Toward the Theological Distinctives of Evangelicalism: Integrating Explicit and Implicit Theology in the Quest for an Evangelical Identity

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Introduction

Many have attempted to trace the contours of Evangelicalism and provide a comprehensive summary of its history and distinctives, especially of the American and British varieties. Yet defining Evangelicalism remains challenging, in my estimation, due to both its historical and sociological diversity. After all, Evangelicals trace their history and development through the following: (1) the Protestant Reformation, (2) the convergence of Moravians, Anabaptists, Puritanism, and Pietism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, (3) the Great Awakenings, (4) the missionary movements of the last two hundred years, and (5) the liberal versus fundamentalist controversies. With these historical, cultural, and ecclesiological influences, it’s understandably difficult, if not impossible, to provide a monolithic definition of Evangelicalism.

Though no monolithic definition of Evangelicalism exists, we can analyze and evaluate the definitions and theological distinctives from a number of popular academic proposals. In this paper, I intend to primarily consider the ideas of Bebbington, McGrath, and Olson. After analyzing the different ways in which these scholars define Evangelicalism, I will evaluate and expand upon their ideas in order to explore Evangelicalism’s theological distinctives. This, in

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2 The recent publication of Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) raises many good questions regarding the evangelical identify. Worthen suggests that in order to explain Evangelicalism, “the logical place to start is to ask [evangelicals] what they believe” (p. 4), though she also suggests that “history—rather than theology or politics—is the most useful tool for pinning down today’s evangelicals” (ibid.). Though *Apostles of Reason* is a helpful critical assessment, it is concerned more with historical and sociological issues related to a narrow form of Evangelicalism found in the United States, as the author notes (p. 5).
turn, will allow me to conclude with an observation on how Evangelicals are shaped by both explicit and implicit theological distinctions.

**Explaining the Evangelical Phenomenon**

Perhaps the most popular and widely accepted explanation of Evangelicalism can be found in the Bebbington Quadrilateral. David Bebbington writes that “it is… preferable to identify adherents of the [Evangelical] movement by certain hallmarks”\(^3\) and argues that the distinctives of Evangelicalism are as follows: (1) *Conversionism*;\(^4\) (2) *Activism*;\(^5\) (3) *Biblicism*;\(^6\) and (4) *Crucicentrism*.\(^7\)

Another definition comes via Alister McGrath. While McGrath notes that it is “notoriously difficult to give a precise definition of evangelicalism,”\(^8\) he suggests that after considering Evangelicalism’s rich history and surveying global Evangelicals, there are “six controlling convictions”\(^9\) for Evangelicals and adds to the Bebbington Quadrilateral (1) the Lordship of the Holy Spirit\(^10\) and (2) the importance of Christian community.\(^11\)

Though Bebbington’s hallmarks and McGrath’s characteristics are helpful in considering Evangelicalism, critics have pointed out that they, especially Bebbington, overlook other crucial

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\(^4\) Bebbington, *Evangelicals in Modern Britain*, 5-10.


\(^6\) Bebbington, *Evangelicals in Modern Britain*, 12-14.

\(^7\) Ibid., 14-17.

\(^8\) McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, 49.


\(^10\) Ibid., 63-67.

\(^11\) Ibid., 73-80.
elements of Evangelical identity.\textsuperscript{12} Olson writes that his addition to the Bebbington Quadrilateral is “respect for historic Christian orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{13}

So what are we to make of these different approaches toward defining Evangelicalism? If we take each of the unique suggestions from Bebbington, McGrath, and Olson, we walk away with \textit{seven} characteristics of Evangelicalism. We can summarize these characteristics as follows: (1) conversionism, (2) activism, (3) biblical authority, (4) Christocentrism,\textsuperscript{14} (5) the Lordship of the Holy Spirit, (6) commitment to Christian community, and (7) respect for historic orthodoxy.

While these characteristics may appear to be simply historical-rooted definitions of Evangelicalism, it must be stated that each of these hallmarks are, at the very least, implicit \textit{theological} statements.

