

WHAT
IS
EVANGELICALISM?

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WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL?

In 1976 the magazine *Newsweek* ran a cover story entitled 'The Year of the Evangelicals', a clear indication that by the mid-1970s evangelical Christianity² had attained public prominence in American media and politics. But about the same time, a poll of Americans who considered themselves to be evangelicals indicated that fifty per cent of them could not name even half of the Ten Commandments.³

What then is an evangelical? Different definitions are given depending on whom you ask. In this book we will (1) examine certain prevalent contemporary definitions; (2) develop a definition that is biblical, historical, confessional and practical; and (3) explore what it means to experience evangelicalism.

A VARIETY OF ANSWERS

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther spoke of the Protestant church as the Evangelical Church. The German adjective *evangelisch* means ‘evangelical, Protestant, Lutheran’.⁴ In many places in Europe and Russia today, ‘evangelical’ refers to any Christian who is not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. According to the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE), ‘evangelical’ is defined three ways. First, ‘evangelical’ refers to Christians who affirm certain doctrines and practices. Historian David Bebbington thus identifies four evangelical doctrines:

- *Biblicism*: the Bible is the only authoritative spiritual guide;
- *Crucicentrism*: Christ’s death on the cross is the heart of faith and life;
- *Conversionism*: repentance from sin and faith in Christ are essential to salvation;

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- *Activism*: Christians must work together to spread the gospel to all nations.⁵

John Stackhouse Jr, of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, adds the following two criteria to Bebbington's list of evangelical characteristics:

- *Orthodoxy/Orthopraxis*: Evangelicals subscribe to historic Christian doctrinal, ethical and liturgical tenets and practices;
- *Transdenominational*: Evangelicals partner with members of other churches in evangelistic, missionary, social and political activities.⁶

Second, according to the ISAE, 'evangelical' can also refer to a number of movements united as much by style as by belief or doctrine, and as such embraces a wide spectrum of people from Reformed to Pentecostal to Roman Catholic. Third, 'evangelical' can be used to describe certain publications or coalitions of men and institutions — such as the magazine *Christianity Today* and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association — which sought a different path from the strident militancy and separatism of fundamentalism.⁷

Richard Lovelace says that 'the evangelical impulse' is 'an urgent drive to proclaim the saving, unmerited grace of Christ and to reform the church

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according to the Scriptures'.⁸ In this he draws upon what are sometimes called the formal and material principles of the Reformation: the authority of Scripture alone, and salvation by faith in Christ alone.⁹

Yet another definition of 'evangelical' is provided by the 1846 constitution of the Evangelical Alliance, which adopted the following articles of faith: the divine inspiration of Scripture, the Trinity of persons in the Godhead, the depravity of man, the mediation of the divine Christ, justification by faith, conversion and sanctification by the Holy Spirit, the return of Christ to judge the world, the ministry of the Word, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁰

According to David Wells, people in the twentieth century viewed the core of evangelicalism in three ways. Some defined it as 'confessional', that is, its centre is the confession of specific biblical doctrines. Some saw evangelicalism as an 'organizational fraternity', a broad coalition of churches, missions, ministries, media and businesses, loosely united for various common causes or joint enterprises. Still others saw its core as 'charismatic', not in doctrine or organization, but in its 'spiritual intuition about the presence of the Holy Spirit'. The organizational and charismatic understandings of evangelicalism have taken the lead since the 1960s and 1970s,

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while the emphasis on the confessional definition has been relegated to the backseat.¹¹

In answer to the question, ‘What is an Evangelical?’ the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in the United States states: ‘Evangelicals take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.’¹² The NAE affirms a number of fundamental doctrines, but notably absent from this list is the doctrine of justification by faith alone.¹³

David Hilborn of the Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom says evangelicals are “‘gospel people”, committed to simple New Testament Christianity and the central tenets of apostolic faith’, who are unified by the Reformation principles of Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone.¹⁴

Then, there are some who say we have no right to define evangelicalism or set any boundaries for it. Roger E. Olson says evangelicalism is a movement, not an organization, and therefore does not have defined boundaries, only ‘certain common characteristics or family resemblances’. As a religious movement, evangelicalism cannot be precisely defined, and the identity of an evangelical likewise lacks any sort of precision. Anyone who tries to exclude another from the big tent of evangelicalism is acting the part of a bully, he says. Olson sees evangelical truth as ‘a never-ending journey rather than a fortress to be defended’.¹⁵ And

yet, he also says that evangelicalism has a ‘historical-theological core’ of Christian orthodoxy, so long as no one requires ‘slavish adherence’ to its doctrines.¹⁶ It has a centre, but no real boundaries; and even the centre is none too firmly fixed.

Meanwhile, polls seem to indicate that self-proclaimed evangelicalism in the United States is disintegrating in doctrinal and moral confusion. It is disheartening to hear the press’s hyped-up and foolish statements against evangelicalism; news organizations and popular entertainment (television and cinema) focus on the extremists, hypocrites, and anything scandalous or sensational, such as the Florida pastor who made headlines all over the USA by threatening to burn, and then burning, a copy of the Koran.

James Boice defended evangelicalism, but had this to say, ‘What is wrong with evangelicals? The answer is that we have become worldly. We have abandoned the truth of the Bible and the historic theology of the church, which expresses those truths, and we are trying to do the work of God by means of the world’s “theology”, wisdom, methods, and agenda instead.’¹⁷ Boice said this was often less of a public renunciation of biblical truth as much as tragic neglect.

He wrote: