
Evangelical: a meaningful term?

Eryl Davies

Well, it all depends on the level at which the question is discussed. At a biblical level, for example, the term “Evangelical” is very meaningful indeed; in fact, it is rich in content and in its implications. And there is no ambiguity at all. The word “Evangelical” originates from the Greek noun *euangelion* which translates as “good news” or “gospel”. Together with the verb *euangelizomai* (to announce good news), these two Greek words occur almost a hundred times in the New Testament. Through its Latin equivalent *evangelium*, these Greek words have been absorbed into the English language. But in its New Testament context, the evangel “is the momentous Biblically-attested good news that God justifies sinners who for spiritual and moral salvation rely on the substitutionary person and work of Jesus Christ”.¹ Evangelicals, therefore, are “Gospel people” and evangelicalism is “the movement associated with the Gospel”.² In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, this Gospel is Biblically described as the good news that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose from the dead on the third day thus fulfilling God-given prophecies in the Old Testament. Here is the only way in which sinners can be reconciled to the Holy God. It really is good news. One important reason for defining and emphasizing the term “evangelical” at this biblical level is in order “to safeguard the Gospel, to keep the evangel clear, to be concerned about the salvation of men and women...”.³

At the historical level, again the term “evangelical” is meaningful. As far back as 200 AD, Tertullian was probably the first to use the term as he defended biblical truth against the false teaching of Marcion. An important use of the term in a later period was in 1519 when Martin Luther described some of the teachings of the martyred Hus (1415) as “altogether Christian and evangelical”. Luther later regarded the term as the only appropriate label to describe his own teaching. It was the Roman Catholic, Sir Thomas More, who attacked William Tyndale in 1532 and referred to “those Evangelicals”. More may have been largely responsible for introducing the term into the English language. In this brief historical overview, we note that the nineteenth century has been described as “the evangelical age”⁴ with the growth of the evangelical group within the Anglican Church and the effective preaching of nonconformist leaders like Spurgeon and, in Wales, John Elias. In 1846 the Evangelical Alliance was launched in London with the aim of uniting Christians, not churches, in fostering religious liberty, evangelism and inter-denominational fellowship.

From a low-ebb earlier in the twentieth century due to the impact of theological liberalism on the historic denominations and colleges, there was a gradual resurgence of Evangelicals and biblical theology by the middle of the century. In the early decades of the century, the terms “Fundamentalist” and “Evangelical” were interchangeable. During the 1930s and onwards, fundamentalism⁵ became increasingly more separatist in ecclesiology, dispensationalist and negative both in its attitude to scholarship and also social-cultural involvement. A number of Evangelicals in the United States from the 1930s wanted to remain loyal to Scripture and fundamental doctrines yet, at the

same time, rejecting dispensationalism to go back to nineteenth century American evangelicalism. They desired to embrace a virile but moderate Calvinism as well as a higher regard for scholarship, apologetics and social action. The establishment in 1942 of the National Association of Evangelicals was significant and included a good cross-section of conservative Evangelicals from various church groupings.

Despite many encouragements in America, it was, by 1967, “impossible to regard American evangelicalism as a single coalition with a more or less unified and recognised leadership”.⁶ One major issue which began to divide Evangelicals was inerrancy and this emerged in the United States, for example, with regard to Fuller Seminary.⁷

In the United Kingdom, new evangelical leaders emerging in the post-war years repudiated the label “Fundamentalist”⁸ and were known as conservative Evangelicals. Once again, however, as in America so in Britain the term “evangelical” has been qualified and interpreted differently during the past twenty or more years. Clive Calver claims triumphantly that Evangelicals are now increasing towards 50 % of Protestant church attenders in the United Kingdom and have “rapidly become a force to be reckoned with”.⁹ Some writers, however, insist that any attempt to describe the term “evangelical” must fail because of its historical diversity and the fact that it is constantly changing. Defining the term is like “trying to pick up a slippery bar of soap with wet hands”.¹⁰ Amongst some Anglican Evangelicals, for example, it is claimed with considerable justification that the term “evangelical” is “functioning simply as an adjective, describing the type of Anglicans they are, rather than the primacy being given to Evangelicalism in defining their theological outlook and practice”.¹¹

Amidst the contemporary confusion concerning the qualification of the term “evangelical”, the following terms or labels can be noted :

1. Neo-evangelical

This term was used by Carl Henry, for example, to describe “the cooperating Evangelicals” who were bitterly attacked by “isolationist Fundamentalists” in the immediate post-war years. These neo-Evangelicals were generally sound in theology and committed unreservedly to inerrancy, but they often worked, and cooperated, with those in mixed denominations and ecumenical agencies”.¹²

2. New evangelical

There are three distinct but related contemporary uses of this term and care is needed in distinguishing them.

