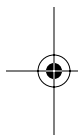




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Toward a Definition of Evangelicalism



Defining *evangelical*, *evangelicalism*, and *evangelical theology* has become something of a cottage industry in the waning years of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first century. At least since a national news magazine in the United States declared 1977 “The Year of the Evangelical,” numerous religious scholars have attempted to provide a definitive portrait, if not concrete definition, of the term *evangelical* and the religious movement it describes. Entire scholarly conferences and symposia have devoted great effort and energy to the cause of investigating and finally comprehensively describing evangelicalism. Even some self-identified evangelical scholars have declared *evangelical* an essentially contested concept—an idea and category with no precise or agreed-on meaning.¹ In fact, so



¹See Donald W. Dayton, “Some Doubts about the Usefulness of the Category ‘Evangelical’” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 245-51.





it seems, there are several justifiable uses of the term *evangelical*. They are all legitimized by either broad historical usage or common contemporary usage. Here we will delineate seven distinct though occasionally overlapping meanings of *evangelical* and then identify which one of them is intended by the title of this handbook and will be its subject.

Etymologically *evangelical* simply means “of the good news” or “related to the gospel.” The Greek root, a word for “good message” or “good news,” was used by the apostles of Christianity and the early Greek-speaking church fathers for the gospel they proclaimed. In this broadest sense of *evangelical*, then, *evangelicalism* is simply synonymous with authentic Christianity as it is founded on and remains faithful to the “evangel”—the good news of Jesus Christ. It is not unusual to see the term *evangelical* used in documents of the Roman Catholic Church and almost all so-called mainline Protestant denominations to denote the message of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God’s love for humanity demonstrated in Christ’s death and resurrection, and especially salvation by God’s grace alone apart from human achievements. In this sense, then, evangelical is contrasted with moralistic or legalistic religion; evangelicalism is the Christian movement proclaiming the good news that human persons can be saved by receiving a free gift won for them by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

The second historical use of *evangelical* derives from the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In parts of Europe dominated by Protestant state churches rooted in the reforming works of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin in the sixteenth century, *evangelical* is simply synonymous with *Protestant*. While traveling around Germany, Switzerland, and portions of eastern France, for example, one may see many churches labeled simply “evangelical” and know they are Protestant without knowing precisely which Protestant traditions they represent. Lutherans especially like to use





the term *evangelical* in the names of their churches and denominations; some Reformed (Calvinist) churches also use it. In the United States this use of the term appears in the name of the largest Lutheran denomination—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—which is a union of two previously existing Lutheran synods or denominations in the U.S. The architects of the union consciously chose to incorporate the word *evangelical* into the name of the new denomination in order to state publicly that it would be gospel-centered in the Lutheran sense of proclaiming the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone.

The third definition of *evangelical* is tied to the British context of the Church of England, which is sometimes called Anglican. In the United States it is known as the Episcopal Church. The Church of England, though doctrinally Protestant since the time of Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century, has also always contained different and sometimes conflicting parties. The evangelical party within the Church of England is not organized, but it is composed of those priests and bishops and lay members who seek to “Protestantize” Anglicanism and who resist the party that would retrieve and strengthen Roman Catholic elements within the church’s history and liturgy. The evangelicals tend to be “low church” in that they reduce the liturgical aspects of worship to a minimum, stress the priesthood of all believers (without discarding the ministerial office), and emphasize the necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ for salvation (as opposed to baptismal regeneration). The evangelicals within the worldwide Anglican/Church of England/Episcopal communion look back to the first-generation reformers of the English church under Henry VIII in the mid-sixteenth century, most of whom were martyred by his Catholic daughter Mary Tudor (“Bloody Mary”) for their enthusiastic Protestant zeal.

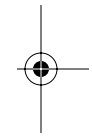
The fourth distinct use of *evangelical* arises out of the Pietist





and revivalist attempts to reform and revive Protestant Christianity in Germany, Great Britain, and North America in the early eighteenth century. At a time when the state churches and even most of the so-called sects (dissenting denominations) had fallen into a state of spiritual lethargy described as “dead orthodoxy” by the “enthusiasts” (spiritual reformers), the latter broke on the scene to enliven Protestant Christianity with a greater sense of spiritual fervor and vitality. In Germany this movement of “heart Christianity” that came to be known as Pietism emphasized the necessity of personal conversion to Jesus Christ through repentance and faith, a life of devotion through Bible reading and study, prayer and worship, and holiness of life. The Pietists often met in conventicles or small groups outside the formal structure of the state churches and were sometimes persecuted as a result. Lutheran leaders such as Philip Spener and August Francke firmly established a spiritual renewal movement within the state church; Count von Zinzendorf turned a small band of wandering spiritual Christians known as the Moravian Brethren into an influential renewal movement within Protestant Christianity.

