

What is an evangelical?

by Dr Paul B Coulter, 26th May 2006 (revised 15th October 2009)

INTRODUCTION - methodology

The term “evangelical” has been described by some in sociological (that is defining what the groups who call them selves evangelical are like) and historical terms (that is defining the origins of the movement or different groups within it), but any true definition must be made on Biblical and theological grounds. In fact, the word “evangelical” is derived from the Greek word for “gospel” (literally in English “good news”, in Greek *euangelion*). Evangelicals are defined by a particular understanding of and commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It would seem essential, therefore, to base our definition of “evangelical” on an understanding of the gospel.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Evangelical scholars including John Stott and DA Carson have found it helpful to appeal to I Corinthians Chapter 15 verses 1-11 for the biblical grounds of a definition of what it means to be an evangelical, since there the apostle Paul goes some way to defining the core of the gospel. The following points, with the exception of the last two (which are my own), are taken from their comments. According to this passage the evangelical faith (the gospel) is:

1. **Personal** (v1-2) - the Corinthians were saved because they had received, believed, and taken their stand on the gospel. Evangelicals expect a personal commitment to the gospel and a personal story of faith in Christ as a defining feature of true Christian faith.
2. **Christological** (v3-4) - the message of the gospel centres on Christ and His death for our sins and resurrection from the dead. Evangelicals believe that Christ Jesus was God Himself living as man (as such He was the unique Son of God), the ultimate revelation of God, and the only Saviour for mankind who was declared to be Lord by His resurrection from the dead.
3. **Biblical** (v3-4) - Paul appeals to Scripture as the basis for understanding the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection. Evangelicals recognise Scripture as the inspired word of God and therefore the sole and ultimate authority on all matters of faith and conduct.
4. **Historical** (v5-7) - the life, death and resurrection of Christ were historical facts which were attested to by witnesses. Evangelicals hold to a historical faith, based on the reality of God’s action in human history and not on empty myths.
5. **Theological** (v3) - Paul says that Christ’s death was “*for our sins*”. Evangelicals believe that the death of Christ was not merely an example of a good death or a demonstration of God’s love, but that it was the one sacrificial, substitutionary atoning death for sins.
6. **Apostolic** (v4-9) - the risen Lord appeared to His apostles, and they were entrusted with passing on the faith to others (v3). Evangelicals believe in the apostolic nature of our faith, handed down by successive generations of faithful witnesses.
7. **Corporate** (v1) - Paul was writing to a community of believers who were part of the worldwide, universal Church of Christ and committed to meeting together under defined leadership as a local

church. Evangelicals believe that all true believers are part of the invisible, universal Church of Christ and that believers should be committed to fellowship and service in local churches.

8. **Missional** (v11) - Paul was engaged in preaching the gospel, declaring it to all people. Evangelicals believe that the church and Christians should be actively engaged in evangelism, social action and world mission.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but I believe that it captures the essence of evangelicalism.

CONCLUSION - unity around a centre; diversity around the edges

The above statement under eight headings goes a long way towards defining the core of what evangelicalism is about - these are principles that unite all evangelicals. However, it becomes much more difficult to delineate the peripheries of what is inevitably a diverse movement. Evangelicals differ widely over many issues, including patterns of church government and theological perspective on baptism, certain gifts of the Spirit, predestination and eschatology (to name but a few). In addition they differ significantly in styles of evangelism and of worship. The intention of this document is to propose a core definition that evangelicals can be united on, so that we can cooperate in mission while having healthy and challenging discussions about our varying positions on other matters.

The label "evangelical" is only useful in as far as it is understood to convey something about the people who bear it. It may be that in future this term will become unhelpful, but for now I believe it remains a useful term in describing Christians from varying backgrounds who share the common values outlined above. Of course, there may be many who also share these values who have never described themselves as "evangelicals" and there are undoubtedly some who take the label "evangelical" and do not really adhere to all we have outlined here. In the final analysis (and surely when we are in the Lord's presence in glory) all labels are found to be deficient and we must trust in the promise of Scripture that:

God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'
(II Timothy 2:19)

FURTHER READING - EVANGELICAL STATEMENTS OF FAITH

Other statements that provide a helpful understanding of the theological basis of evangelical faith and to which I would personally subscribe, include:

- *The Lausanne Covenant* - available online at: <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>
- *World Evangelical Alliance* statement of faith - available online at: <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/aboutwea/statementoffaith.htm>
- *International Fellowship of Evangelical Students* (IFES) doctrinal basis - available online at: <http://www.ifesworld.org/about/whatwebelieve.php>