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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

By any other name?

‘Fundamentalist’ and ‘evangelical’ as terms of public discourse

by Christopher Watkin

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

Shakespeare¹

So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

Romans 14:16²

...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works

and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

Summary

Whatever the words ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘evangelical’ may once have meant, their current use in public discourse is largely negative, save notable references to ‘evangelical social action’. Any adequate response to this situation must include a recognition of the different historical provenances of the two terms, and an understanding of their current public usage. If the term ‘evangelical’ is to be saved, evangelicals must act now, first to reinforce public understanding of their positive contribution to society and, secondly, to re-articulate flexibly their beliefs in ways that communicate effectively in the public sphere.

Introduction

Question: What do British Parliamentarians most frequently associate with ‘evangelicals’? Answer: Evangelicals are those who oppose the use of condoms.³ Shocked? Perhaps not if you’re a regular newspaper reader or television viewer. Bothered? You should be if you would describe yourself using this term.

It matters that the labels ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘evangelical’ are increasingly marginalized and misapplied in UK public discourse.⁴ It matters not least because of the direction of travel that it indicates. If a name associated with a given set of convictions becomes marginalized and eventually used as a term of abuse, it is only a small step to treating the convictions themselves with derision, and another short step to marginalizing or criminalizing anyone who refuses to renounce them. The recent legal wrangle surrounding the ‘Evangelical Christian Union’ at Exeter University is perhaps the first sign of debates to come.⁵

The public use of the terms ‘evangelical’ and ‘fundamentalist’ has taken a direction that leaves many who would identify with those terms feeling pigeonholed in a way with which they are neither theologically nor culturally comfortable. But what can be done? Such names can seem by turns impossible to defend and impractical to drop; to what extent should Christians be worried about labels in any case?

Much of the biblical groundwork for answering this question can be found in David McIlroy’s Cambridge Paper on reputation.⁶ Asking ‘does it matter if evangelicals are denounced in the press as “bigots” and the “Taliban”?’ McIlroy argues that ‘The church and its members are not to be concerned about their reputation for their own sake’, but ‘they should seek to protect their reputation when the honour of God is at stake.’ Building on McIlroy’s argument, the present paper will begin to elaborate a biblical response to a situation where the reputation of God’s people, and therefore of God himself, is brought into disrepute by the increasingly hostile public use of terms like ‘evangelical’ and ‘fundamentalist’.

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1 *Romeo and Juliet*, II. ii.

2 All Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

3 This surprising finding was one result of a search in the Hansard archives (both houses of parliament) for instances of the word ‘evangelical’ and its cognates over the years 2002–2007. A representative flavour of the tone is given by Lord Taverne: ‘Let us not, however, forget the harm that religion does. It is religion – the teachings of the American evangelicals, the Pope and Islam – that prevents UN agencies distributing condoms in Africa and thereby condemns countless Africans to death from AIDS, which I regard as a crime against humanity.’ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199697/ldhansrd/pdvn/lds06/text/61017-0011.htm

4 It is impossible in a paper of this length to address the hundreds of different uses of ‘evangelical’ and ‘fundamentalist’ across different countries, or across different subcultures in the UK.

5 See www.uccf.org.uk/about-us/news/press-release/christian-students-legal-action-frustrated-by-exeter-university-impositions.htm

6 ‘Style or substance: does the reputation of the church matter?’ *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 13 no. 1, March 2004.

‘Evangelical’ and ‘fundamentalist’: historical meanings

It is critical to understand where these terms have come from, not just what some take them to mean today.⁷ ‘Evangelical’ is the older of the two terms by some four centuries. With its roots in the Greek for ‘gospel’ (*euaggelion*), the genealogy of ‘evangelical’ can be traced through three historical eras or waves.

Its first recorded use in the OED is from the pen of Sir Thomas More, who employs it to speak of Wycliffe and his followers. Its second wave comes with the revival movements that swept through England and America under Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century, and then the social reform movement led notably by Wilberforce and the Clapham sect. The third wave comes in the twentieth century, with the emergence of the so-called neo-evangelicals – principally Carl Henry and Billy Graham in the USA and John Stott and James Packer in the UK.⁸

If evangelicalism was a movement with its roots on both sides of the Atlantic, ‘fundamentalism’ was shaped very much in the US context. The term as an ‘-ism’ was first coined in 1919 at the World’s Christian Fundamentals Organization,⁹ following the publication over five years of twelve volumes of *The Fundamentals*.¹⁰ Much, but not all, of what is emphasized in these volumes would pass as standard evangelical doctrine today.

