



*“I know what constituted an Evangelical in former times...
I have no clear notion what constitutes one now.”¹ Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885)*

John Wycliffe (c.1330–84), England’s ‘Morning Star of the Reformation’, was known as the ‘Evangelical Doctor’.² This title arose from his belief that preaching the Gospel was the primary task of his ministry.

Today, some Bible-believing Christians have grown uncomfortable with describing themselves as Evangelical. They may feel it has been politicised or become synonymous with a lack

of doctrinal robustness. Or they may conclude that it is now claimed or applied too broadly to be meaningful, extending to people whose lifestyles are inconsistent with biblical ethics.

But the term is worth reclaiming and defending. The word itself derives from ‘Evangel’, a Middle English word with its roots in the Greek word for gospel or good news, *εὐαγγέλιον*. In Latin, this became *evangelium*.

In biblical terms, Evangelical means ‘referring to the Gospel’ – the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. By definition, they are ‘Gospel people’. So to be a true Christian is – and has always been – to be an Evangelical, whether or not that term is used.

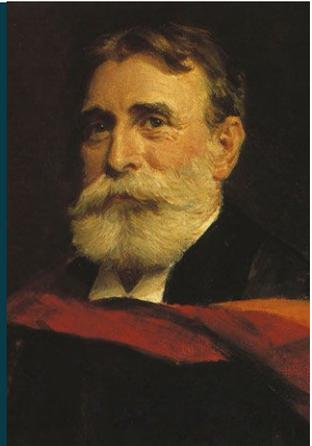
There are many different ways to define Evangelicals, but this leaflet outlines some of what makes them distinct under five headings: **Revelation, Redemption, Spirituality, Activism and Fellowship.**

Revelation

EVANGELICALS HOLD TO THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AS THE INSPIRED, INFALLIBLE, INERRANT WORD OF GOD

BREATHED OUT BY GOD

The Apostle Peter wrote: "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" (2 Peter 1:21). Theologian B B Warfield (1851–1921) explained the nature of biblical inspiration – that God worked in and through the biblical authors by the power of his Spirit, and preserved them from falling into error, so that the Scriptures are "not merely the word of godly men, but the immediate word of God Himself, speaking directly as such to the minds and hearts of every reader".³ The Bible is therefore received with certain faith as the inerrant and infallible Word of God.



THE INNER WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

The Scriptures do not derive their authority from the Church, but are self-authenticating as the Word of God. They bear witness to their own truthfulness directly in our hearts by the grace of the Holy Spirit. As John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, "For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit."⁴

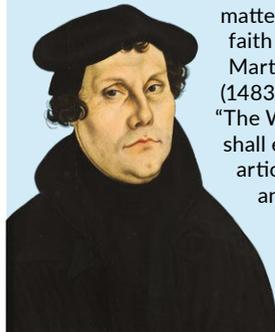


“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” 2 Timothy 3:16



SCRIPTURE ALONE

Evangelicals recognise that God reveals himself in both nature (e.g. Psalm 19:1, Romans 1:20) and Scripture. Yet the revelation of God's will in the Bible is clear and sufficient as the final authority in matters of Christian faith and practice. Martin Luther (1483–1546) said: "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel."⁵



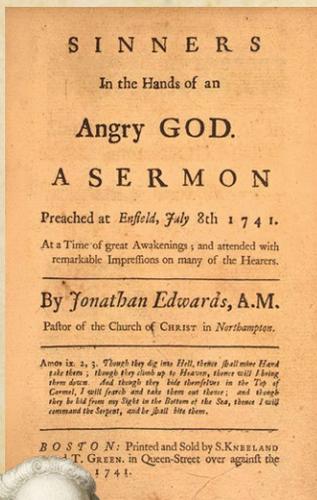
EVANGELICALS BELIEVE IN THE PERSONAL REALITY AND TRANSFORMING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

The Spirit of God lives within every believer, daily empowering and equipping them for Christ's service and transforming them increasingly into his likeness. Those keeping in step with the Spirit display a growing love for Christ, Scripture and other people, hatred of sin, passion for evangelism and zeal for the glory of God. Truly knowing Christ as Saviour and Lord results in wholehearted Christian commitment that impacts every area of life. As well as being diligent in spiritual disciplines – including studying God's Word, praying and fellowship – faith in action has to include loving neighbour and acting as salt and light.

