What is Evangelicalism?

ALASTAIR J. ROBERTS

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PREFACE

The articles that now comprise this booklet represent what was perhaps the high water mark of my scepticism about evangelical identity. My feelings on the matter haven't substantially altered since, but I would now be much more concerned to find ways accurately to speak about and to protect or salvage those things that have been best about the 'evangelical' movement.

I am a conservative Protestant, one whose evangelical identity—if such language be appropriate—is more adjectival than substantive. While I am ecclesially rooted, I am firmly in favour of the cosmopolitanism of affection and cooperation between orthodox and faithful Christians of different Protestant traditions. It is this that, for me, represents the very best of evangelical identity.

While commonly judged by its critics as a fractious movement, at its best evangelicalism can stand for a particularly pronounced practice of 'mere Christianity', for the way in which, despite our differences, we are bound together in mutual love and service with other faithful believers across institutional boundaries.

As I argue in this booklet, evangelicalism can fall—and often has fallen—into an individualistic and deinstitutionalized form of religious consumerism. I

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do not, however, believe that such a fall need be its fate. This danger will become a more real one if we neglect our particular ecclesial identities and abandon them for the non-specificity that always threatens evangelicalism, with the accompanying weak self-definition and vulnerability to prevailing cultural forces.

Alastair J. Roberts

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EVANGELICALISM: DEFINITIONS IN CONFLICT

Introduction

After [a post by Rachel Held Evans](#) raised the question of the meaning of evangelicalism a number of people weighed in on the subject, including [Denny Burk](#), [Jake Belder](#), and [Adrian Warnock](#).

Rachel's Post

[Rachel's post](#), which prompted a number of the posts that followed, was a response to the contested nature of her claim to evangelical identity. Within it she argues that she is an evangelical, but that being an evangelical need not involve many of the things that her critics presume that it does.

Reading her defence of her evangelical credentials is fascinating on several counts and will provide a good starting point for a discussion of the problematic character of evangelical identity more generally.

Much of her post is concerned to observe that while she identifies as one, she doesn't conform to the standard evangelical stereotype. One of the things

that will immediately strike many who read her blog outside of the US is that many aspects of the evangelical stereotype that she is countering are especially or peculiarly American. In other countries, many of those identifying as evangelicals will happily vote for left-wing candidates, or aren't especially politicized at all. There is plenty of support for women priests among many evangelicals that I know, along with advocacy for gay rights, and inclusivist positions on salvation. Many varying views exist on young earth creationism, and premillennial dispensationalism is less of an influence on evangelical views on foreign policy in most countries outside of the US. One of the benefits of the recent work of David Swartz on the evangelical left in America is that it highlights something of the historical and cultural contingency of the prevailing stereotype and perhaps opens imaginations to alternative possibilities for identity.

Beyond her clarification of what she is not, however, Rachel's positive argument for her evangelical credentials is rather muddied. In answering the question 'what "evangelical" means to me', she opines:

It means, in the Greek, "gospel" or "good news" (evangelion). And so, as an evangelical, I am a follower of Jesus who is committed to proclaiming the good news that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.

One wonders what really differentiates much of this from the position of most committed Christians, of any denominational or theological stripe.

A further interesting feature of this claim is the added words 'and Caesar is not' to the proclamation of Jesus' Lordship. While the addition of these words alongside the affirmation of Jesus' Lordship—rather than as merely one implication among several within it—might suggest to some a form of Christianity with a primarily prophetic and oppositional social orientation, placing a greater accent on the transformation of the public sphere and the challenging of the powers, I think that we should be wary of reading too much into this. Notwithstanding, we should make a mental note of it: it can be informative to see where people put such emphases.

The increasingly popular stress upon the counter-imperial rhetoric of the gospel, following NT scholars such as Richard Horsley and N.T. Wright strikes me as overblown: I have been interested by the fact that a number of my friends who are classical historians have so little time for such theories. Now, I enjoy Wright as much as the next guy and probably know his work much better, having read all of his major publications and his unpublished doctoral thesis about three times each, but this is one of the areas where I would more critical of him.

Whether or not Wright is along the right lines here, however, presenting such anti-imperialism, which is little more than implicit in the biblical rhetoric at best, as if it were something that were central to the *definition* of the gospel, seems to lack

the sort of circumspection that is demanded of us in such cases and is at serious risk of reductionism.

Rachel continues:

> It means, traditionally, an impassioned personal response to the gospel and a commitment to the scriptures that point to it. And so, as an evangelical, I am deeply invested in my faith, at both a personal and communal level, and I believe that all scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, challenging, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that people of faith are equipped to love God and their neighbors.

Once again, I am uncertain of how such a definition would successfully distinguish an evangelical from many Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Christians, for instance. In defining 'evangelical' in such a manner, what might we be suggesting about non-evangelical Christians? Do they not respond passionately and personally to the gospel? Are they not invested in their faith or committed to the importance of Scripture in the Church?

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Rachel's answer is that it presents the core of evangelical identity less in a particular set of beliefs about God and divine revelation in the gospel than in a particular character of response to it. Any doctrinal definition to evangelical identity is slight at best.

While she doesn't say so explicitly, I am left wondering whether Rachel experiences the core of evangelical identity as something residing in a sort of

affective, emotional, and expressive piety, a piety whose liveliness and sincerity is of more import than its vaguely articulated object (hence the language of 'deep investment', 'impassioned personal response', 'commitment', etc.). This piety functions as a sort of 'mother tongue'—to employ Rachel's expression—that bubbles to the surface at moments of passion or in more intimate contexts. One wonders whether anything more substantial than the posture of a Ricouerean 'first naïveté' (regarded nostalgically from the perspective of one desiring a second naïveté) is being referred to here.

Some might counter this suggestion by pointing to Rachel's allusion to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and its affirmation of the inspiration of Scripture. Surely this presents us with a clear object of evangelical commitment, albeit one shared by people of most Christian identities? Yet, although Rachel affirms that 'all scripture is inspired by God', the reader is left uncertain of how to reconcile this with her unapologetically selective approach to its application, her hermeneutical convictions, and her underlying doctrine of Scripture and its authority. The precise import of this statement is far from apparent.

I believe that it is revealing that, when challenged on whether her attitude towards Scripture is an evangelical one, her response is to appeal, not primarily to her *doctrine* and use of Scripture, [but to her *love* of it](#), to her *feelings* towards it. Of course, to insist that one loves Scripture does not answer the question of the sense in which you are bound by and to it.

A further thing worth noticing is that, in defining herself as an evangelical, Rachel's emphasis is overwhelmingly placed upon the personal and affective, rather than upon objective doctrinal commitments, public identities, congregational, denominational, and institutional affiliations, or ecclesiastical, sacramental, or liturgical practices. This emphasis is betrayed in wording that consistently treats individual affective interiority as the source and measure of evangelical identity—'an impassioned personal response', 'deeply invested', 'my faith', what it 'means to me', etc.

As I read her post on her evangelical identity, the impression that I am left with is that, for Rachel, her sense of evangelical identity is primarily something that is grounded in her own feelings—her love of the Bible, her passionate response to the gospel, and her deep personal investment in her faith. Consequently, to challenge her evangelical identity is to challenge the validity of her feelings and passions. As, unlike doctrinal positions, feelings and passions aren't so accessible or subject to public analysis, contestation, or judgment, Rachel feels able to dismiss quite lightly all challenge on this front, without the need to make a theological case for herself. Crucially, evangelicalism is a matter of self-definition or self-identification and when it comes to the term 'evangelical', what matters is what it 'means to me'.

All of this is underlined in the conclusion of Rachel's piece, where she writes:

Now, folks will disagree with what I've said here, but that just goes to show that evangelicalism is fluid and amorphous, its definition up for debate.

Labels tend to divide and distract, so I don't want to dwell here, but on the occasion that I identify as evangelical, this is what it means to me.

Hope that clears some things up.

