Like today’s Old Order Amish and conservative Mennonites, the Brethren in Christ of the early twentieth century cultivated a small, tightly-knit religious community stressing values like simplicity, pacifism, and “separation from the world”—values that decisively shaped members’ public religious practice. For example, members built and worshiped in simple, unadorned church buildings that often had neither steeple nor pulpit. As an outward expression of humility and a way of marking themselves off from “worldly” conceptions of fashion, they dressed in plain, distinctive clothing. Women wore ankle-length dresses and a covering or “prayer veiling” on their heads, while men wore dark suits and upright collars with no ties. By refusing to join the military, they sought to follow literally the biblical mandate to “love thy enemy.” These counter-cultural practices, intrinsically connected to the community’s religious values, set them apart from other North Americans, including other Christians.

At the same time, the Brethren in Christ were decisively linked to large segments of the U.S. and Canadian Christian worlds as they stressed traditional evangelical themes like warm-hearted conversion and personal and corporate holiness. They were linked to their Protestant coreligionists on a programatic level, too. Like other evangelicals, the Brethren in Christ held an annual General Conference, conducted revival meetings, dispatched domestic and foreign missionaries, organized Sunday schools, and published a church periodical. Unlike their
eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century forebears, who had eschewed such religious innovations as “worldly,” the twentieth-century Brethren in Christ embraced these institutions—and, in so doing, became increasingly acculturated to the normal patterns of evangelical Protestantism.

A brief survey of the church’s publications during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s reveals both the group’s sense of separateness and its sense of acculturation. In the years following World War II, Brethren in Christ church leaders focused intensely on integrating their community into the wider “conservative” Protestant world. Paradoxically, leaders’ rhetoric also centralized the group’s distinctive doctrines and specific concerns. As though to emphasize this paradox, church leaders at this time often depicted their denomination as a community in crisis. Stagnating from a lack of new members, divided over issues of doctrine and practice, succumbing to the lure of acculturation, and struggling to expand their network of schools, missions, and benevolent institutions, the Brethren in Christ Church had reached a tipping point. “Traditionalists” pressed for a renewed emphasis on the distinctive elements of church life and practice, urging discipline for dissenters. “Progressives” pleaded for exercise of individual conscience, often while modifying or even abandoning formal teachings and historic practices. Church officials, desperate for unity amid this perceived impasse, sought to re-assert what it meant to be “Brethren in Christ.”

Thus, from the 1940s to the 1960s, Brethren in Christ leaders fashioned two categories—termed “legalism” and “liberalism”—into which they sorted beliefs, practices, and attitudes of which they wanted no part. Against these undesirable elements, church leaders defined the “true” Brethren in Christ. Thereby, they posited a fresh identity for their small denomination—an
identity they believed would empower the church to best balance its historic commitment to “separation from the world” with its call to “aggressive” evangelism. Later, those same leaders traded their own identity-shaping language for language borrowed from the larger Protestant world. This shift enabled leaders to rhetorically graft their small sapling of a church onto the sturdy trunk of the burgeoning “new evangelical” coalition.

A brief digression regarding my use of the term “evangelical.” In this paper, I refer to the so-called new evangelical movement that emerged as a distinct element of Protestant fundamentalism in the early 1940s. This “brand” of evangelicalism has been popularized in the American national consciousness by the likes of Billy Graham, Campus Crusade for Christ, and Bill Bright’s *Four Spiritual Laws*. Unlike their fundamentalist progenitors, these evangelicals were irenic, less separatistic, and more obviously shaped by the dominant cultures in postwar America.

A central claim of this paper is that, by re-evaluating new evangelicalism from the perspective of the once-separatist Brethren in Christ, we gain a new perspective on this familiar Protestant movement. I contend that the Brethren in Christ were drawn into the evangelical movement by more than just public commitments to theological orthodoxy. They saw in the new evangelicalism a theological orthodoxy that edified their communal beliefs while simultaneously freeing them from the burdensome, culture-bound traditions and practices born of those beliefs.

Before I can draw that conclusion, however, we need to consider the changing identity rhetoric of Brethren in Christ community leaders—and the effect of evangelicalism on that rhetoric. As I have previously stated, between 1945 and 1965, Brethren in Christ church leaders developed two categories of meaning, which they termed “legalism” and “liberalism.” Into these
categories they sorted ideas and attitudes that they rejected. These categories, in effect, became *symbolic boundaries* marking off the limits of the Brethren in Christ community; they also became the means by which leaders authenticated the “true” Brethren in Christ.

