

Evangelicalism Defined

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1. A DEFINITION OF AN "EVANGELICAL"

A. The word "evangelical" means

The word "evangelical" is: "Derived from [the Greek] 'euangelion' (i.e. evangel, gospel, good news), the term came into use at the Reformation to identify Protestants, especially as they held to the belief in justification by grace through faith and the supreme authority of Scripture (often considered the material and formal principles of Reformation teaching."¹

B. Historical definition

"Historically defined, 'evangelicalism' was a virtual synonym for 'protestant,' and, by definition, being an evangelical included adherence to all Protestant distinctives."²

C. Generalization of the term

The non-descript nature of the term "evangelical" is seen by stating that evangelicalism's "... primary emphases are its (1) particular understanding of salvation, and (2) the necessity of proclaiming the gospel."³

2. ORIGIN OF THE TERM "EVANGELIC"

A. Evangelicalism Started Out As A Renewed Interest In Salvation And God's Word (1490's).

Historian Alister McGrath summarizes Barry Colbart's research which, "...tells us that [1] attitudes toward the personal appropriation of salvation and [2] the spiritual importance of the reading of Scripture, which would now be called 'evangelical' emerged in Italian Benedictine monasteries during the late fifteenth century [1490's]."⁴

B. Evangelicalism Developed Into A Name For Anti-Roman Catholic (1520-1540's).

Again Historian Alister McGrath writes, "The term 'evangelical' is especially associated with the 1520's, when the French term 'evangelique' and the German 'evangelisch' began to feature prominently in the controversial writings of the early Reformation.... The Italian church in particular was deeply and positively affected by the emergence of evangelicalism during the 1530's. In the 1530's, the term 'protestant' came to become more significant; increasingly, this came to be understood simply as anti-Catholic.... It was only in the 1540's, when an increasingly anxious church [Roman Catholic], alert to the growing threat posed by northern European Lutheranism, condemned such attitudes as destabilizing, that 'evangelicalism' went off-limits. The reason for this development? The church authorities had become convinced that to be an 'evangelical' was to be a Lutheran and, hence, to be anti-Catholic."⁵

C. Evangelicalism Then Described Doctrinal Views Opposing The Views Of The Roman Catholic Church And The Reformed Church (1560-1590's).

G. Miller writes, "The term 'evangelical' has a long history. In the Reformation era [sixteenth century] it described the adherents of the Augsburg Confession in contrast to Roman Catholicism or Reformed Churches."⁶

James White writes, "Evangelicalism arose historically because sixteenth-century believers rediscovered the 'evangel,' (i.e. 'Good News')."⁷

D. Evangelicalism Then Described Doctrinal Views Of The Protestant Church (1700's).

G. Miller writes, "In the eighteenth century the term came to be applied to those who favored a Protestant Church of England and to their supporters among the Non-conformists. English evangelicals tended to stress [1] the importance of the Bible, [2] the right of private interpretation, [3] the need for saving faith, [4] high standards of personal morality, and [5] vicarious atonement."⁸

3. THE BELIEFS OF AN "EVANGELICAL"

A. Historical emphasis

Historically, the true two-fold emphasis behind the word "evangelical" has been (1) a particular view of salvation, and (2) a particular view of God's Word, both with a more definitive understanding than what "evangelicalism" has been defined today.

B. Reformation Emphasis

"At the time of the Reformation, Luther and the Protestant evangelicals believed that two truths stood at the very center of their reforming effort. These two truths ['sola scriptura' meaning Scripture alone, and 'sola fide,' meaning faith alone] have faithfully stood at the center of evangelicalism, to a greater or lesser degree, for centuries."⁹

C. General Emphasis

"...Those who believe that all humans are in need of salvation and that this salvation involves regeneration by a supernatural work of God. Based upon His grace, this divine act is received solely by repentance and faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Further, evangelicals urgently and actively seek the conversion of all persons world-wide to this faith, They regard the canonical Scriptures as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice."¹⁰

Loraine Boettner writes, "The most important issue between evangelicals and others is that of biblical authority. The evangelical insists that Scripture is the Word of God written, and that it is therefore infallible in its original autographs."¹¹

D. Conviction Emphasis

"Evangelicalism is grounded on a cluster of six controlling convictions, each of which is regarded as being true, of vital importance and ground in Scripture: (1) the supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living; (2) the majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity; (3) The Lordship of the Holy Spirit; (4) The need for personal conversion; (5) The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole; (6) the importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth."¹²

Conclusion: What can evangelicals do today to stop some of the problems that threaten to destroy evangelicalism and in turn strengthen evangelicalism?