- a) The older usage in which the term is interchangeable with that of neo-evangelical. Harold Ockenga first coined the phrase “new Evangelicals” in 1947 in order to distinguish it from the negative aspects of fundamentalism.
- b) In 1971, in his famous addresses on “What is an Evangelical?” at the IFES Conference in Austria, the late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones declared: “You have in America something which boasts the name of the ‘new evangelicalism’...it is no longer the old. There is a suggestion of some difference, whatever it may be”. He refers to a “very subtle change”¹³ in the definition of what it means to be an Evangelical. This was a perceptive observation on the part of Lloyd-Jones. He was unhappy with the stance of some American Evangelicals or “new Evangelicals” because of their ecumenical involvement, mixed-denominational commitment, a

renewed emphasis, or even over-emphasis, on social involvement and an uncritical acceptance of Billy Graham's evangelistic methods and policy of seeking wide, even "liberal", support for his missions. It is also extremely probable that, in addition, Lloyd-Jones was referring to disturbing developments during the 1960s with regard to the Fuller Seminary staff crisis concerning inerrancy or limited inerrancy. He was certainly distressed over doctrinal divisions at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary: "They were once a body of evangelical people who stood united in the defence of the historic Faith. But", he concludes, "that is no longer true... Can you introduce certain changes and still say that you are the same, that you are still evangelical?".¹⁴ What Lloyd-Jones emphasised in this context was "the subtlety of the change". This has always been true historically, he insisted. Despite making important and often valuable affirmations of the Faith, such people at the same time have often introduced changes but in a subtle way. Such changes, he adds, "generally take place on the periphery and not at the centre" which again "is a part of the subtlety of the process".¹⁵ Because of the unity of divine truth and the interrelatedness of individual doctrines, changes even on the peripheral will, sooner or later, have a domino effect on the Faith.

- c) A third use of the term "new Evangelical" was by John Gunstone in 1982. Gunstone was referring to Evangelicals within the Anglican Church and he traced some of the changes which had occurred since the 1967 Keele Congress. He described these "new Evangelicals" as being "comprehensive rather than exclusive", "more relaxed theologically" and more Anglican than evangelical.¹⁶ This third use overlaps considerably with the second one and justifies the concern expressed by Lloyd-Jones.

3. Radical evangelical

This term is used by several writers who emphasise the crucial importance of social justice; it involves a misunderstanding of the teaching concerning the "Kingdom of God". Whether it is "Kingdom ethics" or "Kingdom ministry" or "Kingdom praying", the biblical teaching concerning the Kingdom of God is often unbalanced and in need of important modifications. It is not true, as is often claimed, that the Kingdom of God is *ipso facto* present when social justice is sought and established. One reason is that the Kingdom of God refers to God's universal rule now mediated through the exalted Christ. Secondly, within this divine rule there is the spiritual Kingdom which people enter by spiritual, not political or social, means. Exponents of this radical evangelical approach include Ronald Sider and Chris Sugden.¹⁷ The implications of this radical approach are far-reaching; for example, it is claimed that social action is integral to mission and that non-Christians are within God's Kingdom even though they may not be regenerate.

4. Liberal evangelical

Liberalism in theology denotes a critical and rational approach to the Bible which developed in Germany early in the nineteenth century and slowly extended its influence until, by the early decades of the twentieth century, almost the whole of Protestantism in Western Europe had embraced its critical presuppositions, methods and conclusions. Liberalism itself has gone through various phases but the term "liberal Evangelical" refers to those who accept the uniqueness of Christ and the necessity of conversion

while embracing a liberal theological framework. For such a person, the Holy Scripture is no longer an infallible and inherent record of God's self-revelation.

