ARE ALL EVANGELICALS EVANGELICALS

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The church around the globe (and, increasingly, the church in the West) does not fit neatly into the categories that we bring to it.
Category: Observations

I recently read a couple of posts, one by Stephen Kneale and the other by Stephen Watkinson which considered the question of whether evangelical Christians should consider to use the term evangelical to describe themselves.

The context for this is the rise of socio-political evangelicalism in the USA; a movement which espouses values that many Christians in other parts of the world disagree with (church going is not central to socio-political evangelicalism, apparently). As part of the conversation, Stephen Kneale tweeted:

> *I think Evangelical is fine. I get why one wouldn't want to be associated with the socio-political evangelicalism in America. But, ultimately, most Evangelicals across the world are fine with it as a theological descriptor and I don't think we should cede the definition to the US*

As someone who has lived and worked in an international setting, I have to admit that I am not at all convinced that most Evangelicals across the world are fine with using the term. In fact, as I mused on this, I began to question whether the majority of people in the UK who hold to evangelical belief would use the term to describe themselves and I'm not convinced that they do.

At this point, we need to define what is and what is not an evangelical. The most commonly used definition is the so called Bebbington quadrilateral, based on the 1989 work of historian David Bebbington who identifies four qualities which are typical of all evangelicals:

- **Conversionism**, the belief that lives need to be changed.
- **Activism**, the expression of the gospel in effort.
- **Biblicism**, a particular regard for the Bible.
- **Crucicentrism**, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross

There are many Christian groups who hold firmly to the Bebbington quadrilateral, but who would not tend to call themselves Evangelicals. Perhaps, the largest grouping of this type would be the various streams of Pentecostalism. This blog post by Jonathan Black is very helpful on this subject:

> *I agree with Robert Menzies that â€˜the term, Pentecostal, is not only compatible with the adjective, Evangelical, but incomprehensible apart from it. Thus, to be Pentecostal is, by*

> *definition, to be Evangelical.â€™*

The fact that Jonathan wrote the blog post is an indication that many Pentecostals do not call themselves Evangelicals, even though they do emphasise the Bebbington quadrilateral. The same thing can be said for many of the newer Charismatic church streams and also for many of the diaspora churches in the UK. They believe the same things as Evangelicals, but they don't use that term to describe themselves.

I have seen the similar things in Africa. In some cases, Evangelical is simply a denominational term which relates to the mission agency which actually planted the church; other groups had more traditional denomination tags - while remaining staunchly evangelical in their belief. I've also encountered leaders (who believe the same things as me) who strongly resisted the term evangelical because they saw it as tying themselves to an essentially Western movement which did not reflect the same realities. I've come across similar sentiments in Asia and Latin America; though I've spent considerably less time in those contexts.

It's also true to say that a significant proportion (perhaps a majority) of people around the world who emphasise the Bebbington quadrilateral are Pentecostals and very unlikely ever to describe themselves as Evangelical.

Although people may not use the term evangelical to describe themselves, this does not mean that they cut themselves off from the wider stream of Evangelicalism and they may well be members of an Evangelical Alliance or support the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, for example.

While it is traditional to describe evangelicalism in terms of a set of theological beliefs (Bebbington) it can also be viewed as a protest movement. Walls suggests that Evangelicalism arose as a protest against a Christian society that wasnâ€™t Christian enough (Walls, 1996, 81) and evangelicals have tended to define themselves in opposition to traditional Christianity in what Warner terms â€œpolemical self-definitionâ€ (Warner, 2007, 5). Evangelicalism arose in the UK as a revival movement which was distinct from mainstream Christianity. Maintaining that distinction continues to be important and the statements of faith that are ubiquitous in evangelical life serve not simply as an indication of what a particular group believe, but also as a mark to distinguish them from other Christians. In a broad denomination such as Anglicanism, evangelical is a marker which distinguishes those people who hold to a certain set of beliefs within the wider communion. In Free Church life, evangelical helps to set particular churches apart from the mainstream.

However, in newer denominations and church streams who have always stressed the Bebbington quadrilateral (such as the Pentecostals) the need to use the term evangelical as a marker of orthodoxy is essentially redundant. These newer groups tend to name themselves after other distinctive features in their beliefs.

A similar phenomenon occurs in many parts of the world where the church is growing rapidly, today. Denominations (which may be theologically liberal in the West) are likely to be conservative and orthodox in the majority world and there is no need for an extra descriptor such as evangelical to describe them. This is perhaps most evident in the case of Gafcon; the Global Anglican Futures Conference. This large grouping within Anglicanism is evangelical in their theological orientation, but you have to dig deep on their website to find that term. They describe themselves as Bible based and Orthodox Anglican. I have encountered more than one African bishop who was far more concerned about reclaiming the term Anglican from the West than whether they were referred to as Evangelical, or not.

The church around the globe (and, increasingly, the church in the West) does not fit neatly into the categories that we bring to it. People will define themselves according to their categories, not according to ours and not everyone who believes what Evangelicals belief, will call themselves Evangelical.

To quote my own PhD thesis:

> *Evangelicalism does not constitute a distinct ecclesiastic grouping with a defined membership or creed. Because of this, it is difficult to define exactly what evangelicalism is. Nassif calls it a â€œmoving targetâ€ (Nassif, 2015, 221) while McDermott describes it as a â€œmany-headed monster that regularly transforms itself into new shapesâ€ (McDermott, 2014, 260).*
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> *Arthur (2018)*

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