In Great Britain and the American colonies a revival known as the Great Awakening broke out under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley, their friend George Whitefield, and Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards. Those who embraced these “new measures” of Christianity that tended toward emotion and appeal for personal decision for Christ called themselves evangelicals. Thus, in the second half of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century in Great Britain and North America, evangelical was virtually synonymous with Great Awakening-inspired revivalism. Evangelicals rejected sacramental salvation and covenant salvation as inadequate views of true conversion to Christ and urged all people—baptized and born “in the covenant” (i.e., into Christian homes and churches), as well as those entirely outside the church’s





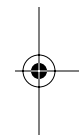
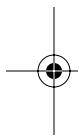
embrace—to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for the remission (forgiveness) of sins and for transformation of life (regeneration).

The fifth definition of *evangelical* comes from the conservative Protestant reaction to the rise of liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is nearly synonymous with fundamentalism—at least as that term was originally used and understood. Conservative Protestants who wished to reaffirm what they considered the “fundamentals of the faith”—such as a supernatural worldview (including the miracles of the Bible), the transcendence of God, the reality of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the inspiration and authority of the Bible—called themselves both fundamentalists and evangelicals. Many of their leading thinkers, speakers, and writers stood in the Reformed Protestant tradition and looked back to the great Protestant orthodox thinkers such as Francis Turretin, Archibald Alexander, and Charles Hodge for guidance and inspiration. The paradigm of such a fundamentalist evangelical was Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen, who taught at Princeton Seminary and then helped found Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia to rival Princeton as it allegedly declined into modernistic Bible scholarship and theology around the beginning of the twentieth century. The early twentieth-century fundamentalists (especially before 1925) were by and large simply defenders of Protestant orthodoxy with a somewhat militant attitude toward fighting the encroachments of revisionist Protestantism. *Evangelical* was one of the terms used to identify them. After 1925, the year of the infamous Scopes evolution trial in Tennessee, fundamentalism gradually began to withdraw from the mainstream of denominational Protestantism into its own subculture, with a plethora of newly founded Bible schools, publishing houses, denominations, conventions, and missionary agencies.





The sixth use of *evangelical* is the one that provides at least the beginning point and center of this handbook and its subject matter. In the 1940s and 1950s postfundamentalist evangelicalism began to break away from the increasingly militant and separatistic fundamentalism of the 1920s and 1930s. There is no absolute line dividing the older fundamentalism from the newer evangelicalism, and matters are especially confused by the fact that nearly all fundamentalists—no matter how militant and separatistic—have continued to call themselves evangelicals. Most postfundamentalist evangelicals do not wish to be called fundamentalists, even though their basic theological orientation is not very different (in most cases, at least) from that of the early fundamentalists such as J. Gresham Machen. The new, postfundamentalist evangelicals were derisively labeled “neo-evangelicals” by their more militant and separatistic cousins, who accused them of accommodating to the secular spirit of the age and to liberal-modernistic Protestantism. Postfundamentalist evangelicals wanted to be known simply as evangelicals and asserted that there was an evangelical heritage that was greater than fundamentalism. They appealed to pre-fundamentalist evangelicals such as the Pietist-revivalist leaders and thinkers of the Great Awakening and to the great theologians of Protestant orthodoxy, and they sought to engage evangelical belief and experience with contemporary society and issues in a less negative way than militant fundamentalists. During the crucial decades of the 1940s and 1950s postfundamentalist evangelicals formed a strong multid denominational coalition in Britain and America and created a large and broad network of cooperating organizations to renew conservative, revivalist Christianity and spread its influence in Western society. In the United States the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was formed to provide an alternative to the liberal-dominated Federal Council of Churches; eventually over fifty conservative Protestant denominations with at least

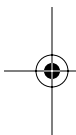




some sympathy with revivalism (e.g., Billy Graham's evangelistic ministry) joined. One motto of the NAE became the old Pietist saying "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity."

