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Edited by Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier

Excerpt

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I Defining and locating evangelicalism

TIMOTHY LARSEN

An evangelical is:

1. an orthodox Protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;
3. who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;
5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.

This definition has been specifically devised for this volume. As I have tried it out on colleagues, they have jokingly referred to it as “the Larsen Pentagon,” which is a compliment to the standard definition of evangelicalism, the Bebbington Quadrilateral. The British historian, David Bebbington, in his seminal study, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989), defined evangelicalism by identifying its four distinguishing marks: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism – that is, evangelicals emphasize conversion experiences; an active laity sharing the gospel and engaged in good works; the Bible; and salvation through the work of Christ on the cross.¹ Bebbington’s definition is routinely employed to identify evangelicalism; no other definition comes close to rivaling its level of general acceptance. It is the definition used by numerous scholars who have studied aspects of evangelicalism.² For example, it is employed by the two main works of reference comprised of evangelical biographies that have been published since 1989, Donald M. Lewis, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* and my own *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*.³

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The eminent American historian of evangelicalism, Mark Noll, has repeatedly commended the quadrilateral as “the most serviceable general definition” in existence.⁴ A leader of evangelicalism in Britain, Derek Tidball (whose current positions include chairing the council of the Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom), has testified concerning this definition: “[Bebbington’s] suggestions have met with a ready response from across the spectrum of evangelicals and has quickly established itself as near to a consensus as we might ever expect to reach.”⁵ My five-point definition is not intended to supplant Bebbington’s. The quadrilateral has the important advantage of being quite short, while the pentagon is far too long to be easily deployed in many contexts where a definition is needed. Indeed, I imagine that most reviewers of this *Cambridge Companion* will not want to expend some 125 words of their valuable space in order to quote it in full.

Nevertheless, the pentagon does bring out important contextual information that Bebbington was able either to assume (given the geographical and chronological scope of his study as identified in its title) or to develop explicitly elsewhere in his book. Without such additional context, the term “evangelical” loses its utility for identifying a specific Christian community. For example, if no context is made explicit, an argument could be made that St. Francis of Assisi was an evangelical. St. Francis, after all, had a clear, dramatic conversion experience; he was so committed to activism that he pioneered friars out itinerating amongst the people, preaching the gospel, and ministering to physical needs rather than being cloistered monks; his biblicism was so thorough that his *Rule* was made up mostly of straight quotations from Scripture; his crucicentrism was so profound that it reached its culmination in the stigmata. For all I know, St. Francis might have been a better Christian and more committed to the distinctives of the quadrilateral (generically conceived) than any evangelical as defined in this chapter who ever lived, but a definition of evangelicalism that would include medieval Roman Catholic saints would not be serviceable for delineating the scope of scholarly projects.

Accordingly, the goal of this chapter is merely to find a definition that clearly identifies a distinct Christian community that can then be discussed. This is decidedly not an attempt to judge the actual identity or status of any individuals who happen to fall outside or inside those functional boundaries. Specifically, this working definition is not intended to challenge anyone’s right to use “evangelical” as an appropriate self-description. To take an obvious example, the word “evangelical” functions in some contexts, especially European ones, as a synonym for “Protestant.” This is a perfectly legitimate usage: it is just not the one

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being employed here. Etymologically, “evangelical” is derived from the Greek word, *euangelion*, meaning “good news” or “gospel,” and many not intended when the term is used in this volume would quite rightly consider themselves to be people of the gospel. Likewise, the pentagon is not meant to violate anyone’s right to refuse to be co-opted into the evangelical camp. Any individual or group who finds the label unwelcome can simply reply to this message and say so; they will have their address removed from the mailing list promptly and without question. More to the point, I have made an effort in this chapter to quote doctrinal statements only from organizations that self-identify as evangelical. Hence this working definition should not be misconstrued as an effort to impose a reality to which people are expected to conform, and to use for deciding whom they can accept as believers of the same ilk with whom they could cooperate. Its only purpose is to mark off a coherent scope for a scholarly project.

On the other hand, this definition is intended to locate an actual, self-identified “evangelical” Christian community in existence. While “evangelical” can be used in many ways, the definition being advanced here articulates what might be meant when this term is used in numerous real-life contexts such as the Association of Evangelical Theological Education in Latin America, the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, the *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology*, the Evangelical Alliance of the United Kingdom, the Korea Evangelical Theological Society, the Evangelical Fellowship of Pakistan, the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, the Romanian Evangelical Alliance, the National Association of Evangelicals in America, the National Council of Evangelical Churches in Papua New Guinea, and the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology. While the word “evangelical” will undoubtedly not mean exactly the same thing in such diverse locations, the members of these organizations are indeed part of a cross-pollinating international movement. It is routine for an individual in good standing with one of these groups (or numerous more that have not been named) to be sought after for service in any of the others, thus revealing the sense that they are fellow believers of the same species, local variations notwithstanding. Let us therefore explore the defining boundaries being established for this work.