The label ‘fundamentalist’ arose in a period when Christians were struggling with the onslaught of a scientific and reductive ‘modernism’ or ‘liberalism’. In the 1910s and 1920s, the challenge of modernism split some of evangelicalism between theological liberalism and what came to be called fundamentalism, ‘originally just the name for the militantly conservative wing of the evangelical coalition’.¹¹

The term originally denoted, then, a doctrinal position, a reassertion of theological orthodoxy in the face of the modernist challenge. However, over time, additional meanings barnacled themselves to its theological hull. Two of these accretions are of particular note. First, there developed a strong identification of fundamentalist Christianity with American patriotism, such that Billy Sunday, a leading fundamentalist preacher of the 1920s, could proclaim that: ‘Christianity and Patriotism are synonymous terms, and hell and traitors are synonymous.’¹² Secondly, fundamentalism became increasingly antagonistic to Darwinian evolution, though this was not a consistent feature of *The Fundamentals* themselves.¹³ The birth of what is known today as ‘creation science’ came later, with the publication of Whitcomb and Morris’s *The Genesis Flood*.¹⁴ There also arose a strong perception of fundamentalists as anti-intellectual.

‘Evangelical’ and ‘fundamentalist’: contemporary meanings

These historical provenances bear remarkably little relation to the way in which ‘evangelical’ and ‘fundamentalist’ are understood in UK public discourse today, where the words have ceased to communicate what they once meant.

‘Fundamentalist’ is most often heard in the context of Islam, but here it is used in a more restricted sense. Attitudes (to Scripture for example) that are labelled as ‘fundamentalist’ in a Christian context often escape the term in public discourse about Muslims. Furthermore, given fundamentalism’s Christian provenance, it is a particularly ill-fitting term to describe aspects of Islam. More broadly, the term seems to be used in two main ways today. First, as a free-floating adjective it ceases to indicate a particular creedal adherence or theological position, coming to be used as a marker of intensity or hostility. So in Hansard, American policy towards Iran is, because of its underlying sense of aggression, ‘far more fundamentalist’ than policy towards North Korea.¹⁵ The word also implies any dogmatic intensity that refuses to engage with contrary views, so we get ‘fundamentalist humanism’¹⁶ and Richard Dawkins as ‘a high priest of fundamentalist atheism’.¹⁷ ‘Fundamentalist’ no longer indicates *what* is believed, but *how* it is believed, and even when doctrine is on the table, ‘fundamentalists’ are understood to be anti-intellectual – even irrational – fideists who cannot be reasoned with and thereby pose a danger to the functioning of a liberal democracy.

As for the evangelicals, with the exception of being largely spared associations with terrorist activities they fare little better than fundamentalists. Confusion often reigns concerning the difference between ‘evangelistic’ (spreading the good news) and ‘evangelical’ (characterized by the good news). Hansard yields a somewhat negative range of meanings: evangelicals are those who campaign against contraception (yes, that is the most frequent usage), campaign against homosexuals, are opposed to women bishops, open private ‘creationist’ schools and, last but not least, preach witchcraft. The warmest use of the term is reserved for a debate on the abolition of slavery, where ‘evangelicals’, and notably William Wilberforce, are acknowledged to have played an important role. Sometimes, indeed, ‘evangelical’ as an adjective has nothing to do with Christianity at all, as when we read that Tim Henman ‘exudes a ... kind of evangelical neatness.’¹⁸

Part of the issue is certainly the lack of care taken to distinguish British from US evangelicals: ‘Both here [in the USA] and abroad, many assume that President Bush is “the evangelical president” and that his policies are what evangelicals want.’¹⁹ Similarly, against the grain of British evangelicalism in the mould of Stott or Packer, there has developed a perception that evangelicals are anti-intellectual, rejecting the claims of reason in favour of a bigoted, literalist ‘faith’ that brooks no engagement with contrary views. Although John Buckeridge may be going a little far when he suggests that the ‘e-word’, ‘which, years ago, may have smelt of roses, now has the aroma of the manure that fertilises the bush’,²⁰ he is undoubtedly correct in indicating the general tenor of the public use of the word today.