In the case of any term with a public and objective meaning, such an assertion would be little more than mere question-begging. Disagreement with Rachel's definition is taken as *proof* that 'evangelicalism is fluid and amorphous, its definition up for debate.' The possibility that Rachel's definition could simply be wrong and that evangelicalism is really quite clear in its definition—a definition that excludes her position—is not countenanced. Because for Rachel evangelicalism is a matter of self-identification, "what 'evangelical' means to me" serves as a sufficient way of defining the term. If someone self-identifies as evangelical in a manner rather different from you, no real grounds for dispute exist: 'evangelical' means different things to different people and there isn't really a public and objective definition to which you can appeal.

Reading Rachel's definition one is left wondering how exactly it is 'up for debate' at all. How does one go about debating the meaning of something that is fundamentally defined subjectively? A contested

meaning is not necessarily the same thing as a debatable meaning, when there is no basis upon which reasonable discourse to occur. Whenever someone does challenge such a definition of 'evangelical' the predictable response is the accusation that they are trying to 'own' or 'have a monopoly upon' the term. Where no public definition is admitted, all we are left with are competing wills, with no standard by which to arbitrate between them.

Taken on its own terms, Rachel's definition of 'evangelical' is an exceptionally weak one, a wax-nose that can be fashioned into more or less anything that a person desires, and which gives us little explicitly with which to distinguish evangelicals from other sorts of Christians (could identifying as 'evangelical' possibly be a self-protective action to avoid association with the liberals or other Christian groupings?). That said, although her definition of 'evangelical' is near to useless, I want to argue that the fact that she describes herself in such a manner is perhaps the strongest proof that we have that she is an evangelical after all.

We should not make the mistake of confusing evangelical forms of self-definition with the actual definition of evangelicalism. I believe that the actual definition of evangelicalism has a lot more to do with the manners in which those within it consistently *self*-define than with any particular one of their many self-definitions.

Denny Burk's Post

[Denny Burk responded](#) to Rachel's post on his blog. He focuses on the definition of the gospel, calling out Rachel's 'Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't' formulation as flawed and reductionist.

In contrast to Rachel's highly subjective definition, Denny appeals to David Bebbington's famous quadrilateral definition of evangelicalism. Denny writes:

> According to Bebbington, evangelicals have four leading characteristics: *biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. Biblicism* refers to the fact that evangelicals look to the Bible alone as the ultimate authority and measure of all truth. From the 1820's onward, a growing body of evangelicals also insisted on inerrancy, verbal inspiration, and the need for literal interpretation of the Bible (Bebbington, 13-14). *Crucicentrism* focuses on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the necessity of his substitutionary atonement for sinners (Bebbington, 15). *Conversionism* is the conviction that sinners need to be born again through the spirit and to repent and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. *Activism* refers to the fact that evangelicals are *doers*. They believe that their faith should be worked out in good works.

There are a number of things to observe here. Bebbington's definition of evangelicalism is a historical one. As a historical definition, we should

beware of exalting it to the level of a timeless theological definition. Evangelicalism is a historical movement and, like all historical movements, it is subject to change and development, its character shifting over time. Burk's quotation itself suggests this in the statement: 'From the 1820's onward, a growing body of evangelicals also insisted on inerrancy, verbal inspiration, and the need for literal interpretation of the Bible.' On what basis are we to rule out evangelical identity shifting in different directions, or is such development excluded by definition? Just because most evangelicals didn't traditionally accept women in leadership, for instance, is no reason why the widespread presence of women leaders shouldn't be a mark of evangelicalism in the future.

Bebbington's is a more descriptive and less prescriptive definition, although many use it in a more prescriptive manner today. By seeking to freeze evangelical identity at one desired point in its historical development progressive forms of evangelicalism are excluded *a priori*. While conservative evangelicals may not appreciate what progressive evangelicals have done with their birthright, I don't believe that they have grounds to deny them it.

Bebbington's definition is a historically and culturally situated definition. This is a crucial point to remember. Bebbington is speaking of evangelicalism as a British phenomenon up to the 1980s. The story of evangelicalism in the US is a different story, one that isn't shaped by the presence of an established

church, for instance. Also, much has changed in Britain since the 1980s. Evangelicalism has always been a very diverse movement. In recent years in the UK the shared characteristics that Bebbington identified have been diluted in various ways and we have a situation of looser family resemblances instead.

My impression is that, in British evangelical circles traditionally evangelical forms of biblical hermeneutics and the commitment to inerrancy and literal interpretation have come under sustained criticism over the last few decades, as have many traditional evangelical understandings of the cross in terms of penal substitution. Something of a recovery of the centrality of the resurrection has also occurred in many circles, leading to less of an exclusive focus upon the cross and its attendant themes and the casting of the gospel that it encourages.

Evangelical activism has shifted in its form. It has been professionalized, with a proliferation of church ministries. Words such as 'relevant', 'contextualization', 'seeker sensitive', and 'missional' have come into vogue and cultural engagement is all the rage. Despite the popularity of adjectives such as 'radical' and 'scandalous', evangelicalism is probably providing less of a culture shock than ever to the unchurched. Many of the hard edges of evangelical rhetoric have been softened and the new evangelicalism is marketed as far more inviting and much less threatening, proclaiming more of a God who will facilitate our self-realization, and less of a

God who calls us to costly self-sacrifice, self-denial, and service.

Finally, in place of the old conversionism, we have more of a 'missionalism'. The urgency and imperative of repentance and faith are less firmly and uncompromisingly stressed. The fate of the unconverted is increasingly a matter of agnosticism or is responded to with hopeful suggestions of inclusivism or even universalism. Instead of challenging and direct appeals to individuals' consciences we are more likely to encounter a therapeutic emphasis. The accent has steadily shifted from 'reaching the lost' to 'church growth', with an attendant focus upon target groups, niche ministries, and the like. In keeping with this movement away from confrontational forms of ministry, friendship and hospitality evangelism have been increasingly emphasized.

Other related far-reaching changes have occurred, perhaps most noticeably in the rapid rise of modern worship styles and the displacing of the more traditional theological emphases of evangelical worship with those represented within the contemporary waves of worship songs. Evangelicalism in the UK has probably become more exposed to foreign influences on account of new media. Evangelicals have generally welcomed new audio-visual and Internet technology into the lives of their churches, being very sanguine about any negative influences that they might have. Corporate and consumer-driven models for church structure, growth, and outreach have gained in popularity,

encouraging the development of different models of church.

Now, although most of these might appear to be negative developments—and I believe that on balance these developments have been for the worse, although not unmixed with some positive improvements—my point is not to lament the current state of British evangelicalism, but to observe that it is evolving. To define evangelicalism in a way that precludes the possibility of such developments is to treat a descriptive definition as if it were a prescriptive and normative one.

For a host of reasons, the story and identity of evangelicalism in the US is a different one from that of the UK, with different formative events, associations, and family resemblances. Evangelicalism in the UK has not had the same relationship with mass media or politics as evangelicalism in the US. It hasn't been driven by personalities to the same degree and my impression is that it has enjoyed much more denominational definition than its corresponding movement in the US. Non-denominational and para-church movements along with independent Christian institutions, organizations, and agencies seem to exert far more of an influence on evangelical identity in the US. Evangelicalism also hasn't been a dominant force in the culture in the UK as it has been in the US, another fact which has shaped its character.

Pentecostals are nearly the greatest single constituency in UK evangelicalism, with the highest rate of evangelical self-identification of any

denominational grouping. Many non-Pentecostal evangelicals in the UK are charismatic to some degree or other. The other great grouping of evangelicals occurs in the Church of England, where evangelicals constitute about a third of the church. [The majority of UK evangelicals support women in ministry](). The composition and emphases of UK evangelicalism contrasts with US evangelicalism, where Southern Baptists are the biggest players. The weighting of emphases and the character historically associated with conservative evangelicalism are not so dominant in evangelicalism in the UK today.

