

On being an Evangelical

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[0 : 0 0] Good. Well, everyone, it's lovely to be here. I'm very impressed that you're all here. It's been quite a week, hasn't it? I was asking Simon if there are any casualties amongst us.

I mean, for any who are involved in the city or so on, I mean, it has been one heck of a week. So, well done for being here. I was speaking during the week to a close and old friend, a Christian friend, who is currently on the main board of Barclays. He also carries the responsibility of being church warden of a large church, of which you would have heard possibly down in Kent. He has not been over-conspicuous at home this week, as you may imagine. The Economist yesterday asked, what next? To which Christchurch Dulwich's answer appears to be a day away, reflecting on what it means to be an evangelical. Now, I think a dispassionate observer would be wondering to themselves, what are we doing?

And we were in the middle of terrific instability in the world. All those of us who have mortgages and pensions and investments and jobs had quite a lot to worry about. We're in the midst of a world in which there are serious and massive needs. I listened to World Service on the way down this morning. The latest report from the Horn of Africa reckons that there could be as many as 17 million people in need of emergency food rations. What is the relevance of this? What is the sense of it? What on earth are you doing? I hope, I hope that by the end of our time together over this weekend, if you have entertained some of those questions, if when you got up this morning you thought to yourself, look actually honestly I'd much rather be at the shops or on the golf course or at the tennis club or just crashing out at home, I hope that you will by then think to yourself, no this has been worthwhile. I think, can I say, that what we're going to be dealing with is of enormous significance. But as Simon said, our title is, what does it mean to be an evangelical? Now, you have on your seat, hopefully on your knee, one of these very nice sheets that Joe has produced. I did have one and it's disappeared so I steal this one. This is really a sort of roadmap for you so if you nod off, you can sort of come back and see roughly where we are. My plan is going to be to think in our first session before coffee about what we mean by being an evangelical. Now, for some here this will be familiar territory but for others it may well not be and so forgive me if you know it well.

I want us to think about terms and to understand what we're talking about first. We're then going to move into a little Bible passage before we have coffee. After coffee we're going to be looking at what it means to be an evangelical according to a little working definition that I hope that that I am going to give you and that I hope you will feel commends itself to you. So that's the plan for this morning and then tomorrow morning in church we're going to Romans chapter one to learn five great truths about the gospel and in between this evening we're being plied with wonderful desserts by the needings and have our story time. Is that right? Good. Then let's launch in. Now words matter don't they? If we're going to communicate we need to understand what we mean by words and therefore this word evangelical is a word that we need to get to grips with.

Now when we think of the word evangelical a good way just to unpack it is this.

[4 : 30] Right can you see what I've done there is I've just circled the word evangel. If you were reading your New Testament in Greek not in English you would come across the word evangel because that is the word that we translate gospel. Now the evangel means the gospel. We use words don't we like an evangelist which is a gospel speaker. We use evangelistic which is an occasion where a gospel speaker speaks.

Yes? So we might have an evangelistic focus for a Sunday service. We speak of evangelism which is the activity of speaking the gospel. The verb evangelize means that I am going to be speaking the gospel to a friend, a colleague, a neighbor, whoever it is. So the word evangelical is a noun that denotes a brand of belief within the circle of those who confess the name Christian, a brand of belief that focuses on the evangel.

So evangelicalism is a theology that has as its heart the evangel.

Now we use all these words. They have a very important history. Now you'll remember that the earliest description of real Christians in the Bible is not the word Christian. Do you remember? Originally believers were called those who belong to somebody tell me?

The way. The way. The way. It was Jesus wasn't it? Who said I am one way to God. Is that right? No it's not. I am the way and the truth and the life. And so the first followers were known as those who belonged to the way. The word Christian we read in Acts 11 was first used at Antioch as a nickname for those who followed Christ. It was probably a derogatory name. Now we just sung hymns reminding ourselves of the terrific humility of Jesus. Another early nickname was Asinari. That is those who follow a Messiah who rides on an ass.

[7 : 18] Within Greco-Roman society the one you follow is the great hero conqueror. The one who comes back from the military campaign and rides on the white stallion through the triumphal arch with captives in his train.

But these Christians they follow a conqueror who rides to his death on a donkey. Asinari. So these names are not complementary. Now the word evangelical came into regular use in the early 18th century at the time of revival under Wesley and Whitfield. Anne and I live in Docklands in a road called Salmon Lane and we were a bit confused and wondered why a road would be called Salmon Lane. I mean it used to be salmon in the Thames.

And so we were trying to check up on this and it turns out that Salmon is a corruption of sermon. And we found an old map that goes back to the 18th century where our road was called Sermon Lane.

It was called that because on the fields to the north of it Wesley used to proclaim the gospel. And so in that part of East London it was known as Sermon Lane. Sermon Lane, Sermon Lane, Sermon Lane, and it became corrupted to Sermon Lane by the middle of the 19th century. Now the word evangelical then goes back to that great revival when the gospel was being proclaimed. But its roots go back before that to the 17th century Puritans in England and the Pietists in Germany who picked up the baton as it were from the 16th century reformers. Indeed some of those reformers and in particular Martin Luther called themselves Evangelicae Viri, that is evangelical men.

