

The “e” in WEA/SPEA: The meaning and history of “evangelical” Christianity

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Kia ora koutou. Ngā mihi nui ki a tatou katoa i runga i te ingoa o tou tatou Ariki o Ihu Karaiti (Greetings to us all, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ).

My talk is about the “E” word in W.E.A. and S.P.E.A: what it means for us to be “Evangelical”. Later today we will talk about how that is expressed in the South Pacific.

As I was flying in yesterday, over a lot of South Pacific water, I was looking out the window and reflecting on the wonderful and inspiring historic work of God among South Pacific people, a profound Gospel work, in which western missionaries first brought the Gospel message, beginning in Tahiti, and then Pacific people themselves then took the message to other Pacific peoples, and with individual and mass conversions island and island was won for Christ, and hundreds of Pacific Christians came as missionaries here to Papua New Guinea, many of them losing their lives. South Pacific Christianity is very much the fruit of evangelical Christianity.

Misunderstandings
of the word “evangelical”

Before I go any further, let me acknowledge that the word “evangelical” is misunderstood by many people, even by many Christians, and it is also out of fashion in some quarters.

(1) That evangelical means “evangelism” or “evangelistic”

Firstly, in most churches and societies around the world, and even among many people who could themselves be fairly described as “evangelical”, the term “evangelical” is often assumed to be just a synonym of “evangelism” (i.e. sharing with others the good news of salvation through Jesus) or “evangelistic” (i.e. someone who frequently does evangelism). salvation through Jesus) or “evangelism”. Yes, being “Evangelical” is very much about evangelism, and so it should be, but it is also wider than that, and describes a whole theological mindset and set of practices.

(2) That evangelical means someone extreme, ignorant, in-your-face, and annoying

Secondly, the term “evangelical” is now often used as a general slur word against those conservative Christians that many non-Christians and liberal Christians find annoying, who they think of as extreme, Bible-thumping, emotionalist, pressurising, closed-minded fundamentalists. There are elements of truth in such a stereotype, but by and large that stereotype is very unfair to the breadth and depth of the evangelical community.

(3) That evangelical means religious people in the USA who support the Republican Party

Thirdly, in recent years understanding of the term “evangelical” has obviously been distorted by media because of the much-publicised link in the USA between some evangelical Christians and current Republican politics. But, of course, the term “evangelical” was around a very long time before the USA or the Republican Party

was even thought of, and its roots actually go back 2,000 years, and in no other country in the world does “evangelical” have the same political linkages or connotations as it currently does in the USA context.

(4) in some countries, that evangelical just means “Protestant”, i.e. not Catholic

And fourthly, in some countries on the European continent, and in places like New Caledonia, the word “evangelical” commonly means little more than “Protestant,” i.e. “not Catholic.” Many so-called “evangelical” denominations in Europe are not “evangelical” in the same sense of what we are talking about today. Such denominations may sometimes be predominately theologically liberal.

So what does the E in WEA and SPEA mean?

εὐαγγέλιον / *euangelion*

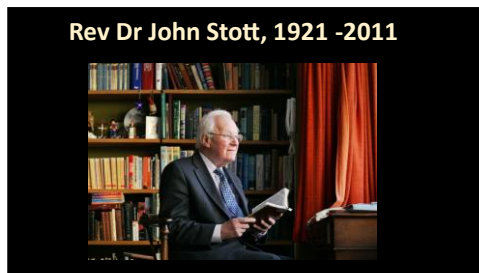
= “Gospel” / “good news”.

e.g. Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God”

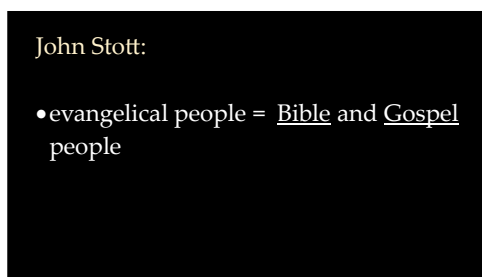
As most of you probably know, the word “evangelical” comes to us from the Greek word in the New Testament, εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion*), which means “gospel”, or “good news”. Every time we read the word Gospel in the New Testament, it is precisely the word euangelion. Such as in Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God” – that Gospel which is the power of God for salvation, both Jew and Gentile.