I suspect that self-identification as 'evangelical' in the UK today often owes a lot less to theological distinctives than it did in the past and in many contexts may say more about worship styles and forms of emotionally expressive, affective, and extroverted piety than about adherence to a doctrine of penal substitution or the inerrancy of Scripture. It is far from uncommon to hear the word 'evangelical' being used interchangeably with 'happy clappy' or applied as a descriptor for groups primarily on account of their dressed down, hip and youth-oriented, audio-visually enhanced, low church, and modern styles of worship.

All of the above is designed to make the point that we should not expect the word 'evangelical' to do the job of guarding orthodoxy for us. It is a descriptive term, whose meaning has evolved and continues to evolve over time. It is rooted in historical narratives and cultural contexts and cannot be raised to the level of a timeless identity. Evangelicalism in the US

and the UK are different things, diverse movements, with considerable variation within them both. Within my next chapter, I will explore this character of evangelical identity in more depth. I will engage with Adrian Warnock and Jake Belder's posts. I will question the usefulness of the term for most of the purposes for which people like to employ it and suggest some ways forward.

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EVANGELICALISM: DEFINITIONS AND IDENTIFICATIONS

In the last chapter I discussed the definitions of evangelical/evangelicalism provided by Rachel Held Evans and Denny Burk. Within this chapter, I hope to engage with a few further explorations of the question, before providing some of my own thoughts on the use and meaning of the term.

Adrian Warnock's posts

Adrian Warnock gave his thoughts on the subject in two posts: the first addresses the question of the definition of 'Christian', while the second defines the term 'evangelical'.

Adrian helpfully begins by distinguishing the definition of the term 'Christian' from that of the term 'evangelical'. Much of the temperature surrounding debates over evangelical identity arises from the degree to which questions of the evangelical credentials of particular individuals or organizations have become conflated with questions over the genuineness of claims to Christian faith and identity. I think that this is an important—albeit not the only—

reason why many people whose evangelical identity is suspect will so strongly insist on their right to use the term of themselves.

My suspicion is that this results in part from the way that the immediacy of much evangelical identity—about which more later—undermines the mental distinction between root elements of Christian identity and their evangelical conjugations. For many evangelicals, the seemingly unmediated character of evangelical experience, engagement with Scripture, and reception of the gospel can lead to a lack of awareness of the hermeneutical interval and the variously mediated nature of our interpretations. Consequently, to be 'Bible-believing' is to adhere to a traditional evangelical reading of the Bible, to be 'born-again' is to have a form of religious experience that conforms to the culturally-instilled and shaped subjectivity and description of evangelical experience, and to confess the 'gospel' is to uphold the gospel in the form that evangelicals do, employing the same conceptual categories, theological constructs, and terminology.

This failure to grapple with cultural and interpretative mediation can lead to a dearth of theological modesty, as our theological formulations, cultural practices, and forms of experience are confused with and invested with all of the weight of the realities that they mediate or represent. Such an admission of representation and mediation and the non-identity of our gospel formulations with the gospel itself is not to court a radical scepticism (I believe in the doctrine of the perspicuity of

Scripture), nor to invite the anaemic and non-committal relativism that may appeal to many today, or [the sort of questioning that renders our doubts the measure of God's truth](#), but rather to challenge us always to hold ourselves and our thinking in question relative to God's truth as revealed in Christ.

Our formulations are signposts that point to Christ, are often imperfect, and do not exclude the possibility that other formulations might also faithfully point to him. To switch analogies, the light of Christian truth can be refracted in many different ways within differing cultural milieux, historical and social contexts, and ideological frameworks. The differences between these refractions are never *entirely* reducible to differences between truth and error. For this and other reasons, we should be careful not to confuse departure from traditional evangelical doctrinal formulations with apostasy from the faith.

In [his second post](#), which treats the question of what an 'evangelical' actually is, Adrian begins by claiming that evangelicalism is 'more about attitudes than doctrinal statements.' He proceeds to argue that evangelicalism is neither primarily a political nor a social movement, maintaining that it cannot be a mere social movement because 'all such social movements have roots that go beyond "we like being together".' He believes that the identity of evangelicalism is expressed in the values of Bebbington's quadrilateral (biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism) fused with the 'solas' of the

Reformation (*sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus christus, soli deo gloria*).

While evangelicalism is definitely not a 'social' movement in the simplistic form that Adrian rightly dismisses, I will be maintaining that it should be approached primarily as a sociological and historical phenomenon, rather than as a movement that finds its core identity in a set of fairly clearly defined and consciously held religious and theological beliefs and articulated values. In my previous chapter, I challenged the prescriptivism inherent in employing Bebbington's quadrilateral as a timeless definition of evangelicalism, rather than as a historical description, subject to revision and development as the object of that description evolves.

In his definition of evangelicalism, Adrian seeks to recognize the diversity within the movement (on issues such as creationism, cessationism, gender roles, and paedobaptism), while expressing those beliefs that all share in common. At the heart of Adrian's definition, however, and perhaps the one point on which he gives the least latitude, is the evangelical commitment to an inerrant Bible as the 'sole source of authority in the believer's life' (while I doubt that Adrian holds to the more extreme of the implications of this unguarded, problematic, and infelicitous formulation, it does serve as an illustration of one area where evangelical practice can so often follow its unhelpful expressions), to be interpreted literally where at all possible. The significance of the doctrine of inerrancy for the evangelical sense of identity can be illustrated in the

fact that the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) for many years had inerrancy as its sole doctrinal basis.

Yet it is by no means clear to me that belief in inerrancy is quite as straightforward a defining principle of evangelicalism as Adrian suggests. Once again, it seems to fall on the side of prescriptivism in the definition of evangelicalism, potentially ignoring the fact that, despite its widespread support in evangelical circles, many institutions and churches that would be regarded as evangelical on almost every other count are either ambivalent towards, divided upon, or opposed to this doctrine.

The attempt to locate evangelicalism's ideological unity in a set of consciously held doctrinal distinctives seems to be mistaken to me. Rather, the movement's ideological unity is more one of a common religious '*épisteme*'—a shared context and set of semi-conscious preconceptions that constitute, shape, and render certain discourses and practices possible—than of a common 'paradigm' or single worldview. Such an *épisteme* can name the quintessence that binds together opposing theological stances, the common themes that they are all improvising upon. The important shared ideological features of evangelicalism probably have less to do with the particular beliefs that are held (although there are family resemblances in this area) than with *the ways beliefs are held*, the *ways that beliefs are formed*, and the *sorts of beliefs and discourses that are possible*.

This is not to restrict the movement to an ideological identity. Ideology is only one dimension of

evangelicalism's broader sociological character, a dimension whose significance is frequently overstated. Also, importantly, evangelicalism is a historical and evolving entity, and even if we are to speak of its possession of an *épisteme*, we are best not thinking of it as stable or unchanging (its persistence is the temporal persistence of a changing historical entity, rather than of some unchanging ideological core).

My concern with Adrian's approach, as with Denny Burk's, is that a rather tendentious and prescriptive definition of the term 'evangelical' is conscripted to the task of guarding a particular orthodoxy for us. This is an extremely common tendency in 'conservative evangelical' circles: the term 'evangelical' is exalted above the level of mere descriptive terminology and becomes a crucial boundary marker, ruling some people in and others out. Unfortunately, this often seems to entail a questionable gerrymandering of the evangelical constituency in a manner calculated to exclude certain beliefs that are troubling or strange to us.

Jake Belder's post

Jake Belder gets at some of this in his post on the matter. He brings forward the statement of faith of Universities and College Christian Fellowship (UCCF) as an example of an evangelical attempt at theological self-definition.

1. There is one God in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
2. God is sovereign in creation, revelation, redemption and final judgement.
3. The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.
4. Since the fall, the whole of humankind is sinful and guilty, so that everyone is subject to God's wrath and condemnation.
5. The Lord Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, is fully God; he was born of a virgin; his humanity is real and sinless; he died on the cross, was raised bodily from death and is now reigning over heaven and earth.
6. Sinful human beings are redeemed from the guilt, penalty and power of sin only through the sacrificial death once and for all time of their representative and substitute, Jesus Christ, the only mediator between them and God.
7. Those who believe in Christ are pardoned all their sins and accepted in God's sight only because of the righteousness of Christ credited to them; this justification is God's act of undeserved mercy, received solely by trust in him and not by their own efforts.
8. The Holy Spirit alone makes the work of Christ effective to individual sinners, enabling them to turn to God from their sin and to trust in Jesus Christ.

