
With *The Making of Evangelicalism*, historian Randall Balmer masterfully writes a reference tool for a broad audience seeking to understand the protean character of American evangelicalism. For scholars interested in religion in America, Balmer offers a conversational yet substantial work. In less than one hundred pages of text, Balmer recounts evangelical history in America with attention to major events, figures, and theological concepts. Balmer provides a necessary introduction to evangelicalism in America for any reader interested in understanding the historical roots of a highly visible religious group.


Balmer’s purpose is no secret. He suggests that evangelicals need to recover their history in order to properly navigate their place in the 21st century. There is a gentle urgency in Balmer’s narrative. *The Making of Evangelicalism* suggests that evangelicals not only can better direct their own course as a result of studying their history, but Balmer quietly urges that they *must*. In fact, he implies that the Religious Right was not and is not truly the voice of evangelicals. In this respect, Balmer wants evangelicals to recognize that they have been “co-opted by powerful political interests” (78).
Throughout this narrative Balmer touches on a variety of significant figures from Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield to Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell; yet, he lingers on none of them. Balmer’s brevity, however, is a strength of this work. By concisely describing figures and events, Balmer focuses on a distinct comprehensive narrative. He explains the four major changes in American evangelicalism listed above in order to emphasize the significance of what he hopes to be a fifth turning point—the faltering of the Religious Right with the election of Barack Obama. Given this account of American evangelical adaptability, Balmer leaves readers wondering how much change the future holds.

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