Two important elements contributing to this picture of confusion are an ignorance of the historical and contemporary emphases

7 In a recent article treating the use of the label ‘fundamentalist’ by evangelicals (‘Are We Fundamentalists?’), *Evangelicals Now*, March 2008, pp.17–18 Barry Seagren fails to engage with the historic differences between fundamentalism and evangelicalism, arguing that evangelicals are fundamentalists ‘in the best and most basic sense of the term’. But evangelicals must insist on a rounded understanding of historic ‘fundamentalism’ before they answer Seagren’s question. For a fuller discussion of the differences as well as the similarities between evangelicals and fundamentalists, see John Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

8 See Stott, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, London: Crusade, 1956, and Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, InterVarsity Press, 1965. Packer’s position is nuanced: ‘Are British evangelicals, then, “fundamentalists”? In the defined sense, they are; nor need they hesitate to admit it. It is no discredit to Christian men to be committed to the defense of “the fundamentals”. But British evangelicals are not “fundamentalists” in any of the other senses that have been put on the word.’ (p.29).

9 See George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991, p.57.

10 Amzi C. Dixon, Louis Meyer, and Reuben A. Torrey, eds., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, 12 vols., Chicago: Testimony, 1910–15.

11 Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, p.3.

12 Quoted in Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, p.51.

13 George Frederic Wright, who contributed an essay on evolution, insisted that the Bible ‘teaches a system of evolution’, and B. B. Warfield himself held the position that the debate ‘can never sink again into rest until it is thoroughly understood in all quarters that “evolution” cannot act as a substitute for creation, but at best can supply only a theory of the method of divine providence.’ Marsden, p.156.

14 John Clement Whitcomb and Henry Madison Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961.

15 See www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/ldhansrd/text/71023-0013.htm

16 Rod Liddle, ‘Wishful thinking’, *Sunday Times* (London), 8 July 2007.

17 Gerard Baker, ‘Farewell Falwell, the religious bigot who failed’, *The Times* (London), 18 May 2007.

18 Tim Adams, ‘Tennis: Still seeking the tiger factor’, *The Observer*, 21 June 1998.

19 Ron Sider, ‘Should we stop using the E-word?’ *Prism*, Sep–Oct 2007. www.esa-online.org/Images/mmDocument/PRISM%20Archive/Ron%20Sider%20Column/SeptOct07RonSider.pdf For a US treatment of this issue that seeks to keep the label ‘evangelical’ but extricate it from conservative politics, see Roger E. Olson, *How to Be Evangelical Without Being Conservative*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

20 John Buckeridge, ‘The “E” Word’, *Christianity*, May 2006.

of British evangelicalism, and a number of wilfully or inadvertently held prejudices that prevent those emphases from being understood. In what follows we will consider first a biblical approach to addressing these two deficits, and then some practical steps that might be taken.

Biblical patterns for addressing ignorance and misunderstanding

Jesus himself resisted the public label ‘messiah’ not because it was inaccurate but because of the misunderstanding it would cause, while actively promoting the alternative label ‘Son of Man’. In the book of Acts, when Stephen, accused of hate speech (Acts 6:11), incitement to violence (v14a) and cultural insensitivity (v14b), is asked ‘Are these things so?’ (7:1), he does not reply directly to the charge of his Jewish accusers but shows in a breathtaking sweep of Old Testament history how the whole Jewish cultural world finds its fulfilment in Christ, the ultimate rejected redeemer foreshadowed by Joseph (7:9–14), Moses (7:20–43) and the prophets (v52).

An Old Testament overview is little use to Paul and Barnabas, however, when they are mistaken for Zeus and Hermes by the pagan peasants of Lystra (Acts 14:11–13), so instead of beginning with Moses they begin with meteorology, correcting the impression that they are latter day incarnations of the Greek gods by proclaiming the ‘living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them’ and who ‘did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness’ (Acts 14:15, 17).

Finally, among the self-proclaimed sages of Athens who accuse Paul of being intellectually lightweight and culturally irrelevant (Acts 17:18), the apostle answers with a reading of Athenian culture which shows how both the religiosity (vv22–23) and intellectual heritage (v28) of the Greeks find their fulfilment in, and are in turn challenged by, the truth of the God who made the whole world and raised his appointed One from the dead.

In each case, when faced with misunderstandings or accusations of a personal or doctrinal nature, the right of reply is taken as an opportunity to give a positive re-articulation of the gospel message, not merely a negative rebuttal of the charge. The accusation is not allowed to set the agenda of the exchange.