9. The Holy Spirit lives in all those he has regenerated. He makes them increasingly Christlike in character and behaviour and gives them power for their witness in the world.
10. The one holy universal church is the Body of Christ, to which all true believers belong.
11. The Lord Jesus Christ will return in person, to judge everyone, to execute God's just condemnation on those who have not repented and to receive the redeemed to eternal glory.

The problem, as Jake observes, is that such a statement is one to which many who would be regarded as non-evangelicals could subscribe. The real boundaries of evangelicalism tend to be placed elsewhere. *Functionally*, the boundaries of evangelicalism are much narrower than the theological boundaries commonly articulated. Jake gives the example of the ordination of women as one issue that is often treated as functionally excluding a group from evangelical identity among certain conservative evangelicals (the treatment of complementarianism as a shibboleth in some evangelical circles is commented on by Carl Trueman [here](#)).

It seems to me that this functional narrowing of the boundaries of evangelicalism occurs, as [Steve Holmes suggests](#), because certain forms of practice are mutually exclusive. While two forms of belief in the area of eschatology or the age of the earth, for

instance, can generally find ways to co-exist in the same context, it is difficult to achieve the same détente in the case of the ordination of women or the practice of paedobaptism. This is one of the reasons why 'worship wars' will often prove far more powerfully divisive on the ground even than disputes over such things as the doctrine of hell or the theory of evolution.

Consequently, practices that are theologically objectionable to a sufficiently large number within evangelicalism will need to be excluded in many shared contexts, making such things as male-only ordained ministry, credobaptism, and non-charismatic worship the default in many situations and creating fractures with those who advocate other forms of practice on principle.

Evangelicalism: Definitions and Identifications

The functional narrowing of the definition of evangelicalism does not merely occur at such levels of practice. I want to argue that the distinct character of evangelicalism arises in great measure from a particular set of cultural sensibilities that are expressed in greater or lesser measure throughout the movement. These statements are especially true of evangelicalism in its American form, but also true to a lesser extent of its British varieties.

In my previous chapter, I made the point that, although Rachel Held Evans's *definition* of the term 'evangelical' was an exceptionally weak and insufficient one, she succeeded in *identifying* herself

as an evangelical by it. This is because, although many of her beliefs may lie some distance to the left of the evangelical mainstream in the US, her religious sensibilities are quite clearly evangelical ones. The crucial information that leads to a positive identification is given less in the *content* than in the *form* of her definition. It is revealed in the language that she uses, in the things that she implicitly emphasizes, in the things left unsaid, in the symbols to which she appeals, etc. The same can be said of most attempts at evangelical self-definition: while their expressions frequently provide enough information to yield successful identifications of evangelicals, they seldom are as successful as definitions.

For instance, in UCCF's statement above, many of the most important distinctives lie less in the content of its affirmations than in its choice of things to affirm, the central points to which it gives attention, and the way in which those things are affirmed. The place given to the Bible is significant, as is the omission of references to the institutional Church, ordained ministry, the regular assembly of the saints, or the sacraments. The centrality of the individual Christian in its account is also important.

Now, the natural objection to this observation might be that UCCF is a parachurch organization and the excluded emphases are excluded because they refer to things that are incidental to UCCF's mission. However, are not the omitted elements also essential to *Christian* identity? Can we really remove the institutional Church and the concrete body of

assembling Christians in the local congregation from the picture of Christianity and leave the remaining elements intact? While UCCF might not be the agency that provides for these crucial dimensions of Christian existence, is not the recognition of such dimensions crucial for a true appreciation of what it means to say that UCCF is a *parachurch* organization?

This, I believe, serves to highlight something that is very important to understanding evangelical identity. Evangelical identity is a form of Christian identity for which the concrete and institutional church is of either incidental or secondary importance. It is an identity chiefly forged in the spaces outside of and between churches. While evangelicals can frequently be extremely active within and committed to ecclesial institutions, local congregations, the celebration of the sacraments, and their ordained leaders, none of these things is an integral element within evangelical identity, but are rather utilitarian or functional sites or means for the expression, preservation, and propagation of evangelical identity. The heart of evangelical identity is located in the individual's encounter with and faithful response to the gospel and the truth of God in the biblical text.

For this reason, the more that one emphasizes the integral importance of the Church, its ordained leadership, its entrusting with, guarding, and declaration of the apostolic witness, membered ministries, liturgical assembly, and its sacramental practices within Christian identity, the more one's evangelical identity will become suspect. Evangelicals

can like liturgy, the sacraments, and value the ministry of the Church, but evangelical identity requires that one be able to distinguish and detach one's Christian identity from such things. Evangelical identity finds its most natural environment in extra- or para-ecclesial contexts.

Evangelicalism offers us a generic trans-denominational Protestant identity, beyond the particularities of confessional traditions, distinct from communities of liturgical and sacramental practice, and transcending the bounds of ecclesial institutions. This identity is then declared to be our core Christian identity. The important matter is not so much what is included in the identity as what is *excluded* from it and thereby marginalized, and also what is rendered central in the form of its presentation (typically the individual and subjective encounter with God and his truth in the gospel and Scriptures).

3

SCEPTICISM ABOUT EVANGELICAL IDENTITY

In the last chapter, I suggested that evangelicalism is a particular form of Protestantism marked by the marginalization of the institutional church. Within this and the chapter that follows, I will be arguing for an understanding of evangelicalism that focuses less upon the adherence to particular doctrines and pays more attention to certain religious sensibilities that shape the manner in which doctrines are held.

While evangelicalism is commonly defined in a prescriptive manner, I have argued that our definition ought to be more descriptive, more historical, and more open to the incredible variety that exists under the banner of the term. Rather than a definition designed to bolster a particular understanding of Protestant orthodoxy—a definition used to press people into becoming what evangelicals supposedly 'should be' and operating on the premise that evangelicalism is Christianity in its purest and most ideal form—I will argue for a definition of evangelicalism that may perhaps be rather less flattering to the movement.

Following Darryl Hart, I will maintain that in the middle of the 20th century, the definition of the term

'evangelical' shifted from referring to the magisterial Protestant tradition (in all of its forms, both liberal and conservative), to referring to a very specific sort of expression of Protestant identity, an identity that expressed impulses that were already operative within Protestantism, especially in the contexts of the 'Evangelical Revival' and Great Awakenings, an identity forged through the coalition-forming work of neo-evangelicals. Evangelicalism, against self-styled 'conservative evangelicals', is not the great expression and bastion of conservative Protestantism, but represents a clear and unhealthy departure from it in a very particular direction (liberalism departed in different directions).

In addressing the question 'what is an evangelical?' most people focus on marking out evangelicalism's identity over against liberalism and perhaps such things as sacramentalism as expressed in Roman or Anglo-Catholicism. My case proceeds on the assumption that, while such distinctions exist and are important, the distinction between evangelicalism and confessional and ecclesial conservative Protestant identities proves far more illuminating for our quest to determine its true character. In the light of these distinctives, the rise of progressive evangelicalism will be seen, not as an aberration, but to be entirely in keeping with the true character of the evangelical movement.

While conservative evangelicals will often treat their conservative Protestant credentials as a given, I want to call these into question. Not all conservative Protestants are 'evangelicals' in the modern sense of

the word and evangelicals should not just be presumed to be conservative Protestants. Evangelicalism is not merely a name for a conservative Protestant consensus but refers to a very specific way of—or perhaps a particular form of departure from—being Protestant. In those things that distinguish evangelicalism from forms of non-evangelical conservative Protestantism, it is not a conservative but a *radical* movement, despite the fact that a significant number of evangelicals seek to draw heavily upon the riches of confessional Protestantism.

