Thought for the Day 30th October - John Reed

This week, I was asked to explain what the word "evangelical" means. Who, or what, is an evangelical? I'll let you decide for yourselves whether or not I have risen to the challenge …

The word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word εὐάγγελος (evangelos), which means "good news." In our Bibles, it is usually translated as "gospel." It is the word that appears in verses such as "Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" (Mark 1:14); "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15); and "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). So, an evangelist is someone who preaches the gospel, and an evangelical is someone who believes the gospel.

Now, although this sounds straightforward, things very quickly get complicated.

Even within the church, we sometimes disagree over who is an evangelical and who is not. You might say, "surely every Christian is an evangelical, since every Christian is by definition a follower of Jesus?" But that fails to take account of the fact that for some their "Christianity" is about tradition and culture rather than personal belief. So some will make a distinction at that point and define an evangelical as someone who has a personal faith and has had a "conversion" experience, making a personal commitment to following Jesus – what some call "born-again" Christians. However, some tie the word "evangelical" not simply to believing the gospel and following Jesus, but to a range of other beliefs and attitudes, particularly such things as literal inerrancy of the Bible – which involves (for instance) accepting that the creation story in Genesis literally unfolded over seven days. In other words, what some call "fundamentalists," others call "evangelicals."

If you're confused, you're not alone. Even Billy Graham, who was heralded as a great evangelist and a leader of evangelicalism, said once that he was unsure how to define an evangelical Christian. When asked to define the term, he said, "Actually, that's a question I'd like to ask somebody too."[1]

If that's not confusing enough, the word "evangelical" has become more widely used not so much of one's personal faith, but of how one's faith shapes one's politics – especially in America. In particular at the moment it is being used a lot to refer to a certain section of the American population who tend to be supporters of Donald Trump.

Late last year, *Christianity Today* – a renowned and respected evangelical publication - published an editorial calling for Trump to be removed from office due to his "grossly immoral character."[2] President Trump was not the only one to take exception – many church leaders also denounced the article. The underlying assumption being, apparently, that a Christian organisation ought to support Trump, not undermine him.

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[1] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/
[2] https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html

In response, *The Financial Review* ran an article called "Evangelical America is 'at a moral crossroads'" which commented on "the close alignment between white evangelical voters and Presidential Trump."[3] According to one respected survey, 81% of evangelicals voted for Trump last time, and 80% say they probably will again.[4] [5]

Just a couple of weeks ago, someone said to me in a (small, safely distanced) non-church social gathering: "What's wrong with you evangelical Christians? Why are you so wedded to Trump?" Their perception, perhaps fed by commentary and surveys like those mentioned above, is that there's something about being an evangelical that somehow makes you a Trump supporter. The assumption seems to be that to be evangelical is somehow tied up with being white, comfortably well-off, and belonging to an older, conservative, generation. That is, it's about belonging to a social "class," rather than one's faith.

All of which says that the term "evangelical" has slipped from its original meaning of someone who believes the gospel to someone who has a particular view on politics and society. Or, as an article in *The Atlantic* put it: "the word *evangelical* pops up in American media to describe everything from mega-churches to voting blocs ... To the pollster, it is a sociological term. To the pastor, it is a denominational or doctrinal term. And to the politician, it is a synonym for a white Christian Republican."[6]

So, should we stop using the term "evangelical," since it has such a range of meanings, and such a lack of clarity? That would be one option. The other, which I personally prefer, is to continue to use it, and where necessary to explain what I think it means (and doesn't mean), using it as an opportunity along the way to explain what the "evangel" is.

[3] https://www.afr.com/world/north-america/evangelical-america-is-at-a-moral-crossroads-20191230-p53nmd
[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/books/review/who-is-an-evangelical-thomas-s-kidd.html
[5] https://www.pewforum.org/2020/03/12/white-evangelicals-see-trump-as-fighting-for-their-beliefs-though-many-have-mixed-feelings-about-his-personal-conduct/
[6] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/