(I) AN ORTHODOX PROTESTANT

Evangelicals are a subset within historic, orthodox Christianity. In particular, they are Trinitarians whose doctrines of God and Christ are in

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line with the ones articulated at the councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381). Many evangelicals explicitly accept the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. There are some evangelicals, however, who reject all creedal statements in principle, interpreting the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* to mean that Christians should have "no creed but the Bible." This instinct has often been expressed, for example, in restorationist churches such as those arising from the Stone–Campbell movement.⁶ An individual who rejected the ecumenical Christian creeds on such grounds might still be identifiable as an evangelical if her understanding of what the Bible teaches on the Trinity and the nature of Christ correlated with the teaching of the Nicene Creed. More than one evangelical leader has claimed that the historic creeds should have no place in matters of faith and instead embarked upon a project to find the teaching of the Bible directly from scratch, but has nevertheless come away from the Scriptures after such an effort with doctrinal convictions identical to the rulings of the early ecumenical councils. On the other hand, some groups are indeed excluded by this point – the fact notwithstanding that they bear a striking resemblance in other ways to those defined as evangelicals here. Oneness Pentecostals would be an obvious example of a group whose church life and worship would correlate strongly in many ways to that of those identified here as evangelicals, but whose lack of a Trinitarian theology positions them beyond the focus of this study.⁷ In short, the doctrine of evangelicals accords with Nicene orthodoxy.

Evangelicalism is also a form of Protestantism. Historically, much of the Christian community being identified here has often cultivated an explicitly anti-Catholic stance, not infrequently in ways that make for painful reading. Indeed, a significant prompt (but not the only one) for the founding in 1846 of the Evangelical Alliance in Britain was a desire to create a united front against Roman Catholicism. The eminent Scottish divine, Thomas Chalmers, hoped at the time of its founding that the Evangelical Alliance would be a "great anti-Popish Association."⁸ It would not be hard to compile a long list from across multiple nations and centuries of self-identified evangelicals attacking Catholicism. Recently, efforts to communicate respect for other orthodox Christians have become so energetic for some conservative Protestants that it is sometimes viewed as bad manners to define the evangelical camp in a way that excludes Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox believers. Such politeness, however, has the liability of being apt to confuse the uninitiated. A former colleague of mine is an ordained Presbyterian minister. He is also a Benedictine oblate who has served on the board of the

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American Benedictine Academy. The fact that the Benedictines would receive him in this way shows that they are not animated by anti-Protestant sentiments. Nevertheless, his case notwithstanding, the clearest way to define “Benedictine” would be as a particular community within Roman Catholicism. Likewise, a desire for methodological clarity prompts me to acknowledge that the term “evangelical” as it is being used here is normed by the wider category of Protestantism. Moreover, this volume concerns evangelical *theology*. Although readers of this volume might know personally people who are a hybrid of evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy, to date, I do not think that one can point to significant theological work that has been done by someone who is simultaneously both Catholic or Orthodox and also recognized by any of the self-identified “evangelical” organizations listed above as an evangelical theologian.

(2) WHO STANDS IN THE TRADITION OF THE
GLOBAL CHRISTIAN NETWORKS ARISING
FROM THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY REVIVAL
MOVEMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH JOHN WESLEY
AND GEORGE WHITEFIELD

The purpose of this point is, first, to demarcate the chronological scope of the movement and, second, to identify a particular social network. In other words, it provides the context that explains why this volume is not referring to Augustine, John Chrysostom, Catherine of Siena, Martin Luther, or Richard Baxter when it speaks of “evangelicals,” however much evangelicals as defined here might admire these figures and appreciate their theological contributions. The network under consideration in this volume began in the cross-pollinating revivalistic and evangelistic atmosphere of Britain and North America in the 1730s, together with links and parallels to Pietists in continental Europe. Leaders such as the Englishmen John Wesley and George Whitefield were avidly collaborating with like-minded believers across Britain, in North America, in Europe, and sometimes beyond.⁹ Their names serve well to identify a particular network of believers that has continued ever since, though other names from that first generation might have also performed this function (such as Jonathan Edwards in Massachusetts or Howell Harris in Wales).

Wesley and Whitefield express well the other points of the pentagon. The fact that Wesley was an Arminian and Whitefield a Calvinist

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notwithstanding, their views on Scripture, the work of Christ on the cross, the work of the Spirit, and the duties of believers corresponded to this definition. From the generation of Wesley and Whitefield to the present, believers who hold these convictions have worked together to pursue common goals. They have also successfully spread their convictions. This spreading influence has resulted in the network taking root in every corner of the globe: only the Roman Catholic Church can rival the extent to which evangelicalism is truly and profoundly a global religious movement. This identifiable, worldwide Christian network has also influenced many different denominational contexts and provided the impetus for creating a wide array of new ones. It is this network to which the word “evangelical” refers.