So, an “evangelical” church or organisation is one that holds to the New Testament Gospel, and person who identifies an evangelical is likewise someone who holds to the New Testament gospel. An “evangelical” individual, church or organisation in essence means those who wholeheartedly believe in the New Testament Gospel of Jesus, and who live, emphasise, and proclaim that Gospel of Christ. The biblical Gospel of Jesus and salvation through faith in him is the core distinctive of what it means to be evangelical, it is living, pulsating heart of the evangelical movement.

“Evangelical” faith can be described as that which is consciously and warmly focused on the New Testament Gospel, that is, it is both Gospel-minded and strongly grounded in the Bible.



Thus, the leading British evangelical, John Stott, identified evangelicals by just two markers: “Bible” and “Gospel”.



In other words, an evangelical is a Bible person and a Gospel person.

Evangelical Christianity comes in all sorts of varieties, flavours, denominations, and emphases, it might be upbeat or downbeat, it might be Pentecostal or not Pentecostal, but if we absolutely believe in the Word of God and the biblical Gospel, if we are a Bible and a Gospel person, then we are “evangelical” whether we know it or not.

This implies that not every Christian or Christian church has always made the New Testament Gospel central. Down through history, Christian people and churches have often drifted away from the centrality of the New Testament Gospel, or have obscured it, or have overshadowed it with things like ritualism, traditionalism, formalism, sacramentalism, moralism, legalism, syncretism (that is, mixing Christianity with pre-Christian beliefs and practices), rationalism, scepticism, or nominalism. Some churches may have become very traditional, and have lost sight of the need for repentance, faith, conversion, spiritual rebirth, and biblical discipleship. They may have become theologically liberal, and no longer believe in miracles or the authority of the Bible or the divinity of Jesus or judgement or hell or

the need for personal salvation, and have a mainly this-worldly understanding of the Gospel.¹

John Stott:

- “the evangelical faith is nothing other than the historic Christian faith”

John Stott also implied that evangelicalism was the truest and purest form of Christianity: “the evangelical faith”, he asserted, “is nothing other than the historic Christian faith”.

The most well-known description of evangelicalism is the so-called Bebbington Quadrilateral, in which the leading British historian of evangelicalism suggested four key characteristics of evangelical Christianity:

David Bebbington:

four key characteristics of evangelical Christianity are...

- conversionism
- biblicentrism
- crucicentrism
- activism

- “**conversionism**” (i.e. a belief that people must be born again into new life in Christ, and ongoing spiritual experience)
- “**biblicentrism**” (which means a strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible, and its constant direct use in preaching, teaching, group study, personal devotions, and evangelism).
- “**crucicentrism**” (which means the centrality of the Cross of Christ in Christian salvation, preaching, and evangelism)

¹ In the late 19th century, the evangelical Church of England Bishop Ryle identified “evangelicals” as those who firmly hold to the Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice”, along with strong belief in human sinfulness, in the person and work of Christ, and in the Holy Spirit’s work in bringing people to repentance, faith, and spiritual rebirth (and he rejected religious formalism and ritualism, re-Catholicising tendencies, and liberal unbelief in the Bible.)

- “**activism**” (which means all the ways in which evangelical Christianity is typically very energetic in trying to reach and change the world – in evangelism, discipleship, mission, and evangelical humanitarianism).

To be evangelical is *not* primarily a *denominational* thing,
but a wider doctrinal position:
to be committed to the New Testament
Gospel and orthodox biblical faith

To be evangelical is not primarily a denominational thing, but a doctrinal position: to be evangelical is about being committed to the New Testament Gospel, and to orthodox biblical faith.

