

Evangelicalism: a brief definition

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Evangelicals often appeal to the derivation of their name from the Greek New Testament word for the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ. On their own account, they are gospel people, committed to simple New Testament Christianity and the central tenets of apostolic faith, rather than to later ecclesiastical accretions. As such, they seek to maintain and present the authentic teaching once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3). As the leading Anglican Evangelical John Stott points out, this means that Evangelicalism is neither a recent innovation nor a deviation from Christian orthodoxy.¹

Although Evangelicals sometimes see these emphases embodied in the ministries of the radical Oxford preacher and Bible translator John Wycliffe (c. 1330-84), the prophetic Czech church leader Jan Hus (1372-1415) and other pre-sixteenth century pioneers like Peter Waldo and Girolamo Savonarola, the shape of Evangelicalism as we know it today was formed more decisively by the Protestant Reformation. Led by Martin Luther in Germany, John Calvin in Geneva and Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Protestantism was driven by the rediscovery of core gospel truths which were seen as having been neglected by the medieval Catholic Church. These truths were summarised in three solas. The first of these was *Sola Scriptura* – By Scripture alone. This entailed the conviction that God's objective truth was supremely revealed through his Word in the Old and New Testaments, and that the Bible must always take precedence over reason, tradition, ecclesiastical authority and individual experience. The second was *Sola Gratia* – By grace alone. This was the conviction that God takes the initiative in salvation and the outworking of his plan for the world. It held that we know the truth first and foremost not because we deduce it rationally from observation of nature, but because the God of truth has revealed it to us. In fact, without this divine initiative in grace, we are powerless and lost. The third pillar of the Reformation was *Sola Fide* – By faith alone. This emphasised that although God takes the initiative in salvation, he nevertheless elicits our response and includes us intellectually, emotionally and physically in the outworking of his purposes. Hence our being saved by grace through faith. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli differed on finer points of theology, and on the ways in which these Reformation principles should be worked out in relation to Church and State. All of them in turn diverged from more radical reforming groups like the Anabaptists in this area. Even so, it is with the Reformation that we see the term Evangelical first

¹ *Evangelical Truth*, Leicester: IVP, 1999, pp.16-17.

deployed in relation to a specific party or worldview within Christianity. Early on, it tended to describe the Lutheran strand of Reformation thought and practice, but by the mid-seventeenth century was being more widely applied to a range of Protestant convictions.

While the great Reformation *solae* define the *theological* foundations of Evangelicalism, its specific social and historical character did not decisively mesh together until the 1730s, when an American Calvinist Jonathan Edwards and two Church of England clergymen, George Whitefield and John Wesley, developed a revivalist application of Reformation principles through itinerant preaching, evangelism and a deepened emphasis on conversion or new birth, assurance of faith, and personal holiness. In particular, these revivalists stressed that assurance of salvation was the normative pattern of Christian experience, and that this could be given to an individual in a moment. Such assurance gave Evangelicals the freedom and the inner dynamic for their now familiar activism in preaching the gospel and engaging in good works.

Against this historical and theological background, the following five points, adapted from key studies of the movement by David Bebbington and Alister McGrath, represent a workable summary of Evangelical characteristics:

Biblicism – Through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the God who is objectively there has revealed universal and eternal truth to humankind in such a way that all can grasp it.

Christocentrism – God's eternal Word became human in the historical man Jesus of Nazareth, who definitively reveals God to humanity.

Crucicentrism – The good news of God's revelation in Christ is seen supremely in the cross, where atonement was made for people of every race, tribe and tongue.

Conversionism – The truth of the eternal gospel must be appropriated in personal faith, which comes through repentance – that is, a discernible reorientation of the sinner's mind and heart towards God.

Activism – Gospel truth must be demonstrated in evangelism and social service. ²

Although they are still conflated by some academics and many journalists, an important distinction needs to be drawn between the terms Evangelical and fundamentalist. Fundamentalism is now often used to refer to any type of dogmatic (and often backward-looking) thought, usually in religion. However, it originated with a series of Christian theological papers, *The Fundamentals*, published in America between 1910 and 1915. Although these papers were written by a group of Evangelicals concerned to restate their defining beliefs, by no means all of them would qualify now for the label Fundamentalist. After the Second World War, a division between relatively progressive and conservative American Evangelicals on issues like biblical criticism, ecumenism and social engagement became evident in North America, and gradually the term *Fundamentalism* was reserved for the latter group. More recently, distinctions between the two constituencies have also emerged in such matters as young earth creationism, the state of Israel and its role in Biblical prophecy, and the role of women in church leadership. Where Evangelicals tend to agree to disagree on such things, Fundamentalists are more monolithically conservative in their approach to them.

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²David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain; A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 4-8. Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995).