Identifying yourself as an evangelical in a roomful of secular people can be awkward. You get the feeling that everyone is slowly stepping back to give the fire-breathing fundamentalist (that would be you) plenty of breathing space.

Of course, this is a slight overstatement, but only slight. Many Americans also associate evangelical Christians with radical right-wing politics. The less generous among them go so far as to think that being born again makes you a warmonger.

Happily, the world of evangelicals is much more complex than partisan stereotypes imply. If you want to know just how complicated we born-again Christians can be, you might want to read David R. Swartz’s first book, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*. This is how the author describes it:

“In 1973 the *Washington Post* suggested that the evangelical left could ‘shake both political and religious life in America.’ In the end, it did not. While progressive evangelicals shaped the culture and living habits of millions, their movement did not take shape electorally in the way that the Moral Majority’s did. This first comprehensive history of the evangelical left, to be published in September 2012 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, explains why.” (From the author’s blog, moralminoritybook.com)

David is a familiar face in the Conservative Mennonite Conference. Some of us know him best as the author of the slightly twisted Top Ten lists that appear in the *Conference Crier* every summer; others know him from his time at Rosedale Bible College, first as a student, then as a teacher and recruiter.

Now he is an assistant professor of history at Asbury University, teaching courses in American history, Western civilization, the sixties, and war in the American memory. David earned his Ph.D. in American history at the University of Notre Dame under the direction of George Marsden and Mark Noll.

Here are some of his thoughts on his book, why he wrote it, and what he hopes it will accomplish.

Karin Granberg-Michaelson and Wes Michaelson, former top aide to Senator Mark Hatfield and editor of *Sojourners*, marching in favor of a nuclear freeze in New York City in the late 1970s. Courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.
Why did you write this book?

Professionally, it was important that I find a gap in the scholarship of American religious history. When I realized that very little had been done on moderate and progressive evangelicals, it seemed like a slam dunk, especially considering the fascinating ways that the movement intersected in my own life and family. I was discovering the writings of Greg Boyd and Shane Claiborne. As a child I ate food my mother (and father!) cooked out of the *More-with-Less Cookbook*. Ron Sider had just been to Rosedale for the Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium. I had a bumper sticker (“God Is Not a Republican . . . or a Democrat”) on my car from Sojourners.

I clearly wasn’t fitting with the religious right, which seemed obsessed with the idea of America as a Christian nation, with a budget that prioritized the military over poverty, a punitive criminal justice system, and the like. And yet I was turned off by the Democratic Party, whose pro-choice stance and militaristic diplomacy also seems anti-life. Doing research on the evangelical left was a way of wrestling with these issues.

In the end, I wanted to complicate outsiders’ perspectives on theologically conservative Christians. Doing this project was a way of saying to my Catholic, mainline, Mormon, Muslim, and secular friends, “I’m not that kind of evangelical!” As ridiculous as it seems, it has to be said out loud that it’s possible—even imperative—for followers of Jesus to follow the way of peace.

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Who is your target audience? Why should they care?

I took a buckshot approach. I wanted it scholarly enough to publish with an academic press, general enough to appeal to non-evangelicals who don’t know terms like “dispensationalism,” and specific enough to tell a narrative that my subjects would recognize.

Why did the evangelical left get left behind?

The evangelical left was left behind not because of strategic missteps. Rather, it failed to match the success of the religious right because of larger structural issues. The religious right found a receptive political party to align with. Prior to the 1970s the Republican Party was arguably less pro-family and pro-life than the Democratic Party. But the Republican leadership was willing to clothe itself in those values to get an important bloc of votes. The evangelical left, with its idiosyncratic “consistent life” ethic, couldn’t attach itself to either party. It didn’t fit the Democrats because of abortion. It didn’t fit the Republicans because of their pro-big business and pro-military planks.

The evangelical left was also hamstrung by a lack of money. Overrepresented by preachers, teachers, and social workers, the movement couldn’t accumulate much money. The religious right, by contrast, got lots of oil money because of its big-business proclivities. A former member of the
Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism
David R. Swartz
University of Pennsylvania Press
September 2012
You can pre-order a copy now at Amazon or Barnes & Noble. To find out more, visit David’s blog at moralminoritybook.com.