By defining evangelicalism chiefly over against the forms of conservative Protestantism that generally preceded it, conservative Protestant doctrines will not be able to play such a role in the articulation of evangelicalism's identity. Rather, whatever evangelicalism is, it is to be understood as something that qualifies or acts upon a fundamental Protestant identity.

In what follows, I will present evangelicalism as a degenerative movement within Protestantism. In the ways that evangelicalism qualifies Protestant identity it generally represents a downgrade development from non-evangelical conservative Protestantism. Once it is understood that I am *not* defining evangelicalism as something *inclusive* of conservative Protestant conviction, but as a particular *qualification* and *development out of* a preceding Protestant identity, it should be clear that, although my characterization of evangelicalism is very harsh at points, I definitely do not mean to reject all that evangelicals stand for. To the extent that modern

evangelicals are simply upholding conservative Protestantism—something that is *not* necessarily bound up with evangelicalism—they are to be praised and I happily stand with them. However, to the extent that evangelicals are marked by the particular developments of Protestant identity, religious sensibilities, and impulses that evangelicalism names, they are mostly to be criticized.

I do not mean to diminish the great good that evangelicals have achieved. I will readily grant that there have been contexts where, despite their internal problems, the characteristic sensibilities of evangelicals have served to provide crucial and valuable resistance to errors that have driven in opposite directions. As a voice within certain traditions at various key junctures, evangelicals have often pulled conversations in a more healthy and biblical direction. However, as evangelicals have increasingly detached themselves from much of the discipline of those traditions and conversations, discipline that held the more extreme development of their impulses in clear check, and their sensibilities have gradually been exalted to the level of governing principles, rather than just placing a particular accent upon a set of doctrinal convictions, these sensibilities have started to exert a profoundly corrosive effect upon doctrine. Perhaps this names the point where a sort of 'proto-evangelical' impulse that was always present in classic conservative Protestantism began to become evangelical*ism*.

Evangelicalism's Religious Sensibilities

I believe that evangelicalism is loosely characterized by a set of religious and ideological sensibilities. These sensibilities are largely constitutive of evangelicalism's *épisteme* and give shape to its various cultural forms.

Resistance to Mediation

At the heart of evangelicalism's *épisteme*—its set of unwitting assumptions or ideological subconscious—is a resistance to or suspicion of mediation. All sacramental, institutional, hierarchical, hermeneutical, historical, cultural, and sociological forms of mediation are treated with a degree of suspicion. In place of such things, evangelicalism tends to celebrate the individual's immediate encounter with divine truth, tending to regard mediating structures as interposing themselves between us and divine reality, rather than being means whereby that reality is brought near to us. Christian truth is timeless, detached from any institution or culturally embedded form of life or tradition, and necessitates no submission to any form of hierarchy or mediated authority.

The Autonomous Religious Subject

A second and related feature of evangelicalism's *épisteme* is an anthropology that operates in terms of the primacy of the detached individual. The religious subject is ultimately self-defining, identified by its

voluntaristic choice. Evangelicalism tends to give great weight to the individual conscience and little weight to the need for the conscience to be subject to the discipline of institutions, a faithful community, and a tradition beyond it. Individual religious interiority is granted priority over all else.

This is one of several reasons why the practice of paedobaptism often does not sit that comfortably within evangelicalism. Paedobaptism suggests that one has an identity that is given to you from outside, by virtue of bonds that precede any choice on your part. Within evangelicalism paedobaptism will tend either to take a weak and apologetic posture or will be denied altogether.

The importance of the autonomous and self-defining religious subject within evangelicalism tends to result in an understanding of Christian faith drawn around that individual religious subject. Instead of a picture which decisively decentres the self through an emphasis on being united to Christ, within whom and through participation in the life of his body we definitively and progressively receive a new identity and self from outside of ourselves, the autonomous religious subject serves the fixed point to which all other theological elements are relative.

This autonomous religious subject will be defined by what is immediate to it and will bear the weight of its own identity. Hence, a highly expressive personal piety and immediacy of religious experience and display becomes increasingly important. While an expressive piety and rich religious experience are certainly not bad things, when our identity as

Christians becomes dependent upon them, rather than upon an identity granted to us from outside of ourselves in Christ, through the mediation of the Church, its life, ministries, the sacraments, and the declared promises of God, real dangers will be courted.

Democracy and Egalitarianism

As Nathan Hatch and others have argued, American Christianity—of which evangelicalism is the archetypical expression—is marked by a profound anti-elitist and anti-hierarchical impulse. The authority of the individual religious subject as an interpreter of Scripture and the divine will is pressed against all agencies that might challenge its claims. Movements that validate, advance, and encourage this impulse are widely popular (even though their own internal structures may often be quite undemocratic).

In this democratic context, the clergy, who represent the formal authority of the institution, the ecclesial community, of tradition, of learning, interpretative skill, and of ordained office are challenged and the distinction between the clergy and the laity is opposed. The movements that result from this impulse stress the removal of all social distinctions and differentiations (which are merely arbitrary cultural functions performed upon the unit of the autonomous religious subject, the only entity possessing genuine theological grounding), emphasize the inalienable rights of the individual and

autonomous interpreter of Scripture, and locate authority in the religious experience of the common person. Divinely established structures of mediated authority become problematic, or are dismissed altogether. Once again, the unmediated is treated as primary.

Through this democratic drive, social distinctions of class, sex, office, race, and learning are steadily broken down and a sort of egalitarianism of undifferentiation results. When the autonomous religious subject, rather than entities such as the differentiated body of the Church, becomes the primary unit of theological analysis, various forms of egalitarianism (egalitarianism in the broader sense of the term, not just as opposed to complementarianism, although my points here are of relevance to that discussion) are a natural development. The Church comes to be seen as the aggregation of the units of religious subjects, rather than as an entity with its own distinct identity and integrity in Christ, theologically prior to the identity of its members.

As democratic and egalitarian values prevail, the rationale of various teachings, such as those relating to distinctions between men and women in the Church, or the authority of Church offices, come to be regard as eccentric and arbitrary, imposed by some sort of divine fiat, or mere cultural accretions, opposed to the driving logic of the gospel and now to be dispensed with.

Populist Anti-culture

The characteristic instincts of evangelicalism tend to be those of a populist Protestant anti-culture. Populist 'anti-culture' is 'a system that rejects the task of restraint and normative character formation in favor of liberation and self-expression.' Evangelical sensibilities are typically contrary to the key constitutive elements of culture and can be understood as 'anti-cultural' in their tendencies.

Evangelical sensibilities are resistant to 'priesthoods' and *hierarchy*, to authority structures that establish guardians of cultural norms, which place restraints upon and give direction to those subject to them. Evangelical sensibilities are resistant to societal *differentiation*, which challenges the primacy of the autonomous religious subject as the unit of analysis. Evangelical sensibilities are resistant to *institution*, which defends ends and cultural meaning transcending those of autonomous individuals. Evangelical sensibilities are resistant to *elites*, which represent demanding standards of excellence by which the value of cultures should be measured, and the exclusion of those who lack such standards from networks of influence. Evangelical sensibilities are resistant to *tradition*, which relativizes prevailing populist prejudices and the authority of private judgment. Finally, evangelical sensibilities are resistant to *pedagogy*, which charges populist culture with infantilism and immaturity, seeks to train and conform it to higher standards, and privileges elders over youth (like more institutional

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forms of Christianity which emphasize the passing on of the faith through baptism, catechesis, tradition, and liturgy). Evangelical 'contextualization' and 'relevance' typically lead to capitulation to the forms of the low, popular culture of capitalist consumption, rather than schooling the surrounding culture into mature Christian forms.

