

Church & Faith Trends

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Defining “Evangelical”

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Type or Movement?

There are basically two related types of definitions for “evangelical” “evangelicalism,” and the like.¹

Definition 1. “Evangelical” as a type (quite literally, a *type*—a particular, distinct variety) of Christian ethos, of “Christian being.” This definition is what is indicated by British historian David Bebbington’s oft-cited criteria of crucicentrism, Biblicism, conversionism, and activism.²

- Evangelicals focus on Jesus Christ and particularly champion the doctrine of the atonement with a focus on the sacrificial, atoning death of Christ on the cross.
- Evangelicals love the Bible as the Word of God written and place it in the centre of their corporate worship (literally, in terms of church architecture, and liturgically, in terms of the order of service), spiritual exercises, theological method, homiletical emphasis, and epistemological outlook.³
- Evangelicals believe that each person must be converted from sin to salvation (not necessarily in a dramatic “conversion experience”) and must press on toward full holiness of life—to be “fully converted.”⁴
- Evangelicals commit themselves to participating with God in his saving mission in and to the world, particularly in the proclamation of the gospel but also in charitable work and in caring for all of creation.

This sort of definition is also the type of definition used by pollsters, sociologists, and others who go out into the world seeking evangelicals: “Do you believe the Bible is...,” “Do you attend church regularly...,” “Have you had an experience of...,” etc. Those people who correspond to their abstract definition they then count as evangelicals. And “evangelicalism” thus is the noun meant to describe this way of being Christian.⁵

Alas, some pollsters and sociologists have used oversimplified versions of definition 1. Such definitions usually have been defended as easier to deploy in the field than the cumbersome jargon of the academicians. I suggest instead that a simple, but not simplistic or truncated, definition can be had, and such a definition will help prevent some unhappy outcomes, not least among which have been the wildly varying totals for “evangelicals” in Canada or the United States.

Worse, some observers of evangelicalism, armed with such compromised “data,” have gone on to make characterizations of “evangelicals” that miss the mark, to put it mildly. (Ron Sider’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* is a key case in point.)⁶ Having set out with a bad definition, they then find the wrong set of people and thus derive wrong conclusions about evangelicals. The classic case of this in Canada is the George Rawlyk / Angus Reid / *Macleans* poll of the 1990s, which that found large numbers of what George Rawlyk called “Catholic Evangelicals,” when all that they actually found were, in my view, reasonably faithful Roman Catholics. The poll questions failed to distinguish between Protestant and Roman Catholic views of the Bible and Tradition—a significant distinction observed by both sides since, well, the sixteenth century.⁷

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A major challenge here, then, is in specifying the criteria for inclusion. Bebbington's quartet is a good place to start, even if one might quibble about terms. (I myself offer a couple of replacements in my eventual definition below.) Bebbington's quartet must be supplemented, however, with American historian George Marsden's fifth element: *transdenominationalism*. Such an attitude made possible the co-operation of evangelicals in the eighteenth-century revivals, which are the defining moment of the emergence of evangelicalism, as definition 2 indicates below, and ever since.⁸

Transdenominationalism also helps to mark off evangelicals from the more generic category of "fervent orthodox Protestants," a category that would include, say, conservative Lutherans or conservative Anglicans, who generally have little to do with any other kind of Christian. (More on the implications of this distinction below.)⁹

Definition 2. "Evangelical" as an individual or corporate entity which belongs to a historical movement known as "evangelicalism." This definition is based on the eighteenth-century revivals as the site of the emergence of a historical phenomenon: evangelicalism.¹⁰ For this sort of definition to be useful today, we must speak carefully. Evangelicals today would be those individuals and groups who

(a) descend from those revivals

and

(b) have not departed from the characteristic emphases of those revivals (which is where definition 1 does help us, if it is rooted in historical description, as Bebbington's and Marsden's definitions are)

or

(c) have since identified themselves with this evangelical tradition.

Canadian examples of (a) and (b) would be (most) Canadian Baptists, and some Canadian Presbyterians, Anglicans, and United Church people. Examples of (a) and *not* (b) would be most of the United Church of Canada. Examples of (c) would be the Mennonite Brethren and Christian Reformed Church.¹¹

Motives

It is useful to acknowledge that there have been several ulterior motives in defining evangelicals in particular ways.

In the past, some leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in the United States and of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) employed definition 1 *without the "transdenominational" element* and thus presented themselves as representative of many Christians that they did not, in fact, represent. (The NAE sometimes sounded as if it included such large groups as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Missouri Synod of Lutherans. And some EFC documents could sound as if it represented all evangelicals in Canada at a time when its membership lacked the affiliation of the Canadian Baptist Federation and the Lutheran Church-Canada.) Thus such leaders could have been understood to represent their organizations as more important than they really were in their quest to present a "united evangelical front," as NAE used to put it. (I am glad to say that the EFC, at least, has become conscientiously circumspect in this regard.)¹²

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Others might want to marginalize evangelicals from public life and so ask questions about creation science or Biblical literalism or apocalyptic beliefs or speaking in tongues, and so on, in order to identify evangelicals as those with strange beliefs, even though none of these is central to evangelicalism, nor are any of them held by all evangelicals.