\textbf{The Theological Distinctives of Evangelicalism}

\textit{(1) Conversionism.} Evangelicals believe strongly in Jesus’ words, “you must be born again” (John 3:7). Conversionism is a \textit{theological} distinctive because it relates specifically to soteriology. It assumes that there is a necessity for gospel proclamation, which is why Bebbington notes that evangelical “preachers urged their hearers to turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith.”\textsuperscript{15} In contrast to other Christian traditions, Evangelicals have historically emphasized that human beings have inherited a sin nature\textsuperscript{16} and must place faith in

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\item John G. Stackhouse also lists “transdenominationalism” as a distinguishing characteristic of Evangelicalism in Andrew Naselli and Collin Hansen, eds., \textit{Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 124-128. For the purposes of this paper, I choose to overlook this distinction because it is not as theologically rooted as those I am including (cf. Olson’s criticism of “transdenominationalism in \textit{Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism}, 157–158).
\item Naselli and Hansen, \textit{Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism}, 176.
\item I’m combining Bebbington’s crucicentrism and McGrath’s emphasis on the majesty of Jesus Christ because they clearly overlap.
\item Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain}, 5.
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Christ and his work on the cross for salvation. The Reformation cry of *sola fide* ("by faith alone") is considered by Evangelicals to be a faithful witness to the teachings of the New Testament (e.g., John 3:16; Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8; etc.).

While Evangelicals are united in their theological commitment to conversionism, there is a fair amount of soteriological diversity within Evangelicalism, as Calvinists and Arminians have been in the ranks since the sixteenth century. Though the debate over God’s sovereignty in salvation continues, another debate related to conversionism is the issue of religious pluralism (i.e., must all human beings place faith in Christ for salvation?). Evangelicals have quite recently begun to explore this issue more fully, though the majority of Evangelicals still maintain a commitment to the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation, largely due to the influence of global Evangelicalism.

(2) Activism. Bebbington demonstrates that Evangelicals take seriously the *evangel* and have historically been committed to its proclamation. This means that Evangelicals participate in both domestic and international missions work. Yet Evangelical activism has not stopped at missions; Evangelicals are active in social reform often as a further expression of missiological methodology. In fact, Bebbington states that “activism often spilled over beyond simple gospel work.”

Activism is a theological distinctive because it is deeply rooted in the *Missio Dei*. Over and against the radical inclusivism found within certain streams of theological liberalism,

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17 A helpful challenge to the popular idea of gospel and salvation can be found in Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). McKnight demonstrates that attached to conversion must be a commitment to discipleship.
19 Cf. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); furthermore, the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in
21 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 12.
Evangelicals assert that the Church has been given the task of both proclaiming and demonstrating the good news of Jesus Christ. The intramural debate on activism essentially comes down to the priorities of gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration, with some juxtaposing the Great Commission with social justice and others delineating between the two. Though Evangelicals often share similar praxis, these debates further suggest that activism is a theological distinctive due to the simple fact that the debates are biblical and theological in nature!

(3) Biblical Authority. In contrast with other Christian traditions, Evangelicals have long asserted that Holy Scripture functions as the final authority for life and doctrine. McGrath writes that the “commitment to the total priority and authority of Scripture has become an integral element of the evangelical tradition.” This commitment is traced back to the Reformation, especially to Luther’s ‘captivity to the Word of God’ as expressed at the Diet of Worms. Later Reformers (e.g., Calvin) followed this same commitment to the authority of Scripture.

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25 Most Evangelicals embrace *Sola Scriptura* over and against *Solo Scriptura*. This is to say that Evangelicals view Scripture as the final authority and other sources of revelation are subordinate, be they tradition, reason, or experience. Evangelicals do believe other authorities exist; they just are situated under Scripture.
To be fair, the term “biblicism” in theological circles has come to be associated with a fundamentalist hermeneutic.\(^\text{29}\) Therefore, it is more helpful to discuss how Evangelicals have a high view of Scripture in that they believe the Bible is their final authority. To this regard, few Evangelicals disagree. Interestingly, differences within Evangelicalism over the nature of Scripture are somewhat contextualized nationally. Brian Stanley argues that in Britain the argument has been over the nature of \textit{inspiration} whereas in the United States the argument has been over \textit{inerrancy}.\(^\text{30}\) Despite these differences, it’s quite clear that Evangelicals have a high view for Holy Scripture.