What constituted a “legalist”? In the years between 1950 and 1965, several Brethren in Christ leaders would devote considerable time and energy to constructing a definition.

First, leaders argued, legalists promoted extra-biblicism. Leaders claimed that this extra-biblicism, while taking seriously the authority of the Bible as the “divinely inspired record” of the past, too often confused human interpretations of the Bible as immanently biblical. Such poor exegesis polluted the religious practices and rituals inspired by legalists’ reading of the biblical text. Popular Brethren in Christ evangelist and minister John Hostetter warned that, for legalists, “man-made interpretations are sometimes mistaken for spiritual interpretations, and as a result you have traditions of men.”

In contrast, church leaders claimed, *true* Brethren in Christ read and applied the Bible in responsible ways. Yet they were not sanguine about human fallibility. Leaders recognized that such responsible biblical interpretation had not always been the way of the Brethren in Christ. In the past, the denomination had veered too close to this extra-biblicism, particularly in its doctrinal proscriptions. John Hostetter, for instance, declared that a 1937 decision to lay down “specific standard” for plain dress “precipitated a bit of the tail-spin that bordered the danger line of legalism.” But more recently, he concluded, the church had taken a positive tack. A 1953 revision to the church’s dress standard “majors on the Scriptural emphasis of simplicity and modesty,” he wrote. This “Scriptural emphasis,” Hostetter believed, was in keeping with leaders’ definition of the true Brethren in Christ.
More than promoting extra-biblicism, church leaders claimed, legalists also practice isolationism. According to leaders, legalists were intent on keeping themselves pure from a sinful world and therefore built barriers between themselves and others. These barriers resulted in a “loss of contact with society” and “mere meaningless routine in religious life.” More importantly, the barriers prohibited legalists from performing what leaders considered “the chief task of the [Christian] Church—salvation of the souls around us.”

Some leaders cautioned their church against lapsing into such isolationism. Clarence W. Boyer, a church leader in Ohio, inveighed against Brethren in Christ who err by “setting up legal barriers which . . . hinder outreach into our communities.” Leaders also drew a sharp distinction between “isolation,” a negative attribute, and “separation,” a positive stance taken by the Brethren in Christ and rooted in a responsible reading of the Bible. “Separation from the world,” wrote a group of bishops in 1961, “is normal” because Christians belong “to a kingdom different from this present evil world.”

Thus, church leaders reasoned, the true Brethren in Christ Church were nothing like the legalists. While legalists practiced an extra-biblical Christianity that celebrated isolationism, true Brethren in Christ rooted their faith and practice in a responsible reading of the Scriptures, remaining separated (but not isolated) from “the world.”

This distinction between the true Brethren in Christ and the legalists became one part of the new Brethren in Christ identity emerging in the years following World War II. The second part of this identity materialized as denominational leaders bound off their community from another undesirable element: liberalism.
“Liberalism,” in the rhetoric of Brethren in Christ leaders, had two components. First, liberalism was anti-biblical. In one place, Alvin Burkholder—a bishop in California and a prominent church leader among those Brethren in Christ living west of the Mississippi River—accused liberals of “compromising with clear Biblical teachings.” In another place, John Hostetter chided liberals for their “lack of guidance and teaching that fails in pointing out a Scriptural walk for the believers.”

Second, liberalism was anti-separation. Canadian minister C.R. Heisey claimed that “the cry of today’s liberal” is “to ‘get the price of this religion down tow here it costs me nothing.’” In his estimation, liberals desired the social benefits of community and the religious “hope of heaven,” but had no intention to serve or sacrifice for God’s Kingdom.

These leaders concurred that liberalism stood in stark opposition to the true Brethren in Christ. Burkholder claimed that true Brethren in Christ avoided the ravages of liberalism by promoting “a deepened spirituality that calls for separation and a personal dedication” to the Bible, and by placing “emphasis as a people upon the power of God unto salvation.” By defining the true Brethren in Christ as Bible-believers committed to separation from a sinful world, leaders set the leftward boundary of their new community identity.