“we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction”

1 Thessalonians
1:4-5



REVIVAL

At certain times, God pours out his Spirit in extraordinary measure to bring revival. Individual lives are transformed almost beyond recognition. Churches see renewed power in preaching and reverence for the authority of God's Word, bringing holiness, joy, peace, love and unity in the Gospel. This translates into energy for evangelism and civic engagement as Christ's ambassadors.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was at the heart of the transatlantic revival that swept Britain and North America in the 1730s and 1740s. Of Northampton, Massachusetts, Edwards wrote: “This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, anno 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God”.⁶

New believers were filled with joy at the forgiveness of sins, public worship became more earnest, and the whole community focused on eternal things. Revival spread from town to town and across the Atlantic Ocean – thousands were saved.⁷



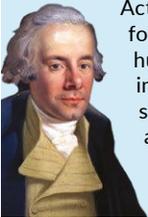
“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741

EVANGELICALS CONTRIBUTE TO POLITICS, EDUCATION, CULTURE AND LAW, AMONG MANY OTHER SPHERES

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE (1759–1833)

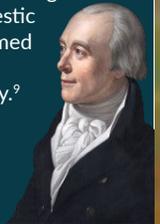
William Wilberforce was already an MP when he came to Christ in 1785. Convinced to remain in Parliament, he sought moral reform. From 1787, his relentless campaigning against slavery saw the trade banned in 1807 and paved the way for the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act.⁸ This was a victory

for the biblical truth that humanity is made in the image of God, which spread around the globe and became foundational for human rights law.



SPENCER PERCEVAL (1762–1812)

Spencer Perceval developed his Evangelical faith while still at school. He became MP for Northampton in 1796 and Prime Minister in 1809. He used his position to advance the cause of Christ, including laying the groundwork for Christian missionaries to operate in India. He was also committed to upholding Christianity as central to domestic politics, taking positions informed by his faith on issues ranging from the Lord's Day to adultery.⁹ He has been described as “the model Christian politician of George III's reign.”¹⁰



JOSEPHINE BUTLER (1828–1906)

Publicly recognised as one of the UK's greatest humanitarians, Josephine Butler was instrumental in transforming the lives of women and girls. Among many achievements as a Christian influence, her tireless campaigning saw the age of consent for girls raised from 12 to 16 and procuring girls for prostitution criminalised. She also fought against state-sanctioned prostitution and established centres to care for prostitutes.¹¹



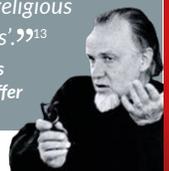
FRANCIS SCHAEFFER (1912–1984)

The pro-life movement owes much to Evangelical minister Francis Schaeffer, who produced a series of films against abortion in 1978.¹²

Schaeffer helped Evangelicals understand that their faith needed to influence politics, culture and law to protect the unborn. He recognised the power of the courts to shape public morality. It was a testament to Schaeffer's legacy that, in 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade's finding of a constitutional right to abortion.

“ True spirituality touches all of life, including things of government and law, and not just ‘religious things’.”¹³

Francis Schaeffer



Redemption

EVANGELICALS BELIEVE ONLY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST SAVES SINNERS FROM THE WRATH OF GOD

THE NEW BIRTH

Evangelicals recognise that they were born “dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:5) and so must be born again of the Spirit to see the Kingdom of God (John 3). The New Birth is the gracious act of the triune God. The Father, through the saving work of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, raises a sinner from spiritual death to living faith in Christ.

The New Birth was a key theme in the ministry of Great Awakening

preacher
George
Whitefield
(1714–1770).¹⁴



FAITH IN CHRIST'S FINISHED WORK

Isaiah prophesied the penal substitutionary atoning work of the Messiah: “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” (Isaiah 53:5). Christ himself declared “It is finished” from the cross (John 19:30). And having “offered for all time one sacrifice for sins”, he rose from the dead and “sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12).

Evangelicals know it is by faith alone in the finished work of Christ at the cross that both our sins and sinfulness are forgiven, and his righteousness is imputed to us.



“ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21



ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Scripture teaches we may have a full and infallible assurance of God's grace and forgiveness in Christ – as the Apostle John stated: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). And Paul wrote: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children” (Romans 8:16). C H Spurgeon explained, “the eternal Spirit from off the throne, descends and fills our heart, and then we have the two witnesses bearing witness with each other, that we are children of God”.¹⁵ Evangelicals rejoice in the certainty of God's saving love in Christ, knowing it is not based on their own merit but is by grace through faith.



Fellowship

EVANGELICALS ARE UNITED IN CHRIST ACROSS DENOMINATIONS AND BORDERS

SHARED ESSENTIALS

Evangelical Christians are united by their faith in Christ, experience of his life-changing grace, and submission to the authority of the Bible. They may disagree over secondary matters, such as church government, but recognise that they have more in common than divides them. This means they can often work together in common cause.



EVANGELISM

Love for the lost draws Evangelicals to work together in proclaiming the Gospel. Faithful Evangelicals cooperate across denominational lines to spread the Word of God, pray for revival, and affirm the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

GLOBAL BODY

The modern global Evangelical movement has its origins in the historic work of missionaries – in 2020, 77% of all Evangelicals lived in the Global South.¹⁶ It is also growing: estimates suggest that the number of Evangelicals in the world has grown from below 150 million in 1970 to *at least* 420 million – perhaps even close to a billion – in 2025.¹⁷



Wonderfully, the body of Christ is expanding across the world, and will expand until Christ returns in glory.

References at the.ci/whatisanevangelical-ref



This leaflet is published in tribute to our late Chairman, Revd Dr Richard Turnbull. Richard had considered the marks of Evangelical identity as part of his doctorate and advocated for a robust defence of the term.



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