The religious sensibilities mentioned above are definitely not present in equal measure in every form of evangelicalism. Many evangelicals are appalled by the extent to which certain of these impulses have been followed in particular quarters. However, I believe that these are the key sensibilities that are most formative of the distinct character of evangelicalism from other forms of Christianity and Protestantism. The evangelical 'anti-cultural' characteristics mentioned above are now widely held, even by many Roman Catholics. However, it is within the culture of evangelicalism that these values find their natural home and expressions.

If we were to revisit Bebbington's quadrilateral, we might reframe and hone his categories somewhat, in terms of my suggestions above. Instead of *Biblicism*, we could speak of the centrality of the authority of the individual interpreter of Scripture. Many other Christian traditions give great significance to Scripture. However, it is within evangelicalism that the Bible is most extricated from traditional, ecclesial, and confessional structures and

the authority of the individual reader is most decisively valorized.

Instead of *crucicentrism*, we could speak of the centrality of the individual and autonomous religious subject in soteriology. The cross is extremely important in other Western traditions of theology and piety. We might think of Luther's theology of the cross or Catholic cross-focused forms of piety. What is particularly characteristic of and unique to evangelicalism is an account of salvation in which the autonomous individual is the focus and the Church and sacraments become reduced to a merely functional status.

Instead of *conversionism*, we could speak of the primacy of individual religious experience and expressive, affective, sincere, and lively piety as the chief marker of genuine Christianity. Other traditions can value a lively piety and subjective religious experience. However, it is within evangelicalism that such things start to bear the great weight of Christian identity, displacing an identity derived from the gift of Christ in the covenant or the sacraments.

Instead of *activism*, we could speak of anti-elitist pragmatic populism. Evangelicalism exhibits and vigorously perpetuates a mass pop culture, a culture hostile to elite, non-democratic, and traditional values, standards, and norms, save to the extent that these can be repackaged for individual choice-driven consumption. It manifests a fondness for democracy's means of ideological propagation, for political lobbying and forms of sales, marketing, and corporate

strategies borrowed from the business world. Evangelicalism is the 'church' of capitalism.

Incipient forms or lesser strains of these impulses were always present to some degree in the context of historic Protestantism. What evangelicalism represents is the elevation of these impulses to driving principles and the steady removal of the counterbalancing influences, practices, and doctrines that formerly limited their unhindered expression.

A Little History

My account of evangelicalism's religious sensibilities above is a fairly pejorative one. Consequently, I think that it is important to make clear exactly what I am and am not referring to and the extent and manner to which I would associate self-identifying evangelicals—many of whom may be appalled to be characterized by such sensibilities—with my description. Some historical background will be clarifying on this front.

Darryl Hart, in his work *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Joel Garver has a helpful review of it [here](#)), observes the evolution of the term 'evangelical'. At one point, Hart argues, the term 'evangelical' merely referred to those churches that derived from the magisterial Reformation. It served to distinguish Protestants from Catholics, but was a term that included liberals and conservatives and churches across the spectrum of liturgical practice. The identity that it denoted was simply mainline

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Protestantism, an ecclesial tradition, rather than a set of conservative theological beliefs.

The meaning of the term 'evangelical' shifted following the fundamentalist controversy as it was commandeered by opponents of liberalism, who wished to 'reform conservative Protestantism and smooth its rougher edges.' This neo-evangelicalism formed a plethora of organizations and institutions to provide for unity among conservative, non-liberal Protestants, agencies and causes that claimed the term 'evangelical' for their self-description. This new conservative Protestant alliance constructed a new religious identity, an identity for which a constituency had to be assembled. This evangelical movement 'replaced the church with the parachurch and it developed forms to match.' It was an exercise in 'coalition-building' that was fundamentally liberal in its premises: it pared down Christian teaching to some supposed 'kernel', while removing the churchly husk of creed and confession, theological tradition, liturgy, sacraments, church polity, ordination, and discipline.

This constructed identity, Hart argues, is attenuated and fissiparous, lacking the definition characteristic of ecclesial traditions. However, it soon became popular among historians and social scientists. Between 1965 and 1985, 'the study of Protestantism switched from the history of the church to the history of the more generic entity, religion.' This went along with a 'secularization' of Protestant history, as the hegemony of Protestantism was rejected and the institutional church was

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marginalized in favour of the informal, the popular, diversity, and outsiders. As Joel summarizes: 'It also came along with a shift in the study of history away from official structures, formal organs, and publications over to a social history that celebrated ordinary life—a perfect fit with the individualistic, egalitarian, and pragmatic character of evangelical piety.' The efforts of neo-evangelicals to forge a new conservative Protestant coalition and identity beyond the bounds of the institutional church and its traditions and read that identity back into the past aligned quite neatly with the historiographical prejudices of the social history of 'religious historians'.

The deinstitutionalized conservative Protestant identity of evangelicalism also proved attractive to social scientists, who constructed the identity that evangelicalism lacked through opinion polling, and invested it with political significance. The weight given to simplistic 'sound-bite' polls of public opinion may be a rather blunt instrument for measuring Christianity, but it is conducive to the sensibilities and resultant character of evangelicalism, which are those of democratic religious consumerism. Also, given the 'what this net doesn't catch isn't fish' risks of much social science, is it any surprise that disciplines frequently wedded to democratic, egalitarian, and individualistic assumptions and methodologies should 'discover' a religious identity that shared those values?

Hart expresses his thesis thus:

The one response that few have considered is perhaps the most radical and the point of this book: Instead of trying to fix evangelicalism, born-again Protestants would be better off if they abandoned the category altogether. The reason is not that evangelicalism is wrong in its theology, ineffective in reaching the lost, or undiscerning in its reflections on society and culture. It may be, but these matters are beside the point. Evangelicalism needs to be relinquished as a religious identity because it does not exist. In fact, it is the wax nose of twentieth-century American Protestantism. Behind this proboscis, which has been nipped and tucked by savvy religious leaders, academics, and pollsters, is a face void of any discernible features. The nonexistence of an evangelical identity may prove to be, to borrow a phrase from Noll, the real scandal of modern evangelicalism, for despite the vast amounts of energy and resources expended on the topic, and notwithstanding the ever growing literature on the movement, evangelicalism is little more than a construction. This book is a work of deconstruction.

Hart argues that evangelicalism is not a tradition in the MacIntyrean sense of an argument 'extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined.' Although modern evangelicals may look to the evangelical revivals and Great Awakenings for inspiration, they

are not clearly commitments to the development of a *tradition*.

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SO WHAT IS EVANGELICALISM?

Evaluating Hart's Thesis

I find Hart's iconoclastic thesis broadly persuasive. However, I want to challenge it at a few points. First, while evangelicalism cannot easily be defined in positive terms as a 'tradition' and lacks clear doctrinal or institutional contours, primarily serving as a name for 'an unstable constellation of personalities and organizations', does it thereby cease to have meaningful identity altogether? It may be frustratingly amorphous, variegated, fractious, unstable, and changeable, but I think that there are still means by which we can define such a movement. It may not be a tradition, an ideological unity, or a clearly defined constituency, but that does not mean that it is *nothing*.

It could be defined in terms of a common history. Hart has already given us something to work with on this front: evangelicalism refers to the loose assemblage of transdenominational Protestant identities that have arisen out of the coalition-forming work of the neo-evangelicals from the middle

of the 20th century onwards. As a historical entity it is unstable and evolving, but real nonetheless.

It can also be defined in terms of its family resemblances. This has the advantage of not requiring us to reduce evangelicalism to some core doctrinal lowest common denominator identity. There are various species within the evangelical genus and, seeing all of the various species together, the common membership of all within the genus becomes more apparent, despite the lack of resemblance between certain particular pairs of species. Evangelicalism is marked by a certain set of shared characteristic traits, sometimes displayed, sometimes not. These family resemblances could include such things as styles of worship, particular doctrines, theological controversies, forms of community, varieties of piety, devotional mannerisms, idioms, or jargon (such as 'Christianese'), affiliation with certain organizations or causes, etc. The presence of several of these traits alongside each other is a good indication that a person or group is evangelical.