The seventh definition of *evangelical* and *evangelicalism* is popular rather than scholarly or historical. One often hears or reads the adjective *evangelical* used by journalists to describe anyone or any group that seems particularly (by the journalist's standards) enthusiastic, aggressive, fanatical, or even simply missionary-minded. True fundamentalists (militant, separatistic, ultraconservative Protestants) are often described in the media as evangelical; sometimes Roman Catholic missionaries and even Muslim groups that engage in missionary endeavors are labeled evangelical by journalists. This seventh use cannot simply be rejected; it has caught on in contemporary language. Jehovah's Witnesses, considered a cult by many conservative Protestants, are often called evangelical simply because of their door-to-door witnessing techniques. However, for the purpose of this handbook, this journalistic and popular use of *evangelical* will be ignored.

Like many good terms and categories, then, *evangelical* and *evangelicalism* have a broad semantic range, one that is so variegated that the terms seem to lose all shape. It is tempting even for evangelicals at times to give up the label. However, it should be remembered that many other religious labels for movements and categories for theological orientations suffer the same vagueness and contested nature as *evangelicalism*. Exactly what is Reformed Christianity and Reformed theology? Beyond the fact that it is a tradition rooted in the theological contributions of sixteenth-century reformers Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, there is little consensus even among those who call themselves Reformed. Can anyone precisely define the charismatic movement? Who is a charismatic; what makes a person truly charismatic? What is liberal Protestant





Christianity? These and many other good and useful and even necessary labels and categories are notoriously difficult to pin down, and yet they continue to be used by scholars and lay people alike. Each one does refer to some phenomenon—a tradition-community that may be bewilderingly diverse and yet at the same time somewhat united in contrast to other tradition-communities.

Our approach to describing evangelicalism—which is the context within which evangelical theology functions—will be historical; here we will attempt to define by telling a story. It is the story of the rise of postfundamentalist evangelicalism—its roots, crucible, birth, and contemporary existence. The focus of our story will be theology—the distinctive ideas about authority for religious belief, revelation and Scripture, God and Jesus Christ, salvation, and so forth. However, the story of theology is never the narrative of pure ideas falling out of the sky. evangelicalism is a tradition-community, and evangelical theology is its peculiar recipe of religious commitments, values, and beliefs. Before delving into the background history of evangelicalism, it will be helpful to set forth at least a tentative definition of the category and of evangelical theology. The perceptive reader will recognize immediately that the definitions set forth here draw together several of the seven definitions of *evangelical* outlined above.

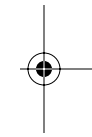
Evangelicalism is a loose affiliation (coalition, network, mosaic, patchwork, family) of mostly Protestant Christians of many orthodox (Trinitarian) denominations and independent churches and parachurch organizations that affirm a supernatural worldview; the unsurpassable authority of the Bible for all matters of faith and religious practice; Jesus Christ as unique Lord, God, and Savior; the fallenness of humanity and salvation provided by Jesus Christ through his suffering, death, and resurrection; the necessity of personal repentance and faith (conversion) for full salvation; the importance of a devotional





life and growth in holiness and discipleship; the urgency of gospel evangelism and social transformation; and the return of Jesus Christ to judge the world and establish the final, full rule and reign of God. Many evangelicals affirm more; none affirm less or deny any of these basic belief commitments. The genius of evangelicalism is its combination of orthodox Protestantism, conservative revivalism, and transdenominational ecumenism. Within it coexist and cooperate peacefully (most of the time) Protestants committed to competing secondary doctrines: predestination, free will, premillennialism, amillennialism, infant baptism, believer baptism, pouring, immersion, literal creationism, theistic evolution. Occasionally, of course, and perhaps increasingly, evangelicals of differing doctrinal persuasions with regard to secondary doctrines (denominational distinctives) fight with each other. The old Calvinist versus Arminian (predestination versus free will) argument erupts from time to time and threatens to disrupt the uneasy unity of evangelicalism. The powerfully unifying figure of evangelist Billy Graham has helped keep the evangelical community together in cooperation in spite of such differences. What will happen when the "Graham glue" dissolves with his passing (or passing the torch) is a favorite subject of speculation among evangelical-watchers.