Origin is not destiny, however. The reference to Wesley and Whitefield should not be misconstrued as norming today’s evangelicalism by narrowly Western standards. To find out what is meant in this volume by an evangelical today, one would be better off observing Pentecostals in Korea than Methodists in England, despite the fact that British Methodists look to John Wesley as their institutional founder. In this study, “evangelical” does not mean whatever historically evangelical institutions or groups have become. Rather, this definition recognizes that historically evangelical groups can change their theological convictions and Christian practices in ways that move them beyond the scope of this study. This could also happen to any of the organizations mentioned earlier with the word “evangelical” in their titles. One prominent way this has happened in the past is when individuals or groups have imbibed theologically liberal or Modernist doctrinal convictions to the point where evangelical distinctives are muted. When such theological influences lead one to deny the unique authority of the Bible, to find an emphasis on the atoning work of Christ no longer central to Christian proclamation, or to dispense with the practice of evangelism and an expectation of conversion, then such a person no longer falls within the scope of this study. Many British Methodists, of course, are evangelicals in the sense being advanced here, but one cannot infer this automatically from their denominational identity (for that matter, being a Korean Pentecostal does not make one *ipso facto* an evangelical either, and that tradition could develop in non-evangelical ways in the future). Conversely, many groups that are not historically evangelical now have members that are evangelicals. For example, some believers in Christian communities that pre-date the 1730s, such as the Mennonites, have been influenced by the evangelical movement, accepted its core traits, and chosen to build relationships in the context of the wider

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evangelical network. Although it began in the 1730s, an individual believer or a whole Christian group might join this international evangelical network and become truly evangelical – even become a supreme current example of evangelicalism – the fact that their Christian tradition does not have historic links to it notwithstanding.

As long as a network continues to exist that expresses the theology and practice articulated in the other points of the pentagon, then there will still be evangelicalism in the sense used in this book, however much the network might change or shift its center of gravity in terms of denominational, ethnic, cultural, or geographical contexts. In short, evangelicalism is a *network* that reflects particular *distinctives of doctrine and Christian practice*. This study is not interested in gathering up people outside an identifiable, self-described, “evangelical” network who happen to share these doctrinal distinctives and insisting that they are evangelicals whether they know it or not, whether they would resent being so labeled or not. On the other hand, this study also rejects the notion that evangelicalism is whatever once-central parts of such an identifiable network might become: if they depart from the distinctives of doctrine and Christian practice outlined in the other four points of the pentagon, then they are no longer evangelicals in its sense.

(3) WHO HAS A PREEMINENT PLACE FOR THE
BIBLE IN HER OR HIS CHRISTIAN LIFE AS THE
DIVINELY INSPIRED, FINAL AUTHORITY
IN MATTERS OF FAITH AND PRACTICE

The Bible is central to evangelicals as a point of doctrine, as the authority by which they defend all their theological convictions, and as a fundamental component of their Christian practice. In terms of the latter, a widespread devotional pattern in evangelicalism is the practice of daily Bible reading. The expectation of regular, private Bible reading is for the whole literate community – both the laity and the clergy, both the young and the old, both new believers and mature ones. Devotional Bible reading is more foundational to evangelical piety than the rosary is to Roman Catholic piety. Innumerable aids have been continually written to guide evangelicals in the systematic reading of Scripture (schemes for reading the Bible through yearly are one standard model). In addition, evangelicals often see the sermon as the high point of corporate worship. They generally expect the sermon to be an exposition of a specific text of Scripture

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or an account of what the Bible says on a particular theme. Evangelicals often gather in small groups and/or Sunday school classes for Bible study. Evangelical spiritual formation frequently includes the memorization of portions of Scripture. Evangelical missionary work to unreached people groups characteristically prioritizes the translation of the Bible into indigenous languages.