And some people reckon that you can trace its origin back to John Wycliffe in the 15th century who was known as the Doctor Evangelicus.

[9 : 43] Now this word then, evangelical, has a great history. It is a history that comes out of the Reformation but it's a history that goes way before that to the Evangel and Evangel means gospel.

Now I want to distinguish evangelical from another term which is often used interchangeably with it these days in the media and that is fundamentalist. Now the word fundamentalist comes out of largely an American context but increasingly also a British context. One of the books in the bookstore which I'm recommending is a book by John Stott called *Evangelical Truth*. And in here in a very interesting little section, Stott delineates a number of characteristics of evangelicalism and distinguishes them from fundamentalism. Let me read to you one or two of these.

In relation to human thought, fundamentalism gives the impression that it distrusts scholarship including the scientific disciplines. Some tend towards a thoroughgoing anti-intellectualism, even obscurantism. Authentic evangelicals however acknowledge that all truth is God's truth, that our minds are God-given, being a vital aspect of the divine image we bear, and that we insult God if we refuse to think, and that we honour him when, whether through science or scripture, we quote, think God's thoughts after him. That was Johan Kepler's famous account of what he was doing in his scientific and mathematical research. Now those who are following the current debate with the Royal Society will immediately recognise the relevance of that. Second, in relation to the nature of the Bible, fundamentalists are said to believe that every word of the Bible is literally true.

Stott says, this is probably a slander since the adverb literally here is used too sweepingly. Yet it cannot be denied that some fundamentalists are characterised by an excessive literalism.

Evangelicals however, while believing that whatever the Bible affirms is true, add that some of what it affirms is figuratively or poetically true, and is meant to be interpreted thus. Indeed, not even the most extreme fundamentalists believes God has feathers, and that's a reference apparently to Psalm 91. Don't look it up now.

[12 : 36] All right, third one. In relation to biblical inspiration, fundamentalism has tended to regard it as having been a somewhat mechanical process, in which the human authors were passive and played no active role. Thus, the fundamentalist view of the Bible, as having been dictated by God, resembles the Muslim view of the Quran, as having been dictated by Allah in Arabic through the angel Gabriel, while Muhammad's only contribution was to take down the dictation. In this way, the Quran is believed to be an exact reproduction of a heavenly original. Evangelicals emphasise, however, the double authorship of scripture, namely that the divine author spoke through the human authors while they were in full possession of their faculties. You see the kind of distinction here.

Last one. In relation to biblical interpretation, fundamentalism seems to suppose that it can apply the biblical text directly to ourselves today as if it had been written primarily for us.

They ignore the cultural chasm which yawns between the biblical world and the contemporary world. However, evangelicals struggle with the task of what Stott calls cultural transposition, in which we seek to identify the essential message of the biblical text, and then detaching it from its original cultural context, recontextualise it, that is, apply it into our situation today. Now, I want to make that distinction, lest there are some here who are thinking that what Simon is doing, or what I am doing, is trying to turn us all into fundamentalists. That is not the case, and I think it's an important distinction to draw. What then are we talking about? Jim Packer, some of you will be familiar with J.I. Packer, a brilliant author. If you're not familiar with him, can I commend him to you? Now in his early 80s, still active in Canada and North America.

Packer, Packer delineates four general characteristics of what it means to be an evangelical Christian. I've listed these out for you, so you don't have to write it all down. He says, first of all, it's to do with a practical Christianity, that is a lifestyle of discipleship. It's to do with how I live, not simply what I believe. Secondly, it's pure, that is, it's what C.S. Lewis called mere Christianity. It's the real thing, it's the original thing. It's not more than that, and it's not less than that. Thirdly, it's unitive, that is, it draws people together around a body of truth. So we're united in the truth of the evangel. And fourthly, it is rational, that is, it is based on a mind that listens and learns to God's gospel rationally communicated. It is not, therefore, experiential in the sense that its roots don't lie in my experience, but in God's revelation.

And so he says there are six essential elements. The first is to understand the supremacy of Scripture, that in the Bible God has spoken. And so the Bible is not merely a sort of interesting text, which we use alongside other things. It is the anchor, it is the foundation, it is the rock on which we build. Secondly, the majesty of Jesus. That when we speak of Jesus, we mean the one who was born of the Virgin Mary, the eternal second person of the Trinity, the one who became flesh, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, who died, and who rose again on the third day, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father, until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, the majesty of Jesus. Thirdly, the lordship of the Holy Spirit. That is, that the Spirit's work is to open eyes so I can realize the truth, repent and believe.

[17 : 23] That we might repent and believe in the gospel. So when Simon said to me earlier, Alan tells us, when and how you became a Christian. What I should have said, of course, was that God, in his mercy, used those friends of mine and the Bible by his Spirit to open my eyes so I can realize the truth, repent and believe.