Another way of describing evangelicalism is by saying that it is a movement for the renewal of Protestant Christianity. It shares with the Protestant Reformers and classical Protestantism in general basic Christian beliefs about the Scriptures, God, Jesus Christ, and salvation, but it regards classic, historic Protestant Christianity as needing reform. Thus, evangelicalism represents a reform of the Reformation. Evangelical reform has a program that centers around *retrieval*, *restoration*, *revival*, and *relevance*. Evangelicals have always wanted to retrieve the original impulses of Christianity as they are revealed in the New Testament and early church documents as well as the ideals of the Protestant Reformers. This retrieval is necessary be-

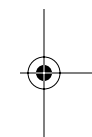
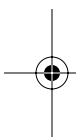




cause of the occasional declensions of Protestantism from these original impulses. Evangelicals have often decried a condition they call “dead orthodoxy” in the churches, a condition in which church leaders and members confess correct doctrine but show little or no evidence of personal experience of the transforming presence and power of God. They have also criticized the modern deviations from historic Christianity known as “neo-Protestantism” or liberal modernism. In order to challenge and correct these diseases in Protestantism, evangelicals have sought to recover both basic Christian doctrine and the New Testament and original Protestant experiences of God’s transforming power in people’s lives.

Not only have evangelicals sought to renew Protestant Christianity through retrieval, they have also sought to restore the spirit of early Christianity within the churches. While they may differ about the details of this restoration, all evangelicals firmly believe that contemporary Christianity is authentic to the extent that it reflects the heart of the apostolic Christian movement as that appears in the New Testament. The missionary journeys of Paul, for example, form a favorite theme of evangelical preaching and teaching, and evangelicals believe that missionary and evangelistic endeavor is just as important for authentic Christianity today as it was in the first century. Most evangelicals would not go so far as to declare the entire church between the New Testament and the rise of evangelicalism apostate, but many would consider it seriously defective and in dire need of renewal and revival. Many evangelicals, then, view evangelical revivalism and conservative Christian theology and proclamation at least a partial restoration of the “true Christianity” that declined into partial obscurity for centuries after the deaths of the apostles.

Thus, crucial to the renewal of Christianity that evangelicals envision is revival. Revival does not necessarily connote emotional responses to emotional preaching. That has, of course,





been a feature of some of evangelicalism. But more important to true revival for most evangelicals is heartfelt, passionate appeals for personal appropriation of God's grace in Jesus Christ and his cross through repentance and faith and a "daily, personal relationship with Jesus Christ" through prayer and Bible reading. Evangelicals have always suspected that authentic Christianity involves the affections and will as much as, if not more than, the intellect. Evangelical revival appeals to religious affections and calls for people to make personal decisions for and lifelong commitments to Jesus Christ. Many evangelical churches have institutionalized revival by holding special "protracted meetings" over several days or even weeks. These were called "Holy Fairs" in seventeenth-century Scotland; in twentieth-century North America they were sometimes referred to as Jesus festivals. Everyone is familiar with the Billy Graham crusades. But whatever they are called, evangelicals of all kinds initiate spiritual renewal events that seek to breathe new life into individuals and churches.

Finally, evangelicalism seeks renewal of Christianity through relevance. Evangelicals have in varying degrees emphasized the importance of contextualizing the Christian message and relating it to contemporary problems and issues. They criticize and seek to avoid real accommodation to culture, while at the same time translating the gospel into cultural idioms, using contemporary means of communication in order to facilitate retrieval, restoration, and revival. The "new measures" used by the revival preachers of the first and second Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries give examples of this evangelical interest in renewal through relevance. During the Great Awakenings those churches that cooperated with itinerant, circuit-riding preachers and produced sermons and used illustrations that related to the everyday lives of people in the colonies and along the frontiers grew, while those that resisted such new measures and insisted on sticking



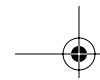


to old language and methods tended to lose members. Evangelicalism has not usually been noted for its relevance, but that is no doubt because of its reaction against liberal Christianity's (neo-Protestantism's) attempts to accommodate the biblical and historic Christian message to the everchanging climates of contemporary cultures. Evangelicals seek to retain the original biblical message, as they understand it, while communicating it in contemporary ways using modern means. Above all, they seek to appeal to the personal spiritual needs of individuals in their everyday lives—needs for release from anxiety of guilt, acceptance within a community of true believers, and hope for a better future, even if only after this life.

Evangelical theology is, most simply, that theological scholarship done within the context of the evangelical movement for renewal of historic Protestant Christianity. The postfundamentalist evangelical coalition contains several publishing houses and publications as well as professional theological societies, and there is a sense in which any theological reflection published, read, or widely discussed within these is evangelical theology. That is, of course, a descriptive approach to defining evangelical theology. What about a prescriptive approach? Are there boundaries of evangelical theology? How might one determine whether a particular book or article or scholarly paper that is published or read within evangelicalism by a self-identified evangelical theologian truly is evangelical? If *evangelical* is compatible with anything and everything, it is literally meaningless. Identifying either a controlling center or limiting boundaries of authentically evangelical theology is notoriously dangerous; others are bound to disagree most strongly.

