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What Does Evangelical Mean?

Abstract

"To what degree should we abandon terms with solid grounding in scripture to accommodate contemporary cultural perceptions?"

Posting about defining religious labels from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/what-does-evangelical-mean/>

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Comments

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What Does Evangelical Mean?

 [all in allthings.org/what-does-evangelical-mean/](https://www.allthings.org/what-does-evangelical-mean/)

Scott Culpepper

What does the term “evangelical” mean? That is an important and loaded question in twenty-first century American culture. The most honest answer one can give is that it depends. It depends on whether the inquirer is asking about theology, worship styles, church history, evangelization techniques, denominational identities, sociological categories, or political affiliations. The meaning someone is trying to express by using “evangelical” depends as much or more on context than any inherently accepted common definition of the term. The sheer flexibility of the term is both one secret of its lasting utility and at the same time its greatest weakness.

“[Evangelical](#)” holds the dubious distinction of being the descriptive label everyone wants to use for others but many seldom seem to want to claim for themselves. It has a long and complicated history as one of the ways people have identified Christians who maintain a strong commitment to believing and sharing the Christian “gospel” or “good news.” “Gospel” and “good news” are both English translations of the term *euangelion* taken from the original Koine Greek of the New Testament. It is a word often used in the New Testament to describe both the content of the message of salvation in Christ as well as the means of its transmission.

While there are many Christians around the world who enthusiastically embrace their identity as evangelicals, groups as diverse as mainline Protestants, Reformed Protestants, the Anabaptist movements, some Southern Baptists, and Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians have all expressed discomfort with being identified with evangelicals in the popular media. They argue that elements in their theological tradition, heritage, or worship practices make them distinct from evangelicalism. The complication lies not in any inherent objection to the idea of commitment to the gospel or to sharing the love of Christ, but rather in the vague usage of the term in contemporary society to refer to sometimes very different groups of Christians. To complicate matters for outside observers, most of these Christian traditions have minority groups within them that are comfortable with evangelicalism and even aspire to be identified as more evangelical.

The early followers of Martin Luther were called “evangelicals” before the term “Protestant,” coined after the Diet of Speyer in 1529, became the general term for the new movements separating from the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. Labeling Luther’s followers evangelicals was a way to indicate the centrality of God’s grace and the basic theological principle of “justification by faith” in Protestant doctrine. The term was used here to indicate a common set of theological commitments that the diverse Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptists traditions generally held in common. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revivalist movements that sparked the First and Second Great Awakenings led to the use of the term “evangelical” to specifically identify supporters of revivalism who placed strong emphasis on the necessity of a conversion experience for salvation. These revivalist leaders tended to emphasize the importance of personal faith, pietistic devotion, and the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. The term at this point came to identify not just basic emphasis on belief in Christ for salvation, but also a particular set of assumptions about how conversion occurs and what techniques should be used to promote it.

The term “Neo-Evangelicalism” emerged in the 1940s and 50s as a label for a loose coalition of conservative Christians who wanted to retain the conservative doctrinal foundations of American fundamentalism but rejected fundamentalists’ separation from American mainstream culture. The movement tended to find a nucleus around appreciation of prominent leaders such as the evangelist Billy Graham and the theologian Carl F. H. Henry. Certain academic institutions such as [Wheaton College](#) and publications like [Christianity Today](#) were considered major outlets for evangelical thought. Much like the Charismatic movements, Neo-Evangelicalism has always been more of a movement or a tendency within Christianity rather than associated with a specific denominational structure. When people react against being labeled as “evangelical,” they are often doing so because they disagree with the legacy and excesses of Neo-Evangelicalism or they see their particular Christian tradition as predating the modern

Neo-Evangelical movement.

Attempts to define the essence of evangelicalism have sparked an ongoing conversation that seems to get more complicated with each new publication. The default scholarly definition for about thirty years has been the “[Bebbington Quadrilateral](#)” first proposed by Stirling University history professor David Bebbington in his 1989 book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*. According to Bebbington, evangelicalism is characterized by Biblicism, conversionism or emphasis on personal conversion, activism, and crucicentrism or an emphasis on the atoning work of Christ on the cross. No consensus replacement for Bebbington’s definition has appeared though a number of evangelical scholars have proposed new directions. Baylor University historian [Thomas Kidd](#) suggested adding an additional item to the quadrilateral acknowledging the importance of the person and work of the Holy Spirit for evangelical thought in one notable example of an alternative.

Several high profile leaders among groups typically identified as evangelical have expressed dismay at the way pollsters and political pundits have used the term “evangelical” during the 2016 campaign season. Some of them like [Russell Moore](#), head of the Southern Baptists Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, have even suggested that “evangelical” needs to be discarded as a descriptive term because it is too imprecise to be of any practical use. Much of this criticism stems from their dismay at the presumptive nomination of Donald Trump as the Republican candidate and unwillingness to accept that evangelical Trump supporters are “true” evangelicals. Such suggestions raise troubling questions regarding how much popular usage dictates the terms Christians use to define themselves. When does a label carry too much baggage? To what degree should we abandon terms with solid grounding in scripture to accommodate contemporary cultural perceptions? When should we choose to retain those labels with a view to educating our contemporary culture regarding how to understand our terms? Much as C. S. Lewis wrestled with the dilution of the meaning of “Christian” in western culture in his book *Mere Christianity*, many Christians today wrestle with determining whether being identified as evangelical has true meaning or lasting usefulness in the shifting ideological landscape of the twenty-first century.