Another biblical pattern for addressing ignorance and misunderstanding is the public display of the ‘good works’ of God’s people. In both testaments, social engagement shines brightly to make the gospel attractive to those who would otherwise disparage or ignore it. Though an individual Christian’s righteous acts should not be done to be noticed by others,²¹ the good deeds of the believing community as a whole – the city on a hill – are not to be hidden but made to shine before others,²² a truth which surely calls local churches to a responsibility for ‘owning’ and co-ordinating social action. The language here echoes the LORD’s injunction in Isaiah 58: ‘if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.’²³ There is, in short, a biblical imperative spanning both testaments for the reputation of God’s people to be formed to a significant degree by their engagement in social causes. This engagement does not substitute for spreading the message of good news, but it does lend it credibility and adorn it.

Drop or defend?

A case might be made for the pattern of re-articulation in Acts suggesting that the word ‘evangelical’ should be dropped altogether in favour of another term without the same baggage. But there is no term without baggage. Nevertheless, this has not

stopped a number of alternatives being suggested, especially in the USA. At Easter 2006 David Neff (editor of *Christianity Today*) reports attending a meeting of Christian leaders in which ‘[t]hey were seriously discussing whether the word evangelical should be used any more, or should we call ourselves classic Christians or historic orthodox Christians.’²⁴ Mark Bailey, president of the Dallas Theological Seminary, prefers ‘biblical Christian’; Francis Beckwith, former president of the Evangelical Theological Society²⁵ and a professor at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, has commented that ‘when I travel, I call myself a “creedal Christian” now’;²⁶ Tony Campolo has recently jettisoned ‘evangelical’ in favour of ‘red letter Christian’.²⁷

There may indeed be wisdom in exercising a flexibility of nomenclature in different contexts; faithfulness to the gospel is not after all bound to the use of any particular extra-biblical word. Choosing to be labelled simply as ‘Christian’ in contexts where a more specific label would introduce any number of prejudices, and choosing ‘biblical Christian’ or ‘committed Christian’ when it is helpful to emphasize that one’s position is (respectively) mainstream or serious, may go a little way towards challenging common misunderstandings. If the word association for ‘fundamentalist’ is ‘neocon’ and for ‘evangelical’ it is ‘condom’, then by articulating some minimal content, terms like ‘biblical Christian’ highlight the Bible, at least, as the issue. In communicating with law-makers, for example, both ‘biblical’ and ‘Christian’ gesture towards historical pedigree and geographical proliferation and thereby make it harder to present those who claim the name as a marginal group, as ‘radical’ rather than ‘mainstream’. Syntactically speaking, such terms are also harder to evacuate of meaning.

Just as we think nothing of using different currencies in different countries to buy the same products, so also we should be flexible, as were Jesus’ followers in Acts, in what words we assume to carry value in different contexts within our culture, when talking about the same thing.²⁸ Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree with those who argue that the heritage of British evangelicalism is too rich and positive to contemplate dropping the word, and the term itself is too institutionally entrenched to make any such disengagement desirable or feasible. In the biblical and social context sketched above, two strategies present themselves: to publicize and to re-articulate.

Publicize what is not known

Writing in 1984, John Stott began his *Issues Facing Christians Today* with the following striking words:

One of the most notable features of the worldwide evangelical movement during the last ten to fifteen years has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid social conscience ... This book is my own contribution to the catching up process.²⁹

Alongside the imperative to forge ahead with this recovery is the responsibility to make it known, to let the corporate light shine. Evangelical Christians have done and are doing many more Isaiah 58 activities than the public appreciates, and there is a corporate

24 Quoted by Michael Luo, ‘Evangelicals Debate the Meaning of “Evangelical”’, *New York Times*, 16 April 2006.

25 Beckwith resigned seven days after being received into full communion in the Roman Catholic church. See www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-33.0.html

26 Quoted in Cathy Lynn Grossman, ‘Evangelical: Can the “E”-Word be Saved?’, *USA Today*, 22 January 2007. Printed before Beckwith resigned on May 5.

27 Tony Campolo, *Red Letter Christians*, Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008. ‘Red letter’ indicates a preference for Jesus’ words over those of Paul and other biblical authors, and it is not just the label ‘evangelical’ that Campolo is walking away from when he claims that ‘On the day of judgment, the Lord will not ask theological questions so much as He will ask if we fulfilled our social obligations.’ (www.huffingtonpost.com/tony-campolo/who-are-red-letter-christ_b_86887.html) Contra Campolo’s dichotomy, evangelicals should recover and renew their heritage of social action, not walk away from evangelical conviction in the name of social action.

28 1 Cor. 9:22.

