In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation created new ways of being Christian. From it arose the Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Puritans, Quakers, and, later, Methodists and Baptists.

The area that would become the United States was settled by Protestants and remained almost exclusively under their sway until the 20th century when Catholic influence began increasing. Even as religious variety increased through the last century, the United States remained predominantly Protestant.

But Protestant Christianity is not monolithic and unchanging. It has undergone an "Evangelical Transformation" in recent decades. This new American Christianity is largely non-denominational, even anti-denominational, in both its institutions and its theology. It is entrepreneurial, rewarding individual energy, but it also shares key theological principles across the many evangelical organizations.

The Evangelical Transformation began in independent churches and small leagues of associated churches. In recent decades, many of these independent churches have grown to become large mega-churches. The leaders of some of them have risen to national prominence, such as T.D. Jakes and Rick Warren. These have developed almost exclusively outside the mainline denominations mentioned above, with the sole exception of the Baptists.

Alongside this movement have arisen religious organizations that are not churches, but to which members of these churches belong. These include Christian groups on college campuses, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. They encompass men's groups such as Promise Keepers and women's groups, like RUTH. More formal institutions, such as Bible colleges and independent evangelical universities like Oral Roberts and Liberty, belong to the evangelical sphere.

We should not forget the radio, television and other non-denominational media ministries that have or have had a following. The most popular include Focus on the Family and the Christian Broadcasting Network, as well as Harold Camping's FamilyRadio.com. None are run by denominations.

The members of this increasing plethora of evangelical organizations share a common theology that consists of a few straightforward principles. While they may disagree over details, they are generally united in their primary beliefs. Some of the key ideas that distinguish them from the mainline denominations are:

First, true Christians are "born again." Each Christian has had a spiritual transformation in which they have recognized Jesus as their personal savior who has rescued them from their sinful life.

Second, they believe in the "literal" truth of the Bible. This means both that the Bible contains no errors of fact and that it should be understood literally. That is, evangelicals hold to what they consider to be the plain meaning of Scripture without any "interpretation" or resorting to metaphorical, symbolic or even historical explanations. Even though the theology of literalism denies biblical interpretation takes place, literalism actually constitutes an extensive set of rules about understanding the Bible which most evangelicals share.

Third, another common element is the belief that the Kingdom of God will arrive at the apocalyptic end of time. They believe that humanity is growing ever more evil and that the Kingdom will appear when humans are most depraved, probably quite soon. Most mainline denominations, by contrast, officially hold that God is gradually improving humanity as part of His salvific plan.

Of course, these three theological principles show up in mainline Protestant denominations, but Evangelicalism gives them a particular impetus. Biblical literalism enables evangelicals to accuse mainline churches of placing their distinctive theologies ahead of the Bible. In these denominations, they charge, the Bible no longer constitutes the sole source of authority. Instead, they are built on human ideas which the denomination cloaks as divine.

This has come to a head most clearly where science conflicts with a literal interpretation of the Bible. Evangelicals disagree with major conclusions of astronomy, geology and biology, especially human biology. Mainline denominations have often made theological innovations, by comparison, that enable them to accept the truths of science as well as Scripture.

Do these changes brought about by evangelicalism loom large enough to deserve a label such as "transformation?" Certainly. In the last 30 years, the mainline churches have lost their standing as the largest Christian movement in the United States to be replaced by the Evangelical movement. In the 1980s, the mainline churches were fully a third of the American populace, while the Evangelicals made up just 16 percent. By 2008, the Evangelicals had grown to 28 percent, while the mainline churches had fallen to 18 percent. Clearly, the Evangelical Transformation is already underway.

Note: The statistics used above come from the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey compiled in 2008 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.