"Evangelicals" Must Maintain Biblical Truth.

Kim Riddlebarger writes, "...Evangelicals must be careful to maintain both the biblical meaning of the Evangel itself (whereas all saving activity is assigned to God alone), as well as their own historical identity, which is necessarily Protestant."¹³

"Evangelicals" Must Maintain A Biblical Belief System.

David Wells writes, "The word 'evangelical' because it has lost its confessional dimension, has become descriptively anemic. To say that someone is an evangelical says little about what they are likely to believe (although it says more if they are older and less if they are younger). And so the term is forced to compensate for its theological weakness by borrowing meaning from adjectives the very presence of which signals the fragmentation and disintegration of the movement. What is now primary is not what is evangelical, but what is adjectivally distinctive, whether Catholic, liberationist, feminist, ecumenist, young, orthodox, radical, liberal, or charismatic. It is, I believe, the dark prelude to death, when parasites have finally succeeded in bringing down their host. Amid the clamor of all these new modes of evangelical faith there is the sound of a death rattle."¹⁴

"Evangelicals" Must Maintain A Distance From The Secular Culture.

Kim Riddlebarger writes, "It must also be candidly admitted, as David Wells, James Davidson Hunter, Carl F. H. Henry, Harold Lindsell, and Michael Horton have all recently pointed out, that evangelicalism as a movement has reached an important crossroad, if not an outright theological crisis. At such an important and critical moment of definition for evangelicals, undoubtedly there will be those who have had enough of secularism under the guise of 'evangelical' religion and who will jump ship for reasons of conscience."¹⁵

"Evangelicals" Must Realize Compromise Is A Trap.

John Ankerberg and John Weldon write, "Many Catholics call themselves Evangelical are seeking to bring these Christians into the Catholic Fold."¹⁶

References:

¹The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, Alan Richardson and John Bowden, London: SCM, 1983, p. 191

²"No Place Like Rome?" Kim Riddlebarger, Roman Catholicism, John Armstrong, Gen. Ed., Chicago: Moody, 1994, Pp. 229

³Evangelical Mind & Heart, by Millard J. Erickson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, p. 14

⁴Evangelicalism & The Future Of Christianity, by Alister McGrath, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995, p. 19

⁵"What Shall We Make of Ecumenism?" Alister McGrath, Roman Catholicism, John Armstrong, Gen. Ed., Chicago: Moody, 1994, Pp. 212-213; Evangelicalism & The Future Of Christianity, by Alister McGrath, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995, p. 21

⁶"Evangelicals" by G. Miller, Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions, Keith Crim, Gen. Ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1981, Pp. 243-244

⁷The Roman Catholic Controversy, James White, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996, p. 10

⁸"Evangelicals" by G. Miller, Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions, Keith Crim, Gen. Ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1981, Pp. 243-244

⁹The Coming Evangelical Crisis, John H. Armstrong, Gen. Ed., Chicago: Moody, 1996, p. 23

¹⁰Evangelical Mind & Heart, by Millard J. Erickson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, p. 13

¹¹Baker's Dictionary Of Theology, by Everett F. Harrison, "Evangelicalism," by Loraine Boettner, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, p. 200

¹²Evangelicalism & The Future Of Christianity, by Alister McGrath, Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1995, Pp. 55-56; Mere Christianity, by C. S. Lewis

¹³"No Place Like Rome?" Kim Riddlebarger, Roman Catholicism, John Armstrong, Gen. Ed., Chicago: Moody, 1994, Pp. 232

¹⁴No Place For Truth, by David Wells, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, p. 134

¹⁵"No Place Like Room" Kim Riddlebarger, Roman Catholicism, John Armstrong, Gen. Ed., Chicago: Moody, 1994, p. 222

¹⁶Protestants & Catholics: Do They Now Agree? by John Ankerberg and John Weldon, Chattanooga: Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, 1994, p. 210