At this point we need to beware. Douglas Johnson expressed the matter succinctly:

The liberal Evangelical appears in general to retain much that is good, including most of the Gospel. It is not easy to notice that fatal step from the firm ground of objective truth, once given by God, on to the quicksands of tentative hypothesis and subjective reconstruction... After that step, it is only a matter of the degree and how far one plunges on into the quicksands.¹⁸

Johnson reminds us that at the end of the nineteenth century it was several liberal Evangelicals, not out and out Liberals, which "first caused the deviation... who made the first move...".

Liberalism amongst Evangelicals has been a matter of concern to us for nearly two decades. Recently, however, Don Carson has raised the matter with regard to some Anglican Evangelicals.¹⁹ No doubt we shall have to face this issue on a wider front.

5. Post-evangelical

Yes, the term represents another major departure from the biblical Faith. The term as popularized by Dave Tomlinson²⁰ has "no formal definition, there is no body of theology behind it..."²¹ For many, we are told, it is "a welcome rallying point, a symbol of hope" for those who want to progress into a more "grown up" experience of faith.²² In other words, such people do not want to be restricted by a narrow biblical theology and basis; rather, they want to interact with and often embrace, non-evangelical perspectives and theologies. To be post-evangelical, in Tomlinson's words, "is to take as given many of the assumptions of evangelical Faith, while at the same time moving beyond its perceived limitations".²³ But this "moving beyond" is radical; truth is understood as something "more provisional and symbolic",²⁴ the Scriptures can be in error and they only "become" the Word of God. The Atonement is no longer regarded as penal and substitutionary. All this represents a radical departure from the Faith.

6. Ortho-gelicals

Have you come across this term yet? Recently it was used to describe those participating in talks representing Evangelicals and different Orthodox churches. The talks commenced after the WCC's Canberra Assembly (1991) when it became apparent that Evangelicals and Orthodox shared concern over several issues such as the centrality and authority of Scripture, apostolic and trinitarian dogma and the limits of legitimate diversity within the life of the World Council of Churches.²⁵

What then?

Should we now abandon the term "Evangelical" in view of the considerable confusion prevailing over the use of this term? Not necessarily. One lesson is that we must be aware of the fact that the term is used in several different and conflicting ways. Another challenge is that we must rediscover its proper biblical and historical meaning. In the words of Lloyd-Jones, it is "a limiting term"²⁶ and eliminates many ideas but includes and emphasizes certain distinctive truths. One major and foundational truth is the doctrine concerning the Bible; its inspiration, inerrancy, sufficiency and supreme authority. In all respects, the Evangelical submits himself to this Book. He begins and

ends with the Bible. And nothing is added to the Bible nor taken away from it. All that the Bible clearly teaches then the Evangelical believes and obeys. Such Bible teaching centres in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and includes the seriousness of sin, the penal substitutionary Atonement of Christ, Justification by Faith alone, the necessity of the new birth, the personal return of Jesus Christ in glory as King and Judge, and the consummation of God's purposes.

