

Evaluating Evangelicalism from a Biblical Perspective

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In a previous paper, “Defining Evangelicalism,”¹ I made the observation that the question of the Biblical nature of what we call today “evangelicalism” must be reserved for a separate study. This is that study. I may owe this effort to the Presidential address of Dr. Wayne Grudem at the 1999 convention of the Evangelical Theological Society. The very title of the address raises a serious issue: “Do We Act As If We Really Believe that ‘The Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written?’”² In keeping with my commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, I find it necessary and salutary to evaluate my ideas and thoughts by the Word of God. This means that I must evaluate evangelicalism from a Biblical perspective.³

The core characteristics of evangelicalism come from a working definition of evangelicalism as a result of my study “Defining Evangelicalism”:

Evangelicalism is a broad movement representing core characteristics of personal conversion, the sufficiency of Scripture, the centrality of the crucifixion, the evangelistic mandate and cultural engagement.⁴

This paper will provide a brief definition of each characteristic of evangelicalism taken from my study. My method will be to measure each statement of an evangelical characteristic by the voices of Scripture. This demands some explanation. My process will be to listen to Moses,

the Governors (Joshua to the Kings), the Wisdom Writers, the Prophets, Peter, Paul and Jesus in that order. Listening to these voices will be equivalent to listening to God speak since the Scriptures are the Word of God and when the Scriptures speak, God speaks.

My perspective of the writer is colored by Calvinism, fundamentalism, dispensationalism, and Americanism. Although my theological commitment is to evangelicalism, my heart commitment is to the Holy Scriptures under the sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ. Biblical passages will be interpreted using hermeneutic principles which I consider to be sourced in the Scriptures. Arguably, evaluating evangelicalism is a difficult task since evangelicalism clothes itself in Biblical language, fervor, and theology. My expectation is that since evangelicalism is Biblical, evangelicals will listen to what the Bible says about each of the five parts of a definition of evangelicalism forming the body of this paper. With this in mind, let us listen to God as He speaks through the Scriptures and evaluate evangelicalism.

I. PERSONAL CONVERSION

“An evangelical is one who emphasizes the possibility and necessity of a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ as essential to the Christian experience.”⁵

Old Testament believers had a personal relationship to God. There is even evidence that a messianic hope characterized the Old Testament revelation. Moses was described as one who knew God “face to face”⁶ and he spoke of Abraham who was the “friend of God.”⁷ The great king David knew God at a personal level as is witnessed by his incredible Psalms. He said, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”⁸ Many of these Psalms are messianic as well.⁹ One could understand Job as possessing a very personal relationship with God when shouted “I know that my redeemer lives.”¹⁰ We can speak of Isaiah who “saw the Lord”¹¹ and the other prophets who by their call

indicated a personal relationship with God. Jeremiah is a classic example of this for God said to him, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord.”¹²

Peter would applaud our call for a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ if we read his sermon at Pentecost rightly. Echoing our Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist before him, Peter exclaimed “Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”¹³ This passage has traditionally been lifted up as a call to a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Paul, of course, would be the hero of evangelicals as they stress the personal aspects of a relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Did Paul not say, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death?”¹⁴ Certainly, our Lord is pleased with evangelicals who emphasize a personal relationship with Him. His call is clear: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”¹⁵ And again, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”¹⁶

The Biblical emphasis upon personal conversion is evident. Old Testament voices focus upon the possibility and reality of a personal relationship to God. There is no call or indication of a necessity for that personal relationship, however. And if we look for an invitation or a demand for “personal conversion,” it is not present in the Old Testament. The New Testament revelation on personal conversion is the source of the evangelical commitment to personal conversion. The call to repentance is clear. The insistence upon being “born again” is emphatic. It must be admitted, however, that if one limits personal conversion to a “new birth experience” or “time of repentance” then one has not caught the full New Testament idea that personal conversion is not

only initial but ongoing. The whole idea of a discipleship to Jesus Christ at a personal level must be grasped for a truly Biblical understanding of personal conversion. Evangelicalism seems to stop at the door of the initial conversion experience and hesitate to enter into holistic evangelism which turns the whole life to a lifetime of the eternal life of God that radicalizes one's personal experience.

II. THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

“An evangelical believes in the sufficiency of the Old Testament and New Testament, inspired by God, and inerrant in its originals, as the sole authority for the Christian in all matters.”¹⁷

Moses tells us that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”¹⁸ This should be sufficient to answer the debates over evolution and creation when evolution is seen as supporting the naturalistic atheistic agenda. God said to Joshua, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”¹⁹ There is no better formula for success. The Psalmist exalts, “Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.”²⁰ That would seem to be enough to delight in. Isaiah addresses us in the midst of scoffers when he says “Therefore hear the word of the Lord.”²¹ It seems that we need to be listening.

Peter makes a plea, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”²² Paul declares “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”²³ We

must not neglect the deep instruction of our Lord Jesus who focused our attention with these immortal words “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”²⁴

The Biblical evidence is strongly supportive of the evangelical emphasis upon the Scriptures as the sole authority of the Christian in all matters. This high view of Scripture is a result of listening to the Old Testament and New Testament voices about the Scriptures. Specifically, the Bible sufficiently addresses the modern day issues of skepticism, determinism, evolution, and success. The New Testament adequately speaks to the issue of the source and credibility of the truth of the Bible as well as the salvation mankind can gain from knowledge of the Scriptures.

One wonders, however, if evangelicals in our time are Scripturally literate enough to deal with “all matters” from the Bible. Evangelicals seem to be preoccupied with the theological issues of our time rather than the “all matters” of our times. Few evangelicals have stepped forward with credible application of the Bible to the social, cultural, and philosophical concerns of our times. Just as few are engaged in the necessary task of the integration of faith and learning. One respected evangelical even writes of the “Gagging of God”²⁵ and I’m not sure that he is only speaking of pagan culture when he addresses that issue.

Grudem says “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.”²⁶ Yet, I would ask, why do evangelicals limit their use of Scripture to “religious” issues? It seems to me that evangelicalism fails to sufficiently engage science, business,

psychology and skepticism in general with the Word of God. It is doubtful that evangelicals are moving from faith to understanding in the Scriptures with assurance that the Word of God provides essential information for every subject of life which modern and postmodern man needs.

III. THE CENTRALITY OF THE CRUCIFIXION

“An evangelical understands that Jesus Christ is not only the central person of the Scriptures but what He did on the cross in dying for sin and sinners is the central doctrinal necessity for Christians.”²⁷

The Law set down the principle: “it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”²⁸ This could only be fully realized at the cross where “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God?”²⁹ Speaking of the coming Messiah (Christ) God said in the great Davidic Covenant “The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you . . . I will establish his kingdom . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”³⁰ It is this Messiah/King who captures the attention of the Psalmist, David when he describes the cross-agony in these vivid terms “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.”³¹ It is this thought which grabs the attention of Isaiah when he says “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”³²

Peter put it this way: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”³³ Paul proclaimed that “the message of the cross is

foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”³⁴

When on the cross, our beloved Savior said it all when he cried “It is finished.”³⁵

The Bible is clear about the evangelical emphasis upon the centrality of Jesus Christ and His cross work as the central necessity for Christians. Both the Old and the New Testaments focus upon the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His work on the cross. There is no question but the Old Testament Scriptures are prologues to the New Testament revelation of God’s Son. And one cannot understand anything about the New Testament without coming to the cross first. The cross is the hallmark of Christianity.

This crucicentrism is undoubtedly Biblical. But, to say that evangelicals have a sufficient emphasis upon the strategy of the cross would not be accurate. My opinion is that evangelicals fail to live up expectations regarding crucicentrism. Is there enough blood in evangelicalism? What about the strategy of the cross? A strategy of the cross would mean that evangelicals are noted for dying for their faith, noted for their sacrificial living, noted for their humility. Certainly in countries other than the United States of America, it is not uncommon for evangelicals to die for their faith. Evangelicals in the Reformed tradition exhibit a healthy emphasis upon the soteriological center of theology which leads to a conscious crucicentrism. However, not all evangelicals are in the Reformed tradition. Evangelicals fail to be recognized as counter culture and thus dangerous to a cynical, skeptical populace. This failure would sound strange to Paul who said “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”³⁶ The centrality of the cross - though advocated by evangelicals - does not seem to cut very deep into the evangelical enterprise. Evidence is slim for an emphasis upon the cross either in the Gospel proclaimed by evangelicals or the teaching on Christian spirituality advocated by evangelicals.