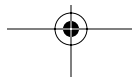
Our approach is to use history as the guide. Rather than setting boundaries and examining every theological contribution by a predetermined set of rigid criteria, we prefer to look at each contribution through the lens of the history of evangelical Christianity, which has always contained a strong reforming

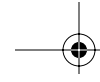




and reshaping impulse within itself. In other words, evangelicalism is dynamic rather than static. Just because something is new does not automatically mean it is not evangelical. However, evangelicalism's history does have a unifying ethos as described above—a strong, gravitational center that holds it together. This can take many new shapes, and it can be expressed and interpreted in different ways. Evangelical theology, then, is that form of mostly Protestant Christian reflection on God and salvation (etc.) that is guided by the ultimate authority of Scripture, acknowledges that God is supremely revealed in Jesus Christ, and includes a strong focus on personal salvation by repentance and faith. More could be included, of course, but this brief definition is sufficient to give some shape to evangelical theology. It is not any and all Protestant theological reflection and formulation. Liberal theology that is characterized by “maximal acknowledgment of the claims of modernity” is not compatible with evangelical theology. Nor is all Protestant orthodoxy; in order to count as evangelical, it would have to include affirmation of and reflection on “conversional piety”—the dimension of salvation dear to the hearts of all evangelicals in which persons come to know God as Savior only through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that begins with, or at least comes to full fruition in, conscious repentance and trust.

Evangelicalism and evangelical theology cross denominational and confessional boundaries; one can find evangelicals and evangelical theologians in many Protestant traditions and communities. One of the most influential evangelical theologians of the later decades of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first century is Donald G. Bloesch, who taught theology for many years at a mainline Presbyterian seminary (University of Dubuque Theological Seminary) and maintained membership and ministerial ordination in the mainline Protestant United Church of Christ. Bloesch's defini-





tions and descriptions of evangelical express the category's unity and diversity and continuity and discontinuity with fundamentalism:

“Evangelical” can therefore be said to indicate a particular thrust or emphasis within the church, namely, that which upholds the gospel of free grace as we see this in Jesus Christ. An evangelical will consequently be Christocentric and not merely theocentric (as are the deists and a great many mystics). Yet it is not the teachings of Jesus Christ that are considered of paramount importance but his sacrificial life and death on the cross of Calvary. The evangel is none other than the meaning of the cross.²

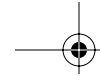
Evangelicalism unashamedly stands for the fundamentals of the historic faith, but as a movement it transcends and corrects the defensive, sectarian mentality commonly associated with Fundamentalism. Though many, perhaps most, fundamentalists are evangelicals, evangelical Christianity is wider and deeper than Fundamentalism, which is basically a movement of reaction in the churches in this period of history. Evangelicalism in the classical sense fulfills the basic goals and aspirations of Fundamentalism but rejects the ways in which these goals are realized.³

According to Bloesch and many other commentators on evangelical history and theology, then, evangelicalism is a broad and diverse movement that includes within itself many (but not all) Lutherans, Reformed Protestants (i.e., “Calvinists”), Wesleyans, Baptists, Pentecostals, and adherents of other

²Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 15.

³*Ibid.*, 22.





Protestant traditions. It also includes many fundamentalists, although Bloesch is reluctant to identify evangelicalism with fundamentalism because of their different mind-sets and approaches to culture, other Christians, higher education, and a variety of other subjects. Some evangelical spokespersons define and describe evangelicalism and evangelical theology more restrictively than Bloesch. Those who value evangelicalism's fundamentalist roots tend to limit it to people and organizations that affirm biblical inerrancy. Others who especially value evangelicalism's Pietist and revivalist roots tend to limit it to people and organizations that affirm radical conversion as the only true initiation into Christian existence and who reject infant baptism as a sacrament. A few evangelicals would argue that authentic evangelicalism is limited to those who believe in the classical Calvinist doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. However, the majority of evangelicals and scholarly commentators on evangelicalism emphasize its diversity as well as its unity; the genius of postfundamentalist evangelicalism and evangelical theology is its ability to embrace a variety of confessional and liturgical differences within a unifying framework of belief and experience.