References

- ¹ Carl Henry, "Who are the Evangelicals?" in *Evangelical Affirmations*, (Zondervan, 1990), p. 75
- ² Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?*, (Marshall-Pickering, 1994), p. 11
- ³ Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times* (Banner of Truth, 1989)
- ⁴ E.g., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell (ed.), (Marshall-Pickering, 1985), p. 380
- ⁵ The term is linked originally with a series of twelve books entitled *The Fundamentals*, the first book being published in 1910 in the United States. Fundamentalism as a term came to refer to those believers who, in opposition to theological Liberalism in the churches, re-affirmed the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith such as the infallibility of the Bible, the virgin Birth of Christ as well as His substitutionary Atonement and physical resurrection, etc. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* distinguishes three phases in the history of Fundamentalism, see p. 435.
- ⁶ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 74
- ⁷ See, e.g., *Biblical Authority*, Jack Rogers (ed.) (Word, 1977), and an even more serious attack on inerrancy in 1979 in *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, Rogers & McKim (eds), Harper & Row. They argued that the doctrine of inerrancy was not embraced by Augustine or Calvin, but originated with seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism and then adapted by the Princeton theologians.
- ⁸ E.g., John Stott in *Fundamentalism and Evangelism*, (London, 1956); James Packer in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, (IVP, 1958); John Stott in *Essentials*, (1988), pp. 90-91
- ⁹ Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?*, p. x
- ¹⁰ Idem; writers include Mark A. Woll (p. xi) and Derek Tidball (p. 12)
- ¹¹ *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*, Melvin Tinker (ed.), (Christian Focus, 1995), p. 9
- ¹² Carl Henry, *Faith at the Frontiers* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 100
- ¹³ DM Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*, p. 303
- ¹⁴ Idem, p. 304
- ¹⁵ Idem, p. 305
- ¹⁶ *Pentecostal Anglicans* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1982)
- ¹⁷ See, R Sider, *Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice*, (Grove Books, 1977) – Chris Sugden, *Kingdom and Creation in Social Ethics*, (Grove Ethical Studies, no. 79, 1990) – George Carey, *I Believe in Man*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), p. 125
- ¹⁸ *Contending for the Faith*, (Leicester: IVP, 1979), p. 343
- ¹⁹ See *Evangelicals Now*, November 1995. Also "Observations of a Friend" in *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*, pp. 203-222
- ²⁰ *The Post Evangelical*, (Triangle SPCK, 1995)
- ²¹ Idem, p. 1
- ²² Idem, p. 3
- ²³ Idem, p. 7
- ²⁴ Idem, p. 87
- ²⁵ "A lot in common" in *One World*, October 1995, pp. 12f.
- ²⁶ DM Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*, p. 306

Dr D Eryl Davies is the Principal of the Evangelical Theological College of Wales

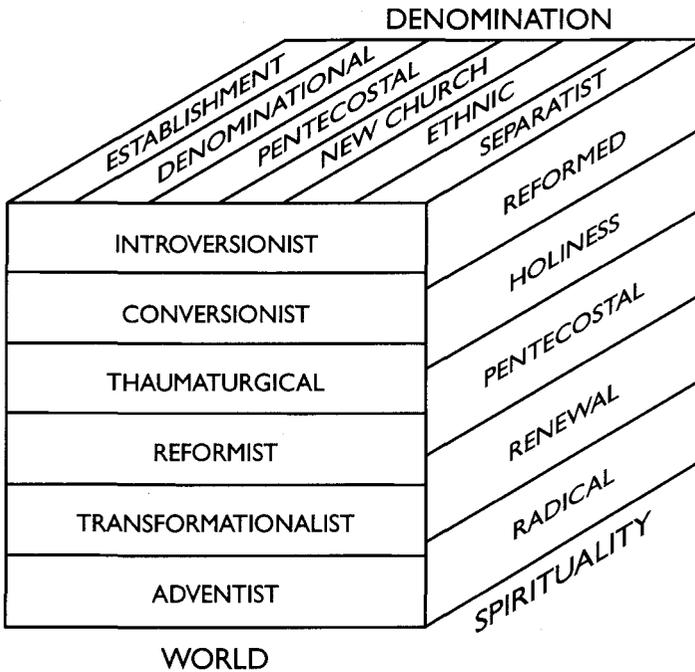
An evangelical identikit

I believe it is helpful to picture contemporary evangelicalism as something like a Rubik's Cube ... Moving the individual pieces around will give all sorts of permutations. So it is with evangelicalism. As the individual pieces are moved, so a whole variety of different evangelical identities can be seen ... So, for example, an Anglican evangelical may plug into the evangelical network at very different places in terms of spirituality and go either to Keswick, or to Renewal conferences, or to Puritan fraternal and so on. A Baptist evangelical may be devoted to the King James Version and be pietistic in spirituality or in touch with the latest trends, familiar with the field of rock music and have a radical social involvement. Evangelicals with similar labels will network with very different people, plug into different events, support different parachurch groups and, as a result, have a very different feel to their evangelicalism from one another.

The Rubik Cube allows us to make distinctions on a number of different dimensions and to create a variety of identikit pictures of evangelicals. It is only an approach like this which makes sense of the complexity of contemporary evangelicalism. My tentative suggestion would be that the most important dimensions are attitudes to:

Church
Spirituality
World

The cube would then look like this diagram:



Derek J Tidball, Who are the Evangelicals?, pp. 20-24.