Evangelicals believe in the
importance of agreed statements
of faith

Evangelicals have often drawn up statements of faith, listing core Christian beliefs which all evangelicals can agree on, whatever their denomination: these doctrines include not just the Trinity, but the inspiration and authority of scripture, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the need for repentance, faith, and regeneration, the bodily resurrection, and the return of Christ; such statements strongly defend those biblical truths which they feel some traditional churches may have lost sight of, and which some liberal theologians and churches may have all but abandoned. Two classic evangelical statements of faith are the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Alliance, in 1846, and the doctrinal basis of Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions, in 1928.

The WEA statement of faith, for example, starts by asserting that the Scriptures are “divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy” and “the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct”. It also asserts the salvation of lost and sinful humanity “through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ by faith apart from works, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit”.

Liberal ecumenical Christians have often argued that doctrine is divisive, and therefore should be downplayed.

Evangelicals believe that shared core doctrines of the faith strengthen the Church and guard our spiritual oneness in Christ

Evangelicals, on the other hand, have argued that core biblical doctrines strengthen and build the Church and are the basis of unity, both within denominations and across denominational boundaries.

Evangelicals believe that wrong beliefs weaken, disunite, and even destroy the church

Evangelicals believe that weak doctrine weakens the Church, and that wrong doctrine disunites and even destroys the Church.

Evangelicals believe that, beyond the core doctrines, Bible-believing Christians may have different understandings and practices in various secondary matters

Beyond key doctrines and practices, evangelical Christianity differs vastly on secondary matters. For example, evangelicals may be Calvinist or Arminian, and may differ in beliefs and practices in all sorts of things including baptism, end times, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and church government.

Evangelicals believe that our unity in Christ

- is spiritual
- is based on a shared Gospel faith
- is fully trans-denominational
- transcends all cultural differences

Evangelicalism was and is strongly trans-denominational. We see unity as spiritual, not structural, and as transcending all denominational boundaries and cultural distinctives.

Many evangelicals/Gospel-minded Christians don't necessarily know or normally use the word "evangelical". They just identify themselves as e.g. "Christians", "believers", or just members of this or that church.

Curiously, the majority of evangelical Christians past and present would not have necessarily or primarily called themselves "evangelical", or been even of the term. More often than not they would just describe themselves as "Christians", or as Bible believers, or as born again, or as members of this or that particular church or denomination.

- Pentecostalism is a sub-set of Evangelicalism

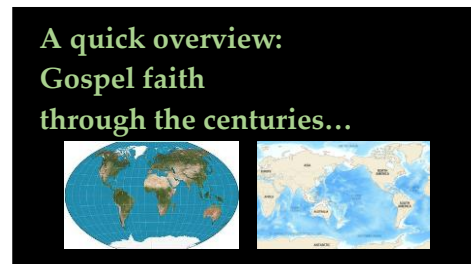
In my view, regardless of whether or not Pentecostals normally explicitly identify themselves as "evangelicals", Pentecostalism is a sub-set of "evangelicalism", because of shared biblical and theological roots and doctrinal commitments. We are all Gospel and Bible Christians. (And Pentecostals also fit within the characteristics of evangelicals identified by Bebbington).

- "Fundamentalism" is a sub-set of Evangelicalism

Likewise, "fundamentalism" is a sub-set within "evangelicalism". Like all movements, evangelicalism has a spectrum of emphases and characteristics and moods, and "fundamentalism" often shows such tendencies as strong conservatism, strict biblical literalism, and sometimes separatism, or anti-intellectualism, or combativeness.

Some of you will know that, as a movement within evangelical Christianity, “fundamentalism” developed in the USA in the 1920s, primarily as a reaction to liberal theology.

After World War II, however, many American evangelicals (under the leadership of people such as Carl Henry and Billy Graham) pulled away from a separatist, fundamentalist type of evangelicalism and worked to re-establish a more positive, moderate, and intellectually self-assured identity for American evangelicalism.