It can be defined by identifying the concrete manifestations, expressions, and organs of evangelicalism. This involves studying the cluster of networks and shifting coalitions that constitute the movement. The parachurch organizations and agencies that express and advance evangelical identity should be mentioned here. The countless magazines, publishers, media companies, music companies, ministries, lobby groups, artists, writers, pastors, speakers, and personalities that serve as

means for evangelical affiliation, organs or agencies of evangelical expression, objects of evangelical appreciation, and foci of evangelical identity are all important here too. While evangelicalism does not represent a tradition and typically has values characteristic of an anti-culture, it does name an agglomeration or concentration of shifting consumer tastes, clustered around and focused upon particular 'culture' producers and propagators and the products and forms that they champion. It also names a set of alignments and coalitions, conversations and controversies (for instance, the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate is typically distinctively evangelical in character, involving a fundamental deracination of positions once constituted by a particular Reformed theological, ecclesiastical, and confessional tradition and a particular historical context).

I have also suggested that evangelicalism can be defined through its shared *épisteme* and religious sensibilities, features that can permit significant diversity and divergences in theology, worship, and form of practice. In this case, the true identity of evangelicalism is situated in its ideological subconscious and in its set of values, the assumptions of which can be expressed in conservative or radical forms. While other Christian religious traditions may occasionally exhibit the same sensibilities within them, within evangelicalism these sensibilities have become programmatic dimensions of the movement.

The attempt to define evangelicalism in terms of institution, tradition, or a core theology fails, for

reasons that Hart and others have outlined. More importantly, the attempt to secure a conservative Protestant identity through evangelicalism fails as, at its very heart, evangelicalism harbours a radical and liberal impulse, marginalizing the Church and maintaining a form of liberal anthropology. Its tendencies are unconducive and actually contrary to the perpetuation of any tradition. Its democratic, egalitarian, and anti-elitist sensibilities and its hostility to mediation all make it a weak reed for conservative Protestantism to lean upon. The weakness of evangelicalism's identity has resulted in its secularization, as it has been assimilated and readily assimilates itself to prevailing forms of selfhood, community, nationalism, consumerism, politics, and marketing.

Second, within the context of Western Christianity, traditional ecclesial forms of identity have considerably less cultural traction. People neither think nor operate in terms of them much any longer. For instance, the recent American election illustrated the enervation of Catholicism's institutional influence, as the political guidance of bishops seemed to have little or no effect on the behaviour of the Catholic electorate. In the contemporary cultural milieu, people articulate their identities in different manners and even the old institutional markers of identity (such as marriage and church membership) are being accommodated to the habits and attitudes of democratized and voluntaristic lifestyle consumerism.

As Hart rightly recognizes, evangelicalism may represent a liberal departure from historical confessional Protestantism and may name no more than the most attenuated and fickle of identities. Nevertheless, the vague constructed category of 'evangelicalism' is more congruent to and revelatory of the reality of religious practice on the ground than the undemocratic categories of institutional forms of history and social science would be. When institutional identities increasingly cease to be determinative of the shape of Christian practice I believe that it is appropriate for historians and social scientists to search for new categories, more appropriate to the identities that have become determinative. For all of its faults, I think that 'evangelicalism' is a category with some merit on this front.

Third, although evangelicalism may not meet the MacIntyrean criteria for a tradition, being anti-tradition in its character in such a way that to seek to recover and advance a tradition would lead it to cease being evangelical, I would argue that it has a heritage and a history nonetheless. It finds its heritage in the movements of spiritual democratization, populism, and anti-institutionalism in the Evangelical Revival and the Great Awakenings, movements that fostered more egalitarian forms of Protestantism, resistant to mediation, which elevated the autonomous religious subject. Evangelicalism also finds a great measure of its patrimony in those denominational traditions that have historically been more democratic, spiritually

egalitarian, and populist in their form and teaching, such as the Baptists and the Methodists.

Such trends in the development of evangelical identity, though typically involving a historical amnesia uncharacteristic of a genuine tradition, manifest a steady progression, development, and some degree of a discernible pattern of succession and spread. Taking this into account, I believe that we are justified in speaking of evangelicalism as something real and not just an illusory identity. However, as its defining features are not located in theological content so much as in a democratizing and deinstitutionalizing function performed upon Protestant theological traditions and in the religious sensibilities that are integral to this function, evangelicalism will be recognized in those contexts where this function has become determinative of identity and its religious sensibilities are prominently expressed.

Finally, as should be clear, evangelicalism is far from a unitary or homogeneous phenomenon. Hart's account and my statements apply to an American context to a far greater extent than they do to a British one, where the challenge to institution and the process of democratization is far less advanced in many quarters, especially those of conservative evangelicalism. Nevertheless, I believe that the distinctive character of evangelicalism in the UK still resides in its creation and encouragement of more democratic, egalitarian, voluntaristic, and populist forms of Protestantism, and in its resistance to institution and mediation.

Evangelical Identity: Putting the Pieces Together

So how are we then to define evangelical identity? I believe that a definition of evangelical identity must identify the *historical* roots of the movement—the movements of democratization and deinstitutionalization within Protestantism. It must identify the *religious sensibilities* and *épisteme* that form the distinctive driving force of the movement—democracy, egalitarianism, anti-institutionalism, immediacy, religious autonomy and individualism, and individual interpretative authority. It must identify the *family resemblances* of the movement that have arisen as the governing principles of evangelicalism have acted upon the Protestant tradition. These family resemblances are numerous, including everything from forms of church structure and styles of worship to pious idioms and political allegiances. It must identify the *concrete manifestations and organs* of the movement: its 'cultural' products, its affiliations, its conversations and controversies, agencies, organizations, etc.

Combining all of these elements together, a clearer picture of evangelicalism begins to emerge. Such a picture enables us to account for the inclusion of the sharply differing forms of theology represented by such as Rachel Held Evans, Denny Burk, and Adrian Warnock within a single identity. Despite their many differences, to some extent or other, all of these characters are bound together through their presence in a particular 'cultural' milieu, their activity

in a context constituted by a shared history, their participation in certain conversations and controversies (even if not on the same sides), their adoption of similar forms of practice, their possession of related religious sensibilities and ideologically subconscious values, their membership of interrelated affiliations and organizations, their consumption of similar cultural products and forms, their manifestation of family resemblances in forms of piety, practice, language, and worship. Obviously, deep differences remain, but there are marked, salient, and illuminating similarities and relationships, similarities and relationships that I believe provide sufficient justification for the adoption of a term—'evangelicalism'—that distinguishes them for the purpose of analysis.

What About Conservative Evangelicalism?

I have argued that evangelicalism names an anti-culture—or rather, a realm where anti-cultural tendencies are active. I have spoken of the democratizing and deinstitutionalizing impulses of evangelicalism. Those identifying as conservative evangelicals will naturally object to this representation, arguing that their movements are characterized by resistance to many of the forces that I have claimed are integral to evangelicalism. Answering these objections will help to clarify my understanding of evangelicalism.

To the degree that 'evangelical' is being used to name something more specific than the magisterial

Protestant tradition, I believe that it names, less the doctrine that is held, than the manner in which it is held, the *épisteme* and religious sensibilities that shape the movement in which the particular doctrine is maintained. Evangelicalism is primarily about form, rather than about content. However, the form serves to shape the content.

Evangelicalism begins as a particular way of holding Protestant convictions. This particular way of holding Protestant convictions gradually reshapes those convictions over time. In evangelical hands, the Protestant commitment to the sole *final* authority of God's voice in the scriptures steadily leads to a resistance to all subordinate authorities and the elevation of the individual interpreter. In evangelical hands, the Protestant commitment to speaking directly and powerfully to the individual's personal relationship with God becomes a marginalization of the mediating structures of the Church and the sacraments. In evangelical hands, the Protestant celebration of a lively piety becomes a deep opposition to the formal and institutional practices of the Church and their role in constituting Christian identity and a subjectivization of Christian faith. In evangelical hands, the Protestant emphasis on the inclusion of the laity in Christian vocation and the priesthood of all of the baptized becomes a rejection or flattening out of the distinction between the clergy and the laity and the propagation of a democratized and egalitarian populist anti-culture.