Still others would like to claim evangelical identity and credentials while departing from orthodoxy in doctrine or practice. (I have in mind here a wide range of examples, whether those who would combine evangelicalism with New Age spirituality, those who would justify homosexual relationships, those who would maintain evangelical identity while converting to Rome, etc.) Definitions of evangelicalism that are too simple may well unintentionally or, in this case, *intentionally* include heterodoxy and heteronomy.

Recommendation

I therefore submit the following definition of evangelicals and evangelicalism for CRCE use—and for anyone else as well!

Note that it begins with a sixth criterion, one that doubtless was assumed by Bebbington and Marsden but must now be made explicit, as too many people have *reduced* evangelicalism to *only* the criteria these historians used.

- *Orthodox and Orthoprax*: Evangelicals subscribe to the main tenets—doctrinal, ethical, and liturgical—of the churches to which they belong.
- *Crucicentric*: Evangelicals are Christocentric in their piety and preaching, and emphasize particularly the necessity of Christ's salvific work on the Cross.

- *Biblicist*: Evangelicals affirm the Bible as God's Word written, true in what it says and functioning as their supreme written guide for life.

- *Conversionist*: Evangelicals believe that (1) everyone must trust Jesus as Saviour and follow him as Lord; and (2) everyone must co-operate with God in a life of growing spiritual maturity.

- *Missional*: Evangelicals actively co-operate with God in his mission of redeeming the world, and particularly in the proclamation of the gospel.

- *Transdenominational*: Evangelicals gladly partner with other Christians who hold these concerns, regardless of denominational stripe, in work to advance the Kingdom of God.

Finally, a couple of key qualifications that pick up themes previously sounded. First, these criteria describe evangelicals' own professed values. They are not meant to suggest that other Christians do not share some of these values: of course they do. Precisely because they do share many values with evangelicals (as I am defining them here), in fact, they have been counted as evangelicals by many historians, sociologists, pollsters, and others. This definition would (finally) yield study of *evangelicals*, and not just *conservative* or *orthodox* or *observant* or *enthusiastic* or *evangelistic* or *revivalistic* Christians.

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Thus, second, this set of criteria functions properly only *as a set*. There is nothing peculiarly evangelical about any of them singly, of course. It is only this set that helps scholars, pollsters, leaders and interested others “pick out” evangelicals from Christians in general or observant Christians in general or observant Protestants in general, and so on. Thus it must be employed as a set, without compromise, as in the common polling practice of counting as evangelicals those who score “highly” on some scale derived from such criteria. No, evangelicals do not compromise on *any* of these values: They don’t think it’s okay to fudge on the atonement or the Bible, or to neglect churchgoing, or avoid evangelism.

Rigorous application of such a definition will provide us, I trust, with much better data about evangelicalism in Canada, and thus we begin with such a definition as we launch the CRCE.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ For a similar account of things on the U.S. side of the border, see Larry Eskridge, “Defining Evangelicalism,” on the website of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals: http://www.wheaton.edu/isae/defining_evangelicalism.html.
- ² D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1–19.
- ³ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “Evangelicals and the Bible: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” in *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium*, ed. Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia (New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 185–206. I will immodestly refer to several of my own writings in these notes in order to accommodate readers who would like to pursue further subjects to which I can only gesture in this brief space.
- ⁴ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “A ‘Paradigm Case’: Billy Graham and the Nature of Conversion,” in *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 103–20.
- ⁵ See the accompanying article by Rick Hiemstra. For terminological counsel from wise sociologists, see Robert D. Woodberry and Christian S. Smith, “Fundamentalism et al.: Conservative Protestants in America,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 25–56. See also Christian Smith, “Evangelicals Behaving Badly with Statistics,” *Books & Culture* 13 (January 2007): 11 (accessible at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/001/5.11.html>).
- ⁶ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “What Scandal? Whose Conscience?” *Books & Culture* 13 (July 2007): 20–21, 41–42.

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⁷ G. A. Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicals in the 1990s* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Who Are the Evangelicals? Some Appreciative Reflections upon the Mark Noll/Angus Reid Report," *Crux* 34 (December 1998): 26–28.

⁸ George Marsden, "Introduction," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), vii–xvi.

⁹ This literally generic definition of evangelical bedevils the discussion in Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, eds., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), in which the editors themselves square off on whether a proper definition of evangelicalism is possible. Dayton thinks the variety defies a single description; Johnston opts for "family resemblance" language. As will become clear, I suggest here a definition that avoids this problem of looking for evangelicals merely as a kind of religious type.

¹⁰ See Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Whitefield, Edwards, and the Wesleys* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).

¹¹ I discuss this matter more extensively in *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993; reprint ed., Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1999), 6–12.

¹² Donald Dayton makes this suggestion in "Doubts about the Category 'Evangelical,'" in Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, eds., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 250–51. I followed up that suggestion in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "The National Association of Evangelicals, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and the Limits of Evangelical Cooperation," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25 (December 1995): 157–179.