Now, a very quick overview of evangelical faith across the centuries...

The New Testament church was obviously “evangelical” in belief and action, and has been the inspiration and model for every subsequent Christian movement of spiritual renewal and reform.

Self-evidently, the New Testament church was “evangelical” in character and purpose...

- Its clear focus on believing and proclaiming the Gospel, the *euangelion*.
- Its central emphasis on the Cross and the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and his coming return.
- Its biblicism: its intense interest in searching and applying the scriptures.
- Its emphases on repentance and faith.
- Its growth through countless conversions
- Its outstanding prayerfulness
- Its commitment to costly discipleship.
- Its missionary expansion

The New Testament was unquestionably the inspiration and model for every subsequent Christian movement of spiritual renewal and reform.

In the medieval period God still worked through many people, but there was also much nominalism, superstition, ritualism, and corruption – and the Church largely lost sight of the biblical Gospel.

In the medieval period the church settled down and became more traditional, and influenced by underlying cultures. But there was still much growth, missionary expansion, and movements of renewal. But there also developed far too much nominalism, superstition, ritualism, and corruption.

In the 16th century Reformation, some parts of the western church rediscovered both the Gospel and the authority and the use of the Bible.

In the 16th century Reformation, Martin Luther and others rediscovered both the New Testament Gospel and the authority and use of the Bible.



The key catalyst was Martin Luther's rediscovery of salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus. For Luther, that was the moment of his spiritual rebirth, and many followed him and formed non-Catholic churches. Among those was Calvin, with many insights including his emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling faith, regeneration, and ongoing sanctification, and John Knox in Scotland, and Thomas Cranmer in England, and on the so-called Evangelical Anabaptists (such as the Swiss Brethren and the Mennonites).



They all made the Scriptures the key rule of faith and life, and emphasised the reading and preaching and application of the Word, and its superior authority over church tradition, church authorities, and human reason and ideas. As Luther famously said, "my conscience is captive to the Word of God".

The Reformers explicitly saw themselves as “evangelical”: that is, Christians who were faithful to the New Testament.

The 17th century Puritans,
Pietists, and Moravians

In the 17th century, in England there were the Puritans, eager to see the church of England become more consistently biblical and godly.

On the Continent, there were the Pietists, who emphasised being born again, Bible study and prayer, and holy living. The Moravian Pietists were deeply devoted to prayer: from 1727 they held a round-the-clock prayer meeting, which lasted 100 years non-stop. Revival broke out in Herrnhut in the same year.

But, in Britain, by the early 19th century Christianity and society was in a bad way: weak in belief, missing the Gospel, and spiritually sleepy.



And then there came the 18th century Evangelical revivals, both in Britain and America, which came against that backdrop of both churches and society being in poor shape, both spiritually and morally.

The 18th century Evangelical
Revivals/Awakenings – John Wesley,
George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards

A giant of the evangelical revivals was John Wesley, an Anglican clergyman who in 1739 was converted by trusting in Christ alone, and who was soon preaching the Gospel to crowds of 10,000 or more.



Wesley preached outdoors because he was banned from preaching in churches, and because outdoors he could reach many more people, most of whom never or rarely went to church. He continued this for the next 52 years, preaching several times a day, beginning at 5.00 a.m., in all weathers, and against much opposition.

The 18th century Evangelical
 Revivals/Awakenings – John Wesley,
 George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards

Wesley's friend George Whitefield, a Calvinist, had a similar preaching ministry both in Britain and in North America. In America there was also Jonathan Edwards was a Calvinist who was passionate about evangelism and the new birth. He wrote that when he was converted, "There came into my soul...a sense of the Divine Being; a new sense quite different from anything I ever experienced before....My mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of His person, and the lovely sense of salvation by free grace in Him. The sense I had of divine things would often of a sudden kindle up, as it were, a sweet burning in my heart; an ardour of soul, that I know not how to express". In the 1730s there was amazing revival in and around his church: he wrote "souls did come as it were by flocks to Jesus Christ...The town seemed to be full of the presence of God."