\textit{(4) Christocentrism.} John Stott wrote that Jesus is “the centre of history… the focus of Scripture… the heart of mission.”\(^\text{31}\) Christianity has \textit{always} been centered on Jesus. The missionary and scholar Stephen Charles Neill stated:

> The old saying “Christianity is Christ” is almost exactly true. The historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls.\(^\text{32}\)

The great neo-orthodox Protestant theologian Karl Barth\(^\text{33}\) believed that Jesus was the center of theology and Kimlyn J. Bender states that “for Barth, to consider and formulate a Christian doctrine in isolation from the revelation given in Christ results in an abstract doctrine

\(^{29}\) Christian Smith, \textit{The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture} (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012).


\(^{32}\) As quoted in McGrath, \textit{Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity}, 61.

\(^{33}\) I include Karl Barth in this paper well aware that some suggest that he is \textit{not} an Evangelical. However, this rejection is largely due to the influence of Cornelius Van Til and, in my estimation, is not a sustainable argument; cf. Gavin Ortland, “Wholly Other or Wholly Given Over: What Van Til Missed in his Criticism of Barth,” \textit{Presbyterian} 35.1 (2009): 35-52.
that has lost its moorings and can be regarded only as speculative.”\textsuperscript{34} Barth’s Christological emphasis is an excellent example of how Evangelicals value the “majesty of Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{35} Since this Christological emphasis, which is inherently theological, is shared by many Christian traditions, what of the Evangelical approach is unique? For Bebbington, the unique contribution is found in the \textit{focus} on the atoning work of Christ because “to make any theme other than the cross the fulcrum of a theological system was to take a step away from Evangelicalism.”\textsuperscript{36}

Recently, atonement theories have taken center stage for Evangelical theologians.\textsuperscript{37} While John Stott’s classic work on substitutionary atonement\textsuperscript{38} still remains influential, Evangelicals have also begun to explore other theories in the hopes of embracing a well-rounded global and missional understanding of what Scripture teaches concerning Christ’s work on the cross.\textsuperscript{39} Make no mistake, Evangelicals are passionate about Jesus and his cross.

\textit{(5) The Lordship of the Holy Spirit.} McGrath has written that “the Holy Spirit has long been the Cinderella of the Trinity. The other two sisters may have gone to the theological ball; the Holy Spirit got left behind every time.”\textsuperscript{40} This may be true of other Christian traditions but it cannot be said of Evangelicalism. Evangelicals have \textit{always} had a high regard for the Holy Spirit. In fact, McGrath has also stated that “Evangelicals give an important place to the Holy Spirit, seeing that Spirit as the one who brings spiritual understanding and rebirth, who seals our knowledge of our salvation, and who works to conform us to Christ.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{34} Kimlyn J. Bender, \textit{Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology} (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 3.
\textsuperscript{35} McGrath, \textit{Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity}, 60.
\textsuperscript{36} Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain}, 15.
\textsuperscript{38} John Stott, \textit{The Cross of Christ}, 20\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).
\textsuperscript{41} McGrath, \textit{Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity}, 63.
With the rapid growth and influence of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement, Evangelicals have continued to develop a significantly more robust pneumatology, especially within the past thirty years. This is largely due to criticisms by Continuationists. While not all Evangelicals have embraced Continuationism, they have continued to embrace a Trinitarian theology that views the Spirit as more than an effectual means of salvation.

This tends to be the theological distinction of Evangelical pneumatology. While Evangelicals understand that the Spirit is involved in initiatory soteriological issues, they do not relegate the Spirit to only being involved in salvation. In addition to the Spirit’s role in individual and corporate spiritual formation, the Spirit is active in Evangelical ecclesiology, which leads us to the next theological distinction.