Such Christian practice reflects doctrinal convictions regarding the nature of Scripture. Foundational to this stance is the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. Unlike some liberal Protestants, evangelicals reject the notion that a modern awareness of religious pluralism undermines belief in the Bible as an uniquely divine text, or that modern biblical criticism has compromised the Bible as a reliable source of truth, and so forth. Evangelicals believe that the Bible is uniquely the word of God written. The whole of the Bible is authoritative and no other documents possess this exclusive level of authority. Therefore, all other doctrinal statements must be tested against the teaching of Scripture. It is common for statements of faith written by evangelicals to place Scripture references in parentheses behind each point. Evangelicals believe that human beings are judged by the Bible and called to change in the light of it, rather than standing in judgment over the Bible and rejecting those parts that are not in line with their own sensibilities. It would be unevangelical to claim that what the Bible teaches is actually a deceptive understanding of the nature of God. In the last hundred years, many evangelicals have used the word “inerrancy” to express these convictions regarding the nature of Scripture. Other evangelicals have shied away from that word, protesting that it is not a historic term, suspecting that it might be overdetermined, and worrying that it could divert the community into concentrating on explaining relatively trivial discrepancies in the text. A strong case can be made that inerrancy is an apt term for the way that the church historically has often viewed the Bible, the medieval Catholic theologian St. Bernard of Clairvaux no less than the twentieth-century, American, evangelical, theologian Carl F. H. Henry, for example.¹⁰ Regardless, that debate should be kept in proportion: there is a strong, confident, uniform evangelical consensus on the inspiration, authority, uniqueness, and sufficiency of Scripture, as well as on its complete trustworthiness in matters of Christian faith and practice.

A globally comprehensive, formal evangelical organization is the World Evangelical Fellowship (now Alliance). Its statement of faith, written in 1951 and still in use, has as its first point (of seven): “The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God, divinely inspired, infallible, entirely

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trustworthy; and their supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice.”¹¹ The Evangelical Alliance in Britain has revised its statement of faith twice – most recently in 2005 – since its founding in 1846. The point on the doctrine of Scripture from these three versions is as follows: “The divine Inspiration, Authority and Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures” (1846); “The divine inspiration of the Holy Scripture and its consequent trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct” (1970); “The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God – fully trustworthy for faith and conduct” (2005).¹² The Association of Evangelicals in Africa has as the first point of its eight-point statement of faith: “The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament (a total of 66 Books) are the Word of God. It is divinely inspired, infallible, inerrant, entirely trustworthy and serves as a supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct (2 Tim. 3:16–17).”¹³ Numerous other evangelical statements could be cited from across the centuries and the nations that would illustrate this point of the pentagon.

(4) WHO STRESSES RECONCILIATION WITH GOD
THROUGH THE ATONING WORK OF JESUS CHRIST
ON THE CROSS

Evangelicals are people of the gospel, and the gospel they preach is that human beings can have their sins forgiven and be reconciled to God through the atoning work of Christ on the cross. This is Bebbington’s “crucicentrism.” Repeatedly, when theologians reflecting other traditions have moved the center of gravity in Christian thought toward doctrines such as the incarnation, the life and teaching of Christ, or the Fatherhood of God, evangelicals have insisted, as P. T. Forsyth put it, on *The Cruciality of the Cross*.¹⁴ Overwhelmingly, evangelicals have viewed the nature of the work of Christ on the cross as vicarious and/or substitutionary. Thus, the statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals in America confesses a belief in Christ’s “vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood.”¹⁵ “Vicarious and atoning” is also the wording in the statement of faith of the World Evangelical Alliance, and numerous bodies across the globe such as the Evangelical Fellowship of India and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean also accept this wording.¹⁶ The current statement of the Evangelical Alliance of the United Kingdom affirms a belief in: “The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place,

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paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God."¹⁷ Words and concepts such as "substitutionary," "propitiation," and "penal" have sometimes been found problematic by some evangelicals. While there are intra-evangelical discussions about the exact nature of the atonement and the best way to express this doctrine in language, all evangelicals agree that Christ's work on the cross has made possible the only hope, plan, and way of reconciliation with God that human beings have. For evangelicals, "Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) is at the heart of gospel.

(5) AND WHO STRESSES THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF AN INDIVIDUAL TO BRING ABOUT CONVERSION AND AN ONGOING LIFE OF FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD AND SERVICE TO GOD AND OTHERS, INCLUDING THE DUTY OF ALL BELIEVERS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TASK OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL TO ALL PEOPLE

An overarching and unifying theme can be discerned in several features of evangelicalism that are often discussed separately, notably Bebbington's "conversionism" and "activism." The theme that binds them together is the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals. From a starting point at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pentecostal and charismatic expressions of Christianity have gone on to exert a particularly strong influence on global evangelicalism. This influence has increased the prominence of pneumatology in evangelical thought. Nevertheless, an emphasis on the work of the Spirit has always been a distinguishing mark of evangelical Christian life, not least in the first generation of Wesley and Whitefield. At its founding in 1846, the Evangelical Alliance in Britain had as its seventh point in a pithy nine-point doctrinal basis of faith: "The work of the Holy Spirit in the Conversion and Sanctification of the sinner." The National Association of Evangelicals in America has as the fourth and fifth points in its even briefer seven-point statement of faith: "We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life." Likewise, the Association of Evangelicals in Africa has an eight-point statement. The fifth point includes the affirmation that human beings receive salvation "through regeneration by the Holy Spirit" and the fourth point