

What is an evangelical?
August 8, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone



This morning we have another great question to consider -

“With Donald Trump and people not wanting to get vaccinated, I’ve heard a lot about evangelicals. What’s an evangelical?”

That’s a great question and I’m glad somebody asked it. That word, ‘evangelical,’ is very much in the cultural consciousness these days, isn’t it? I’ve seen news reports saying that 80% of evangelicals supported Trumpⁱ and I’ve seen others saying that a quarter to a half of all evangelicals have no intention of being vaccinated.ⁱⁱ That’s what the news media says about evangelicals, but is that really what makes a person an evangelical? Are evangelicals really Trump people and anti-vaxxers?

Well, no. And frankly, it’s kind of a bummer that that’s what people think of these days when they hear about evangelicals, because that’s not really what evangelicals are. And evangelicals are so much more than that stereotype.

So we’re going to talk today about evangelicalism and what it is that makes a person an evangelical. And I’ll show you my cards right off the bat – I consider myself an evangelical and if you agree with the way I read and teach the Bible, then that means you’re probably an evangelical, so let’s talk about what that means. What’s an evangelical?

Now to be honest, it’s a little tricky to nail down what exactly an evangelical is because there’s no formal ‘evangelical denomination’ per say. Evangelicalism is not a denomination but a worldview, a way of seeing the world. And that worldview is shaped by certain commitments when it comes to faith.

Years ago, a scholar named David Bebbington came up with ‘the Bebbington quadrilateral’ as a way to highlight what evangelicals emphasize and it’s become the standard definition, so we’re going to work with that this morning. By and large, evangelical people are committed to these four principles: Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.ⁱⁱⁱ That is, evangelicals are committed to the Bible, to the Cross, to experience of conversion and to the active living out your faith. That’s evangelicalism in a nutshell - Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.

Admittedly those are some pretty heady words, so let me put it like this –

Evangelicals are committed to the Bible. Evangelicals are committed to the Gospel. Evangelicals are committed to a personal experience of faith. And evangelicals are committed to living that faith out. In other words, evangelicals are Bible people, Gospel people, transformed people and action people.

Let’s take those one at a time.

So first, evangelicals are Bible people.

First and foremost, evangelicals are characterized by their attitude toward the Bible. Evangelicals are absolutely committed to the idea that the Bible is God’s infallible, authoritative Word to His people. It is not just a collection of human ideas on par with other good books that people have come up with; it is

God Himself speaking to us through human authors and so it is the authority that we use to order and shape our lives. That's the evangelical view of the Bible.

Not all Christians agree with that though. For some, the Bible is valuable, but only as valuable as tradition and experience. Sure the Bible is good, but church tradition and experience is just as meaningful for shaping our lives. For others, the Bible is a helplessly outdated relic that needs to be reinterpreted in order to find the good stuff that's really in there and they so rearrange it or read it metaphorically and end up with a Bible that's more palatable to the modern mind. And then of course, for some, the Bible is just that old book on grandma's shelf.

Against all that, an evangelical would say 'No, the Bible is God's own Word that we use to understand the world and govern our lives.' It describes real historical events and so we read it as literally as we can. An evangelical would point to 2 Timothy 3:16 and say 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

It's not just human beings writing down good ideas – it's 'God-breathed.' 2 Peter 1:21 says that the Spirit carried along the authors of Scripture as they were writing it down,^{iv} so yes, it comes in the culture and through the character of the people who wrote it, but it is ultimately God who is the final author of the Bible. And so that means that we use it to shape our lives. We don't use culture to critique the Bible, we use the Bible to critique our culture. Absolutely, it was written in a different time and place and so we're going to have to do some work to understand it, but we do our best to understand it the way the original authors intended. And then apply it in a way that is consistent with what they wrote and meaningful in our own context. In that way, we emphasize the Bible and let it teach, rebuke, correct and train us. We give the Bible authority in our lives.

Evangelicals are Bible people.

And it's because of that that evangelicals are Gospel people.

See, if the Bible wasn't really worth paying attention to, then the Cross wouldn't mean much. If the Bible was no more true than 'Tuesdays with Maury,' then Jesus' death on behalf of sinners wouldn't have counted for much. But since we know that the Bible is God laying out how the world works, we can understand just how important the Cross really is.

Again, the BIBLE tells us that God created all things, including us, and all things were good. God made us to enjoy fellowship with Him and gave us everything that we would need to thrive and yet we choose to think that we knew better than God. In Adam and Eve and in our own lives, we have all rebelled against Him, causing a rift between Him and us.

But rather than just wiping us out and starting anew, God chose to redeem us. And He redeemed us in a pretty incredible way. He came in the person of His own Son to bear the price for sin and on the Cross, He got what we deserved so that we could receive what He deserved. We were forgiven and restored to God, all by grace, through faith, because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

That is the central story that governs our lives as evangelicals. People will scoff at the idea that we are/were sinners and that we need saving, that's there's even a God, but evangelicals are convinced, frankly I am convinced that the Bible knows what it's talking about – that we all have a sin nature that makes us wander from God, that we need a Savior to bring us back to Him, that Jesus is that Saviour and

that in His life, death and resurrection, we have been given the greatest gift that we could ever be given - the free gift of salvation and restoration because of the Cross. That's great news... and that's where we get our name from. 'Evangel' is the Greek word for the announcement of 'great news' – the Cross and all it implies is 'great news' and so evangelicals are people who are committed to the 'great news' of the Cross. Evangelicals are Gospel people.