(6) Commitment to Christian community. Bursting forth from and lying under the hallmarks provided by Bebbington, McGrath, etc. are deeply ecclesiological distinctives. Yet when we talk about Evangelicalism and ecclesiology, we enter into an arena that has long been

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43 It must be stated that I view the majority of Pentecostals/Charismatics as within the large umbrella of Evangelicalism; cf. Bryon D. Klaus, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Pentecostal,” in Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity, ed. Anthony L Chute (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 151-175.
troubling to scholars. In fact, Simon Chan writes that ecclesiology is “one of the least developed areas of Protestant thought, especially among evangelicals,” though D. G. Hart acknowledges that “evangelical ecclesiology, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.”

When we consider the history of Evangelicals, we observe that they have traditionally placed a high value on gathering together “for the tasks of evangelism, spiritual nourishment, teaching, and discipling.” Evangelical ecclesiology certainly has many facets of diversity (e.g., Baptist and Presbyterian polities), yet “it is ultimately a reflection of its distinctive belief that the church is the body which gathers where the gospel is truly preached.” Evangelicals love the church.

(7) Respect for historic orthodoxy. Olson states that he “cannot conceive of genuine evangelical faith in a total doctrinal vacuum or in a context of radical rejection of the hard-won doctrinal orthodoxy of the early church fathers and sixteenth-century Reformers.” In other words, Evangelicals have a “deferential respect for historic Christian orthodoxy.” Though some may question how Evangelicals remains committed to the authority of Scripture as well as having a respect for the Great Tradition, Olson clarifies that “deference to traditional, basic

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52 For an excellent Evangelical ecclesiology, see Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 20012).
54 Naselli and Hansen, *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, 176.
Christian orthodoxy” is always done “within a higher commitment to the authority of God’s Word.”

In evaluating Olson’s characteristic, one must acknowledge that there is, like all other characteristics, diversity here. Harold O. J. Brown wrote that Evangelicalism “refuses to be liberal, but it is not theological enough to be orthodox.” This has certainly changed within the past thirty years as Evangelicalism has developed and become more theologically informed, though anti-intellectualism still has its roots with certain members.

**Affirming the Implicit Evangelical Distinctive**

Thus far we’ve seen explicit and historically articulated summaries of Evangelical distinctives. Yet I want to argue, for a moment, that Evangelical theological distinctives should not be considered apart from one *implicit* concept, namely the priesthood of all believers.

Though few scholars list the priesthood of all believers as a distinctive of Evangelicalism, it goes assumed in the movement as part of its ecclesiological ethos in both theology *and* praxis. After all, as John Wesley stated, “the Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote the Bible, but continually inspires those who read it with earnest prayer.” While other traditions have been known for *discouraging* non-clergy from reading Scripture and participating in the work of ministry, Evangelicalism has spread because it has placed the *evangel* at its heart and

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56 Ibid., 43.
60 Scholars tend to see the priesthood of all believers as part of the historical heritage via Luther and the Protestant Reformation, cf. Hutchinson and Wolfe, *A Short History of Global Evangelicalism*, 30; it is listed as a historical identifying marker of early evangelicals by Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 17.
61 As quoted in McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, 55.
soul in the hands of all of its members. Bird states that “the gospel is the glue between doctrine, experience, mission, and practice”\(^{62}\) and Evangelicals have applied that glue to all who self-identify with the movement, giving everyone a chance to participate in the Missio Dei.

Thus, the theological distinctives of Evangelicalism are identifiably explicit while being surrounded and supported by an implicit framework. Without the priesthood of all believers, the Evangelical tradition would never have spread as rapidly or as globally as it has.\(^ {63}\)

While Evangelicals haven’t always clearly defined their theological convictions, perhaps one of the reasons why is due to the fact that their distinctives are often implicit and assumed. In other words, Evangelicals have not always used language to describe their underlying theological convictions and corresponding distinctives because their views are simply implied by their praxis and assumed in their defining hallmarks. To these hallmarks we must add the priesthood of all believers.\(^ {64}\)

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\(^{64}\) Space does not permit us to discuss the differences in how Evangelicals understand the priesthood of all believers, though it should be mentioned that differences exist. E.g., Luther stressed the priesthood of baptized believers, though many Evangelicals would reject Luther’s more sacramental perspective.