In such a time of revival, evangelical preaching was hugely fruitful.

These evangelicals preached about human sinfulness, judgment, the need for repentance, God's grace, the cross of Christ, salvation by faith in Jesus, being born again, and holy living.

The 18th Century revivals had a huge impact. Many were saved, many churches and believers were revitalised, and there was a spiritual re-awakening across society. In the Church there was a renewed interest in discipleship and evangelism, and a new humanitarian Christian social conscience with regard to things like slavery and the plight of the poor, and a new interest in taking the Gospel to the whole world.

A hundred years on, there came the Second Great Awakening, beginning in the USA, but also with some revivals in Britain. There were some very influential revivalists and mass evangelists such as Charles Finney and DL Moody.

Impact of 18th & 19th century evangelical revivals

- Large numbers were converted
- Churches were revived
- Western societies became more Christian
- The evangelical humanitarian movement addressed human suffering and need
- Evangelicals were at the core of the massive global 19th century missionary movement

By the middle of the 19th century, evangelical Christianity had a huge influence upon the American and British societies. Evangelicalism, with its strong notes of Gospel, personal piety, and faith in the Bible, became a very prominent feature of Christianity in the United States, and in Britain too, but usually in less boisterous sort of way.

To the ends of the earth. Christianity goes global. The modern Protestant missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries



Evangelical missionaries from Britain, American and other nations were at the forefront in bringing the Gospel to Africa, India, China, and the Pacific (and the Gospel was then spread far and wide by those indigenous people who had become Christian). Evangelical Christianity was and is at the heart of the modern global expansion of Christianity.

That movement was not part of colonialism, and often preceded colonialism. Its Gospel motivation was very different from colonial and imperial desires for trade, wealth, and territorial power.

By the later 19th century, in Western countries, the evangelical tide was beginning to recede, under the influence of liberal scholarship and theology and sceptical Enlightenment thinking.

Two bright spots in all this were the Welsh Revival (1904-5) and the beginnings (1906) of the modern Pentecostal and charismatic movement (which would eventually have such a massive and positive influence upon world Christianity).

By the 1920s evangelical Christianity was in some trouble, in America and Britain, and looking like it might possibly be eclipsed by liberal Christianity.

But from the 1940s there began an evangelical renaissance, with the formation in the USA of the National Association of Evangelicals, and in the UK and elsewhere the growth of the Intervarsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions and a recovery of evangelical scholarship, publishing, evangelism, and confidence, and the rise of such leaders as Billy Graham and John Stott. There came about what is known as the postwar evangelical renaissance.

And following that, from the 1970s, there was major growth of the Pentecostal churches, across the world.

As you know, the World Evangelical Alliance estimates there are now some 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide.

In many countries, the Christian church has grown greatly, and continues to grow. But in western countries the culture has steadily moved in a more secular direction. Some evangelical churches have grown, or held their own, and new ones have been started. Many churches, especially those that are more traditional, or liberal, have declined.

In every part of the world, we evangelical believers and churches all very much need a clear sense of what it means to be committed Gospel and Bible Christians, with a deep love for God the Father, Holy Spirit, a passion for the Scriptures and the Gospel a renewed focus on prayer, conversion, discipleship, evangelism, and mission, a heart for the world, a turning away from distractions, and a deeper sense of our spiritual oneness in Christ and the Gospel. And as and where God sovereignly sends revival and spiritual refreshing, all the better.

Questions for Table Talk

TABLE TALK 1

- (1) What aspects of this overview stood out for you?
- (2) What questions did this overview raise for you?
- (3) What key emphases that make an evangelical faith differ from other types of Christian faith and practice?
- (4) What can be the weaknesses of evangelical Christianity?
- (5) How has evangelical faith shaped your own life and ministry?