

WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL?

There are so many labels which describe Christians. Protestant, Orthodox, Presbyterian, Anglican, fundamentalist or free-church, all should provide clarity but often they just confuse us and our non-Christian neighbours. Sometimes they are used with theological precision, but they can also be misused to hurt those with whom we disagree. Why invent another title and call ourselves Evangelical as well?

Because something extraordinary happened in the first few decades of the eighteenth century, which changed the practice of Christian faith, and is worth holding onto. All over Europe and North America, churches which had been lifeless and listless were revived through evangelists who preached to crowds sometimes numbering 20,000. Known as the Evangelical Revival in Britain or the Great Awakening in North America, this movement of the Spirit saw many thousands converted. The names of the movement's leaders are part of our own story: John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards, for example.

Such leaders of the revivals faced a great challenge: churches were Protestant in doctrine, the Bible was honoured as the supreme authority, and justification by grace was preached, but still people were unconverted. The Puritan experiment in the New World had not created a godly nation. The Indians of North America and the miners of newly industrialised England were being overlooked by the churches. A new desire to work for experiential faith, vital piety, regenerate lives or in the language of John Wesley a 'heart strangely warmed' gripped the revivalists, with the prayer that believers would know themselves to be born again by the Spirit. Evangelicalism was born.

For the three hundred years since, Evangelical Christians have sought to transform churches by reviving individuals within them, and creating new

forms or structures to achieve it. Whether it has been missionary societies to take the Gospel to foreign lands or camp meetings on the American frontier to provide opportunities for families to find fellowship and hear evangelists preach, a chaplain to a penal colony or concerts of prayer to synchronise outreach, evangelicals have frequently been at the forefront of entrepreneurial experiments to reach the world for Christ. Most recently, Billy Graham pioneered new models of evangelism by using radio and television to address multitudes who could not make it to his crusade tents, while insisting that those who came to hear him live were racially integrated, blacks and whites being seated together.

Some choose to define an Evangelical by highlighting the *doctrines* of the sixteenth century which we preach, while others define an Evangelical by the *experience* of grace which we want to protect. Either way, student ministry in Australia combines the best of both worlds, and leaves us with the challenge of working out how each of us prays and works to see lives transformed by Christ. If we want to stand up in our generation and preach the importance of being born again, then the label 'Evangelical' puts us in esteemed company.

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