This salvo against liberalism did not make the Brethren in Christ unique within so-called conservative Protestantism. As scholars like Jon Stone have shown, the new evangelicals began to assert their identity in opposition to liberal (and fundamentalist) Christianity as early as the 1950s. Thus, Brethren in Christ church leaders’ invocation of the term “liberalism” linked them—at least semantically—with nationally recognized evangelical leaders like Carl F.H. Henry and Harold Ockenga.
By the early 1960s, that semantic linkage would be complete. By then, Brethren in Christ leaders had begun to adjust the terms of their community boundaries: “fundamentalism” often took the place of “legalism,” while “liberalism” deepened in definition to include particularities seemingly borrowed from new evangelical rhetoric. This re-definition of terms, while still serving to ground a particular denominational identity, more fully linked the Brethren in Christ to the larger new evangelical movement.

In 1956, Burkholder became one of the first to assert the new binary. Speaking before the General Conference, he warned the Brethren in Christ of the encroaching liberal threat. “When a liberal theologian like Nels F.S. Ferre declares, ‘The use of the Bible as final authority for Christian truth is idolatry,’ we need to be on guard . . . [and] we need to reaffirm our position on the Holy Scriptures,” he urged. He expressed particular concern over apparent apostasy within the denomination: “[Even] in our own brotherhood . . . there are those who have surrendered their personal belief in the infallibility of the Scriptures in favor of relativism.”

Burkholder also feared the encroaching influence of fundamentalism on his church. He argued that the Brethren in Christ should not “perpetuate non-Biblical details of the Christian life,” as fundamentalists do. Rather, he concluded, the true Brethren in Christ have an “obligation to serve and effectively present a soul-saving gospel to a lost world.”

Following Burkholder’s lead, John Hostetter employed the fundamentalist/liberal binary in the 1960s. In one instance, he denounced both the “rabid religious provincialism” and doctrinaire militancy of fundamentalism as well as the “social gospel” of liberalism. In contrast to the two, Hostetter pointed his readers to the “main stream” of North American Christianity: evangelicalism. Within this movement, he claimed, the “vital concepts of the Christian faith are
taught and are in evidence.” Hostetter linked his own community to this orthodox religious
current by declaring that “we [Brethren in Christ] will preach and proclaim [this] Gospel while
using every means at hand to express a vital faith with good deeds to our fellow man.” Clearly,
Hostetter considered evangelicalism a “third way” between the opposing fronts of
fundamentalism and liberalism. In paralleling the Brethren in Christ with this evangelicalism, he
contrasted his own denomination against fundamentalism and liberalism, too.

Why should we care about the identity rhetoric of a small Protestant contingent like the
Brethren in Christ? I want to conclude by suggesting at least one reason. By examining the
Brethren in Christ in the manner that I have done here, we might gain a new vantage on a
naturalized religious phenomena like “new evangelicalism.” Clearly, the Brethren in Christ
leaders of the postwar era wanted members of their small denomination to think of themselves as
evangelicals. Despite their church’s heritage of quietism, these leaders believed that the Brethren
in Christ could benefit from participation in this burgeoning transdenominational movement, and
they borrowed rhetoric that would reinforce such participation. Thus, evangelical identity
became Brethren in Christ identity—an identity free from fundamentalist isolationism and extra-
biblicism, and protected against liberal ecumenism and anti-biblicism. In other words, this new
(evangelical) identity, while insulating the church from the theological drift of mainline
Protestantism, promised to liberate the Brethren in Christ from the stifling constraints of their
strict nonconformity.

This view of new evangelicalism as a liberating force complicates longstanding scholarly
conceptualizations of the movement. Historians like Marsden, Carpenter, Watt, and Bendroth
have repeatedly emphasized evangelicalism’s theological, political, and cultural conservatism.
All of them place evangelicals beneath the umbrella of “conservative Protestantism.” Indeed, I have been forced to fall back on this phraseology even within this essay, since scholars of Protestantism have yet to develop a more nuanced umbrella term. This appellation of “conservative Protestantism” may helpfully distinguish evangelicals from their “liberal” counterparts in mainline Protestantism. But such simple dichotomies, while perhaps suitable for initial classification, may actually obscure more than they illuminate—as evidenced, I hope, by the preceding case study. For the Brethren in Christ in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, evangelicalism promised a means by which to maintain theological orthodoxy while transforming traditional religious practices and ways of thinking. Thus, for the once-quietistic Brethren in Christ, evangelicals were not just “conservative Protestants”—they were also religious progressives.

In the decades to come, the Brethren in Christ—by virtue of their identification as new evangelicals—would play a definite role in the reshaping of North American religion. Their days of ecumenical quietism and devotional separatism were numbered. Without a doubt, the community had traded a distinctive small group identity for ideological membership within a broad coalition of like-minded Protestants. They had, in a profound and irrevocable way, joined the evangelical mainstream.