At this point, it is important to observe that weaker strains of a number of those tendencies were

present in the earliest forms of Protestantism. There is no prelapsarian Protestant golden age to return to here. Protestantism has always had some degree of difficulty with the concept of mediation, with the place of tradition and checks on the individual interpreter, with the importance of the institutional dimensions of the Church, and with the objective foundations of Christian identity. However, evangelicalism represents the challenge of these impulses in a far more virulent form.

This reshaping of Protestant convictions through the impact of the religious sensibilities of evangelicalism is less far advanced in some contexts than in others. Conservative evangelicals, while manifesting many signs of the effect of evangelical sensibilities upon Protestant doctrine, will often hold those sensibilities in check through a strong adherence to certain points of conservative Protestant doctrine, such as a high view of Scripture and its authority and support for objective principles governing its interpretation. Contexts where these commitments have caved more readily to the influence of evangelical religious sensibilities can look very different. However, the same forces are at work and the general movement is in the same direction.

Evangelicalism is like a coastline, where the haggard cliffs of the old Protestant orthodoxy stand against the rising sea of democratization, individualism, and deinstitutionalization. The waves lick at the base of doctrinal stacks, formerly connected to the theological mainland but now

separated from its robust rationale and support, eccentric holdouts against the insistence of the waves. Conservative evangelicalism names those stretches of coastline where the battered rockface still bears a dull semblance of the confessional and churchly Protestantism that once stood there. Other portions of the coast have proved less successful at withstanding the erosive assault of the breakers and the old orthodoxies have shattered and collapsed, leaving behind beaches that are more tractable to the dictates of the waves.

Where do we go from here?

The definition of evangelicalism is a matter of considerable importance to many people today. For some it serves as a means of identifying themselves with some movement larger than themselves. When you are not firmly situated within a clearly defined tradition of theological discourse, a member of a particular ecclesial entity with deep historical roots, bound to a confessional or creedal identity, under a particular authority, or subject to a robust institutional structure, the heavily diluted generic identity of evangelicalism may be the only identity to which you can appeal.

This identity also provides for mutual recognition. As you identify as evangelical, people will acknowledge your commitment to a lively personal faith and the symbolic importance of—if not the exact role being performed by—'the Bible' and 'the gospel' in your thinking. Where ecclesial and institutional

structures are weak and identities and theologies function in increasingly emotivistic or expressionistic ways (Rachel Held Evans's understanding of evangelical identity is a perfect example here), a shared will to identify with evangelicalism and its primary constitutive symbols can serve as a basis for recognition and alignment.

For others, in the absence of clearly defined traditions to which appeal can be made, the category of 'evangelicalism' is conscripted as a means to gerrymander order out of ecclesial and theological chaos in the context of democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian Protestantism. For such, evangelicalism serves much as a life raft assembled from pieces of confessional Protestantism adrift on the sea created by atomized societies, the collapse of institutions, the breaking down of the great traditions, and the rise of consumerist approaches to identity. It may be a ramshackle construction, but it provides some provisional means for securing and policing orthodox identity, maintaining a post-denominational conservative Protestant consensus, and providing some basis in common commitment in terms of which reasonable discourse can be pursued. To such, my argument is that this construction won't support the weight that is being placed upon it. The raft is not seaworthy and, on account of its anti-ecclesial and democratic form, will always be in danger of sinking. The historical development of evangelicalism's democratic and individualistic impulses has naturally given rise to the very

emotivism and subjectivism that renders reasonable discourse near impossible.

The category of evangelicalism, a lowest common denominator measure of Protestant orthodoxy, also serves as a means for interdenominational cooperation and ecumenism. Although I do not believe that the category of evangelicalism is best suited for this purpose, the role that it is designed to perform is an important one. I will return to the question of how we could operate without it shortly.

The identification of evangelicalism with Protestant orthodoxy has been problematic on several counts. Most particularly, it has blinded us to the radicalism and heterodoxy at evangelicalism's heart. The symptoms of evangelicalism's impulses have been disowned, but the disease has remained largely undiagnosed and untreated. My concern in this booklet has been to reject all prescriptive definitions of evangelicalism, which would identify it as Christianity in its purest and most ideal form, and to define the term descriptively, identifying it firmly with the messy, problematic, uneven, and fundamentally flawed empirical and historical reality. Once this movement has been made, we will be able to make a far more honest assessment of evangelicalism's true nature. Only when such an assessment has been made will we be able to address the problems integral to the movement. Conservative evangelical definitions of evangelicalism have typically been super-ego definitions: I want us to become reacquainted with evangelicalism's id.

If my account of evangelicalism's character and identity is correct, I believe that we need to turn our back decisively upon it. Its gradual homeopathizing of conservative Protestant identity in search of a transdenominational coalition and ecumenism stifles the development of Protestant traditions, merely hastening their disintegration. Its marginalization of the Church in favour of deinstitutionalized, democratized, individualistic, and egalitarian Christian identity has detached Christian identity from its biblical connection to the concrete forms of the Church as the body of Christ and has displaced the essential role of the Church in our reading of Scripture and submission to its authority, our spiritual formation, our enjoyment of salvation and the presence of Christ, our outliving of Christian existence, and our theological discourse.

Reasserting the importance of the Church, we will change our form of discourse. Rather than necessitating a retreat back into an ecclesial parochialism, this still enables us to seek to establish interdenominational bonds. No longer founding our identity and discourse on some weak quintessence of all evangelical identities, we will draw upon the depth of particular theological traditions. The ecumenism that this forms will be conversational in character, rather than being founded upon the theological lowest common denominator of an identity. An ecclesial tradition is a conversation; there are Reformed conversations, Lutheran conversations, Baptist conversations, Anglican conversations, etc. Rather than a Protestant ecumenism of a small set of

shared beliefs, I believe that we should rather pursue a conversation between conversations.

Evangelicalism tends to stifle serious self-examining internal conversation, as its focus on shared identity, rather than close relationship of different Protestant conversations in conversation, tends to place the focus of discourse upon policing the boundaries of the movement. Evangelicalism relocated identity into the spaces between churches, but by dissolving ecclesial identities, cannot easily function as a disciplined conversation and tradition, because the distinctness of the voices that constituted the tradition is consistently being undermined. The theological resources and voices that it draws upon are progressively deracinated and caricatured. Labels—which serve to protect many unhealthy theological variations from close scrutiny—start to matter much more than the substance that emerges through searching theological conversation.

I believe that we need to support a reassertion of ecclesial Protestant identity, giving priority once more to the particularity of Protestant theological traditions, ecclesial practice, form, and institution, rather than to generic identities. Rather than a flattened out shared Protestant identity, we should pursue differentiated relationships between different ecclesial communions and traditions, relationships in which all parties maintain a clear and self-defined identity. No longer losing ourselves in a generic soup of undifferentiated identity, these ecumenical relationships will be negotiated through the particularity of extensive discourse with different

particular parties, in which areas of cooperation and common cause can be hammered out. This will enable us to make the important distinctions that we need to make within the world of evangelicalism, recognizing that many who may genuinely be evangelicals are well beyond the pale of forms of orthodox Protestantism, or Christianity for that matter.

In this new form of discourse, the populism and anti-elitism of evangelicalism will be resisted. The role of ordained guardians of theological orthodoxy will be recognized and the voices of lay theologians will be given less weight. Those evangelical voices that detach themselves from tradition, institution, and concrete church communion altogether will not be given much of a part in the conversation. The elite skills of theological learning and expertise, the office of ordained clergy, institutional limits on practice, and the controls of particular traditions will all be held in higher esteem. The centre of gravity of Protestant identity will once more be located in the life, tradition, and institutional forms of the Church. Crucially, such a move will enable us to oppose the democratic and deinstitutionalizing error that lies at the heart of the movement once proclaimed to be our saviour.

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