IV. THE EVANGELISTIC MANDATE

“An evangelical is committed to the fulfillment of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ which demands the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world and the discipling of the nations.”³⁷

There is undoubtedly a global aspect to the revelation of God in the Old Testament and the nations are often addressed by writer and prophet alike. Nevertheless, Jonah perhaps tells us the general attitude and effect of God’s interest in the evangelistic enterprise during Old Testament times. By definition, then, the evangelistic mandate is a New Testament command. The commission was uttered by Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”³⁸ Peter began the process of carrying out the mandate on the Day of Pentecost with these immortal words from the Old Testament prophet: “And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”³⁹ Peter continued and “With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’”⁴⁰ Of Paul, the Lord said “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”⁴¹ Paul was then the man who explained the evangelistic mandate in the unmistakable terms of personal commitment: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”⁴²

The Scriptures are clear about the absolute necessity of the proclamation of the Gospel. The Great Commission stands. The whole world is the theater of operation for that proclamation.

The discipling of the nations is the God-set agenda. This is where the evangelical shines the brightest. World wide evangelism is the hallmark of evangelicalism. One could argue that all doctrinal disputes dim in the brilliant light of the evangelistic efforts and successes of the evangelical movement. Yes, there is weakness. Yes, there are more converts than disciples. However, the evangelistic mandate is going forth not only personally but on a movement wide front in obedient response to the Biblical mandate.

The bright light of evangelistic success dims a bit when evangelism means disciple making so that the resulting converts are not only changed individually but change their world. American society displays a severe dichotomy between the multitudes who profess to be evangelicals and people who definitely need to be saved. By this I mean that it is nearly impossible in American society to see any difference between evangelicals and pagans. Any semblance of holistic salvation as a result of the Biblical Gospel call is hidden beneath a facade of consumer Christianity. Evangelicals are at the forefront of all that religion calls “progressive” in this world - but this shouldn’t be a compliment!

V. CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

“An evangelical expects the Gospel to have an impact on culture and lives with intent to seek God’s reign on His earth.”⁴³

When God described the creation of mankind to Moses, He imbedded a cultural mandate within that account: “Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”⁴⁴ This is repeated after the Flood: “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth .

. . . I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.”⁴⁵ Solomon prayed for all peoples and recognized that they are under God’s rule. “As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name . . . do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.”⁴⁶ The wisdom of God does not limit itself to personal righteousness and individual accountability as shown with these powerful words, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”⁴⁷ The great prophet Isaiah reflects upon the cultural mandate when he says “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.”⁴⁸ The Psalmist insists about man “You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet.”⁴⁹

Peter placed Christians under obligation to society with his words of exhortation, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”⁵⁰ The writer to the Hebrews repeats the Old Testament truth: “In putting everything under him [man], God left nothing that is not subject to him.”⁵¹ Paul supported society in general and certainly with the Gospel obligation in view when he said “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities”⁵² and urged prayer “for kings and all those in authority.”⁵³ Jesus said this about the cultural mandate: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”⁵⁴ We cannot limit the message of Jesus “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”⁵⁵ to the nation of Israel and the concept of individual salvation.

It must refer to a holistic salvation proclaimed and offered to a whole world as its only deliverance.

Evangelicals are not too sure about their responsibility to fulfill the cultural mandate. A fear of guilt by association (with Liberals), prejudice of position (with Conservatives) and concern for self (selfishness) seems to be controlling the evangelical agenda. At a practical level, evangelicals in politics are suspect, political positions by evangelicals are matters of controversy. The world hears little of an evangelical statement about homosexuality, abortion, drugs, alcohol and an array of social problems in our day. The evangelical voice is often weak, sometimes confused, and often inconsistent. Then there are the evangelical stars who have fallen or are falling!

The Biblical cultural mandate is well expressed in the evangelical focus upon cultural engagement. The Scriptures call for mankind to take responsibility for his culture and rule it under God with righteousness. The Believer is called upon to be salt and light to the culture without apology or hesitancy.⁵⁶ The idea of having an impact on culture and seeking God's reign on His earth, however, is not sufficiently spread abroad among evangelicals. Not enough evangelicals are able to stand clear of culture in order to impact it for Jesus Christ. Not enough evangelicals are even trying.

CONCLUSION

Evangelicalism has been identifiable since the time of the Reformation. That fact puts it in the historic credibility neighborhood with Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Arminianism as well as Pietism. This is important because otherwise the charge of "novelty" could be rendered against evangelicalism. In my opinion, evangelicalism is the best expression of those Biblical

commitments of the great Reformation traditions. The task, however, is not done. In fact, the arduous work of defining evangelicalism and discovering its boundaries makes one wonder. Is evangelicalism sufficiently cohesive to serve Christianity? Does evangelicalism display sufficient commitment to the Scriptures to serve as a uniting factor for all Christians? Or, God forbid, does evangelicalism perpetuate the continuing fragmentation of the Body of Christ? The Scriptures speak of a “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”⁵⁷ There is also reference to “one faith.”⁵⁸ There is a Scriptural warning about forsaking the true Gospel for “another which is really no gospel.”⁵⁹ My answer to these questions at this time is positive and hopeful.