29 John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984, p.xi.

21 Matt. 6:1–6.

22 Matt. 5:14–16.

23 Verse 10; see Isa. 58:6–10.

responsibility to make known the story of what David Bebbington calls ‘evangelical activism’.³⁰

The light that needs to shine includes that of the domestic and international legacy of hospitals and schools established to care for and educate people of all religions and none. The provision of education and healthcare in Kenya, to take one example, was spearheaded by evangelical Christian missionaries.³¹ The campaign against the practice of sati (burning wives on the funeral pyres of their husbands) in India was led by evangelical Christians.³² There are the many charitable organizations in this country and abroad which were founded by Christians with evangelical beliefs: Action Aid, Oxfam, Help the Aged and the Anchor Housing Association,³³ Barnardos,³⁴ the Salvation Army,³⁵ Concordis International, Credit Action, along with ECOD (the Evangelical Coalition on Drugs) and ECOS (the Evangelical Coalition on Sexuality), among others.³⁶ The point needs to be made that, from the great social reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – Wilberforce, yes, but also Thornton, Venn, Shaftesbury and others – to organizations like Tearfund and the Shaftesbury Society today, as well as in the writings of evangelicals like John Stott, a commitment to serious, large scale, long-term social reform for the good of all people has regularly been at the historical heart of British evangelicalism.

There are also the hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours inspired by love for the neighbour invested annually by evangelicals up and down the country in running free mother and toddler groups, pensioners’ drop-ins, youth groups, and debt and pregnancy advice centres for the good of the whole community, a contribution without which many communities would suffer a serious loss.

In the face of accusations of anti-intellectualism or cultural separatism, organizations like the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity need to be recognized, as well as the peer-reviewed scholarly works produced by field-leading evangelical academics in this country and abroad who think as seriously about their faith as they do about their academic discipline. There is a story to be told to the glory of God, and it is the job both of individual Christians and organizations with media exposure to tell it.

Re-articulate what is not understood

In the three passages from Acts discussed above, those facing ignorance or misunderstanding had a public right of reply (Stephen before the Sanhedrin, Paul and Barnabas to the crowd in Lystra, Paul before the Areopagus) which is often not afforded to evangelicals in the same way today. Other means must be found of re-articulating beliefs in the public sphere.

A consistent pattern revealed in research from The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity is that ‘the abstract “religious person” is almost always far worse than the concrete one of people’s experience.’³⁷ If there is indeed an ‘ingrained cultural willingness to hate religion’,³⁸ then individual Christians should seek all the more to reinforce the second, experiential impression that actual Christians are not so bad as the abstract stereotype. So at least part of the response to negative public image must be in seeking to foster a ‘bottom-up’ approach to the problem, where negative views are gradually overcome by countless individual and unreported acts of kindness, integrity and courage on the part of those who claim the labels ‘Christians’ and ‘evangelical’. Such action is absolutely necessary, but not sufficient. The LICC research suggests that changing people’s experiences of individual Christians will not alter their perception of Christianity as a whole.

Another means of re-articulation to address the negative global perception of biblical Christianity will be for all Christians with evangelical beliefs,³⁹ and especially opinion formers in academia, business or the professions and those with access to the media, to self-identify as evangelicals, helping save the term from misunderstanding and abuse. The window of opportunity to intervene before the word ‘evangelical’ degrades further will not be open indefinitely; evangelicals must decide whether they are willing to see it go the way of ‘fundamentalist’, and they must decide soon.

Conclusion

‘Fundamentalist’ is just too politically sensitive and charged a word for Christians to contemplate it as a term of public self-designation in the UK today, unless as a provocative gesture. But things are more complicated in the case of ‘evangelical’. Moreover, the issue is much broader than a choice over whether to keep or jettison the term. The Bible’s message must be constantly re-articulated in terms that can be heard by particular sub-cultural audiences, and the stories of work being done in love by evangelicals for the good of communities up and down the land must be told. In both of these responses, the final aim is the same: not to defend a particular group or to bolster a particular word, nor even ultimately to benefit the neighbour who is loved, but so that the non-Christian public ‘may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.’⁴⁰

37 Nick Spencer, *Beyond Belief: Barriers and Bridges to Faith Today*, London: LICC, 2003, p.3, cf. p.23.

38 Spencer, *Beyond Belief*, p.24.

39 For an excellent brief survey of evangelical distinctives as defined by James Packer and David Bebbington, see Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, pp.26–7. Stott’s own view is that ‘it would [...] be a valuable clarification if we were to limit our evangelical priorities to three: namely the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming ministry of God the Holy Spirit. All our other evangelical essentials will then find an appropriate place somewhere under this threefold or trinitarian rubric.’ (p.28).

40 Matt. 5:16.

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