain the most difficult Biblical passages in language that an ordinary layman could understand. The Schofield Bible taught the second coming of Christ, called the Rapture, and also taught the restoration of the State of Israel. It is for this reason that evangelicals and fundamentalists are some of the strongest supporters of Israel in this country. It is also interesting to note that Hal Lindsey's popular books on prophecy, such as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, are dispensational in orientation.

1. There is disagreement on the various types of evangelicals. Robert E. Webber claims there are 14 different bodies of evangelicals (*Common Roots* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub., 1982]). Richard Quebedeaux has divided evangelicals into Establishment Evangelicals and the New Evangelicals (*The Young Evangelicals* [New York: Harper & Row, 1974]).
2. The best book on fundamentalism is by George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and the American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

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have been particularly vocal in expressing their critical appraisals of public schools. They often express these views to administrators and school boards, voicing their concern about the public schools' tolerance of objectionable textbooks, drugs, secular humanism, Marxism, evolution taught as fact and not theory, the feminist movement, abortion, homosexuality, education about AIDS, and much more.

A Sense of Perspective Needed

When evangelical parents come to school, they often have deep-seated apprehensions that public school administrators don't understand them. If evangelical parents appear anxious and defensive to school administrators, it is because they are just that. Evangelicals believe that they are talking to people who are committed to secularizing the schools, people who are deeply indifferent and even hostile to their basic beliefs. In one way or another these parents are told by administrators to mind their own business and let the professionals run the schools.

After fruitless and tense encounters, administrators often become frustrated and angry about what they perceive as rigidity and inflexibility on the part of evangelical parents. With little knowledge of the evangelical tradition, school administrators find conservative evangelical attitudes to be biased, narrow, and much too dogmatic for present American society, particularly when the administrator's role often requires him or her to achieve compromises and build consensus within the community.

Frequently, evangelical parents are concerned with fairness and balance in students' textbooks and books in school libraries. Occasionally parents ask librarians and administrators why there are so few conservative books that present their pro-life, pro-Creation, and pro-family point of view. Why are there, for example, books by Norma Klein and Judy Blume, and no books by conservative evangelical writers such as James Dobson, Mary Ann Mayo, and Ken Unger?

School administrators and educators generally avoid the term *censorship*. When responding to evangelical parents about books, librarians claim that they *select* but never *cancel*. Recently, an educator wrote that there is a difference between school people and those who would cancel books: "We are readers and censors often do not read, or if they read, they do not read to learn or react or challenge" (Donelson 1987). All this goes to prove that evangelicals do not have a corner on narrow-mindedness.

Another continuing concern of evangelical parents is the failure of public schools to teach "creation science." Evangelicals do not agree on biological evolution; their views range from theistic evolution to creationism, which has recently been called creation science. Whether creationists' views are "right" or "wrong" is not the question school people should be discussing. If we are committed to academic freedom and critical thinking, that evangelical-fundamentalists' views of creation should be taught and discussed in the public school is beyond debate. Whether creationism is taught in a science class or in social studies is of little importance. What is important, however, is that our children and youth have access to American social thought, and ideas about biological evolution are a part of that history.

Exploring Solutions

What are some steps administrators can take to understand evangelical parents better and thus reduce conflict and confrontation? First, evangelical parents would like administrators and classroom teachers to know more about evangelicals and the Biblical view of the world. As church historian Martin Marty (1976) has put it, to look at American religion and overlook evangelicals and fundamentalists would be comparable to scanning the American physical landscape and missing the Rocky Mountains. For school administrators to dismiss this large group of Americans is unfortunate and unproductive.

Second, if school administrators really tried to understand the evangelical

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point of view, they would find evangelical parents more cooperative. Most evangelical parents would welcome an opportunity to share their perspectives with school administrators in an objective, open discussion of their beliefs and goals for their children. Most school administrators, pragmatic in orientation, avoid abstractions related to an understanding of theology or philosophical issues in depth, and this dislike of abstract thought is part of the problem.

Third, evangelical parents deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect when they come to school with their concerns. To be sure, "true believers" can be tough to deal with, and they appear to administrators and school board members as rigid and narrow-minded. Nonetheless, this does not give administrators, teachers, or school boards the right to dismiss evangelical parents as "fanatics"; their opinions are as much a part of the school community as the opinions of those who are more *laissez-faire* in their moral perspectives.

Finally, evangelicals would like administrators to respect evangelical values, which constitute their personal values and core of beliefs that find their source in the Bible. This is not to say that, like all Americans, they do not share most of the mainstream values of American society, because they do. But, to the evangelical, the teaching of Scripture is to be taken seriously. Millions of Americans meet every week for Bible studies, mostly in homes. It is for this reason that Biblical views are so often involved in the evangelicals' concern with textbooks and the teaching of evolution. Evangelicals agree with the assessment of Stephen Arons (1984), professor of legal studies at the University of Massachusetts, that today's public schools are bland, ethically numb, and assertively mediocre.

Sharing Perspectives

Richard Hofstadter (1962) once aptly characterized the history of American education as a history of complaint and a "constant undercurrent of something close to despair." Perhaps we can avoid repeating this history if educators, school boards, and evangelical parents can begin to share and discuss philosophical differences in an atmosphere of mutual respect and concern for the ultimate goal of all three groups—the education of our children. □

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