Now as you know, there are lots of churches that would agree broadly with that, but in many churches, there is this sort of vague sense that God loves everybody and everybody is welcome and the good news applies to everybody without requiring any kind of commitment of their own.

Evangelicals on the other hand say 'No; because of the Cross, we are transformed people.' We are committed to conversion and a personal experience of faith.

This is where Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 comes in. John 3:3 Jesus says "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians 5:17 - 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2Co 5:17 NIV).

The implication is that when you listen to the Bible and take the Gospel seriously and receive its benefits by faith, you are born again. You are made entirely new. You are transformed from one thing to another, the way that bread becomes toast when you put it in the toaster.

Evangelicals believe that when we come to faith, God transforms us into brand new people, who will live brand new lives from that point on. Sure, we will still struggle against sin on this side of heaven, but when we come to faith in Jesus, the fundamental orientation of our hearts is changed away from sin and self and toward Jesus. That is a fundamental commitment of evangelicalism – a personal experience of change.

Now for some people, like the apostle Paul, they can point to a big, dramatic conversion where God knocks them on their butt and then they choose to follow Him, but for others, like Peter, like me, there is more of a journey, where you can't put your finger on the moment, but you know the change has happened. For evangelicals, it's important that that change has happened because it means that you have truly taken hold of the benefits of the Gospel.

So evangelicals are transformed people.

And evangelicals are action people.

And really this grows out of the previous two commitments. Because of the Cross, we are saved from sin and transformed into new people, people who will live out the Gospel in all parts of their lives.

Ephesians 2:8-10 sums it all up for us - 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:8-10 NIV).

We are saved, not to live like we used to, not to sit on our butts and do nothing, but to extend the grace that we have received to the rest of the world. This means evangelicals are motivated to share their

faith and to serve the world in tangible ways. Billy Graham was an evangelical – his faith motivated him to evangelize people all over the world. William Wilberforce was an evangelical – his faith moved him into government in 1800's England where he became a major force for ending the slave trade. Clarence Jordan and Millard and Linda Fuller were evangelicals – and their faith moved them to build homes for people, eventually becoming the Habitat for Humanity that we know today. All different works, but all motivated by the same commitment – that the Gospel calls us as new creations to be a blessing to the world. Evangelicals are action people.

So... evangelicals are Bible people. Evangelicals are Gospel people. Evangelicals are changed people. And evangelicals are active people.

How about you? Where do you stand on these commitments? Let's just do a quick rundown.

What is the Bible to you? Is it an old book that you sometimes visit? A hopeless relic from a bygone age? An old-fashioned book that needs to be modernized if it's to be any use? Or is it God's own Word, given by Him to His people to explain the world and direct their lives? If you said the last one, you're probably an evangelical.

What about the Gospel? Is it an idea that you entertain on Sundays but not the rest of the week? A kind of fairy tale that exists out there without any real impact on your life? Or does it explain the experience of sin and redemption that you've seen in your life? If you said the last one, you're probably an evangelical.

How about conversion? Are you the kind of person who comes to church but looks just like their non-Christian neighbour? Are you the kind of person who says 'Yep, God loves us all no matter what; no action required on my part.' Or have you personally taken hold of the grace of God and seen a change in your attitude? If you said the last one, you're probably an evangelical.

And what about action? Is faith a private Sunday thing or something you live out, in service to others, every day of your life? Say it with me – if you said the last one, you're probably an evangelical.

I get the sense that we are an evangelical church – that we are committed to understanding the Bible in the way that the original authors intended, that we are committed to living it out, that we believe the realities of sin and redemption that we see in the Gospel, that we value transformed lives that bear fruit in keeping with the Gospel – I think that we ARE an evangelical church.

And frankly, we have an evangelical heritage. Whether you would have used that language then or not, the decision to leave the United Church in the 1980's was a very evangelical decision. You looked at what the UCC was doing, said 'that's inconsistent with God's Word' and said 'we're going to take action to preserve our commitment to the Bible and the God of the Bible in all that we do.' That was a very evangelical move. And to be honest I think we're better off for it.

What about the people in the States – the 'evangelicals' who supported Trump? Well, I don't know their hearts, so I can't judge, but I think what's really happening here is an unfortunate widening of the definition of evangelical, the same way that people who say they're Christian on the census never darken the door of a church. One scholar, Thomas Kidd has quipped 'it seems nowadays that all you have to do to be considered evangelical is be vaguely religious, vote Republican and watch Fox News.'^v

That's not an evangelical, not from an historical point of view, not according to the Bebbington quadrilateral. That's something entirely different and yet the name has become affixed to it.

But you know what, I think it is important to truly be evangelical. I think that evangelicals have grasped the true meaning of the Gospel and truly experienced the redemption from sin and new life and mission that Jesus gives to us, all because of His love for us. Keep committed to the Bible, to the Gospel, to the transformation and the mission. Let's pray.

ⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/08/932263516/2020-faith-vote-reflects-2016-patterns>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/05/us/covid-vaccine-evangelicals.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Bebbington, 'The Nature of Evangelical Religion' in *Evangelicals: Who they have been, are now and could be*, ed. Mark Noll, David Bebbington and George Marsden, page 34. You can actually read this chapter and some of the rest of the book here: <https://bit.ly/3fBFvY3>

^{iv} 20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2Pe 1:20-21 NIV).

^v In Michael Hamilton, *Evangelicals*, page 218 and Kidd, *Evangelicals*, page 247.