Evangelicalism as understood in the 21st Century is very dynamic and broad. Its breadth includes Calvinists, Arminians, Dispensationalists and Charismatics. Because of this breadth, evangelicalism is described as an empty term that needs to be abandoned. Even within evangelicalism there are calls for a return to traditional denominational creedalism and concerns about doctrinal wandering. One wonders if the very dynamism and movement of evangelicalism which embraces so many will be its destruction. The future of evangelicalism will include continued debates about the sufficiency of Scripture, evangelism, cultural engagement and even conversion. The centrality of the cross will be endangered. Thus, evangelicalism will continue to be in need of being evaluated from a Biblical perspective. Always, however, this evaluation must be done in conformity with the Scriptural principle that “the goal of this instruction is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”⁶⁰ As I complete this paper, I am very conscious that I have not completed the task of evaluating evangelicalism from a Biblical perspective. Even as I look over my work, I appreciate the fact that I have left out so much of the Bible that should that should be brought to bear upon each important area of evangelicalism. My

hope is that I have avoided the trap of proof-texting and brought to the discussion some major Biblical support for and a critique of this movement called “evangelicalism.”

End Notes

¹ Thorne, James “Defining Evangelicalism” a paper presented at the 1999 Convention of the Evangelical Theological Society.

2.Grudem, Wayne. “Do We Act As If We Really Believe that “The Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written”?”. JETS, Volume 43, No. 1, 5-26.

3.Wayne Grudem’s six suggestions at the end of the above article are helpful in summarizing a Biblical evaluation of evangelicalism:

1. Consider the possibility that God may want evangelical scholars to write more books and articles that tell the Church what the whole Bible teaches us about some current problem.

2. Consider the possibility that God wants the Church to discover answers and reach consensus on more problems, and wants us to play a significant role in that process.

3. Consider the possibility that God wants evangelical scholars to speak with a unified voice on certain issues before the whole Church and the whole world.

4. Consider the possibility that God may want many of us to pay less attention to the writings of non-evangelical scholars.

5. Consider the possibility that God may want us to quote his Word explicitly in private discussions and in public debates with non-Christians.

6. Consider the possibility that the world as we know it may change very quickly.

4. Thorne.

5.Thorne, 11.

6.Exodus 33:11.

7.James 2:23.

8.Psalm 23:1

9.The number of Messianic Psalms varies. I am thinking of the classics like Psalm 22,24,89.

10.Job 19:25.

11.Isaiah 6.

12. Jeremiah 1:8.

13. Acts 2:38.

14. Philippians 3:10.

15. Matthew 11:28,29.

16. John 3:3.

17. Thorne, 12.

18. Genesis 1:1.

19. Joshua 1:8.

20. Psalm 119:35. Where do you stop in Psalm 119?

21. Isaiah 28:14.

22.2 Peter 1:20,21.

23.2 Timothy 3:16,17.

24. Matthew 4:4.

25. D. A. Carson. The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

26. Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 127.

27. Thorne, 12.

28. Leviticus 17:11.

29. Hebrews 9;14.

30.2 Samuel 7:11-16.

31. Psalm 22:14.

32. Isaiah 53:5.

33.1 Peter 1:10,11.

34.1 Corinthians 1:18.

35. John 19:30.

36. Philippians 1:21.

37.Thorne, 12.

38.Matthew 28:18-20.

39.Acts 2:21.

40.Acts 2:40.

41.Acts 9:15.

42.Romans 1:16.

43.Thorne, 12.

44.Genesis 1:26.

45.Genesis 9:1-5.

46.1 Kings 8:41-43.

47.Proverbs 14:34.

48.Isaiah 11:10.

49.Psalm 8:6.

50.1 Peter 2:12.

51.Hebrews 2:8.

52.Romans 13:1.

53.1 Timothy 2:2.

54.Matthew 22:21.

55.Matthew 4:17.

56.Matthew 5:13, 14.

57.Jude 3.

58.Ephesians 4:5.

59.Galatians 1:6-9.

60.1 Timothy 1:5.