And that regenerating work of the Spirit is continued in the life of the real believer in transformation. So the lordship of the Spirit.

Fourth, the necessity of conversion. You must be born again, said Jesus to Nicodemus. That conversion is not, therefore, the sort of minority interest of a tiny group of batty enthusiasts, but is actually what the gospel is about.

Because unless and until we are born again, we are dead in our trespasses and sins. Therefore, flows number five, the priority of evangelism. If that is true, if all men and all women, if every son of Adam and daughter of Eve is facing God's wrath, well then evangelism has to be the dominant priority of our work and our ambition because it is God's.

And lastly, the importance of fellowship. That is, that what God is doing is building his church. That the church isn't a means to an end, it is the end. It is the big thing that God is doing.

[19 : 05] The plan is to build a new people of God, drawn from every race and language and culture and people under heaven that we might all be together forever.

And that is why church is important. It's what it is all about. It is God's big plan. And so if you ever attempted to ask yourself, what on earth is God doing?

When you switch on the news or you read your paper or you go online or whatever it is, the answer is God is building his church. So in the midst of famine and natural disaster and conflict and war and everything else, what is God doing?

He's building his church. And it's a remarkable thing that he's doing. He's quite good at it. And as you travel around the world, you see it happening.

And part of the privilege of the last five years for me with CrossLinks has been the opportunity to travel, particularly into Europe and into Africa, and actually to be part of that and to see it. But you're part of it too through your international mission partner, Links.

[20 : 11] It is a tremendous truth. It is stunningly brilliant what it is that God is doing. He's building his church. So that's for Jim Packer, his four characteristics and six essentials.

Now another man, a man called David Bebbington, tried to make this somewhat simpler. And what he did was to propose what he calls a quadrilateral.

And in his quadrilateral, what he tries to do is to say that there are actually four distinctive features of evangelical Christianity.

They are the Bible and the cross. For in the Bible, God has spoken and in the cross, God has acted.

And what that means for us is conversion and evangelism.

[21 : 21] Now that was David Bebbington's quadrilateral. And what he says is that all genuine, authentic Christianity happens within that framework.

He put it under isms. Conversionism, activism, biblicism, crucicentricism. He may not like the words very much, but you can see what he's getting at, can't you?

Yes? So church activity is to do with conversionism, that he's getting people converted. It's to do with activism because we don't think that it's simply God that does it.

We think that we have an active role in it. Yes? It is to do with biblicism because the Bible is not simply man's best shot at telling us what we ought to think about God.

He's actually God's living word to us today and it's crucicentricism, that is the cross, is both the place where our salvation was wrought and the model for Christian discipleship.

[22 : 31] You got that? The cross is both the place where our salvation was wrought and the model or the shape of Christian discipleship. That's what Philippians 2 is telling us.

Have this mind amongst yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not think equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, making himself nothing, being born as a man and being found in human form, humbled himself to death, even death upon a cross.

You remember? Have this mind amongst yourselves. So that's David Bevington's Quadrilateral. In 1977, at the First National Evangelical Anglican Congress, John Stott tried to simplify it still further and in a booklet that was subsequently published called What is an Evangelical?

which is out of print, sadly, otherwise I'd have brought some for you. He said, no look, actually, evangelicals are in essence Bible people and gospel people.

And in this book that was published in 1999, what he's done is to expand that slightly. So what he's saying in this book is that actually evangelicals are Bible and cross and transformation people and that those three link in with each of the persons of the Trinity because our Christian belief is fundamentally Trinitarian.

[24 : 00] Now, we don't have time to go into this in detail now, but the Trinity is not a device for keeping academic theologians in doctorates.

The Trinity is the very bedrock of what it means to be a real Christian. We need to get our heads around the Trinity because that understanding of God is at the very heart of biblical truth.

And so what Stott is saying is that it is God the Father whose word we have in Scripture, it is God the Son whose work we have on the cross, and it is God the Spirit whose power is to change and transform lives.

Now, I give that to you because I hope that gives you an idea of two things. First of all, of the guts of what it means to be evangelical, distinguishing it from fundamentalism and seeing the way in which it is anchored in the gospel and the way in which, therefore, it is the framework for what we are doing as church.

Now, of course, the Bible doesn't ever spell out what it means to be evangelical so that you pay your money and take your choice. You may be a packer person who prefers four characteristics and six essentials or a Bebbington person who likes a quadrilateral because you like diagrams or a stock person and then you have to choose between 77 and 99 and I don't mind very much.

[25 : 30] Yes? So long as we're getting our heads around what we're talking about here. And to help us, we're going to have a Bible passage. Now, I think Joe has asked somebody to read from Revelation 1.

Is that right? Anybody here? No. Right. That's a disappointment to me. Then, can we turn to Revelation 1 from verse 4 down to verse 9?

I don't know how familiar you are with John's great revelation, this concluding book in our New Testament.

The author, the apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, now finds himself in exile on the island of Patmos.

And there, he