

MacArthur: How “Evangelical” is the Evangelical Movement? ¹⁹⁴⁵

By John MacArthur

DailyWire.com

What denominational label would best describe the following person’s religious beliefs?

He claims to be a committed, born-again Christian but isn’t sure that Jesus is truly God incarnate. He isn’t convinced that God has infallible knowledge of (much less sovereign control over) the future. He doesn’t believe the Bible is truth without any mixture of error. He doesn’t believe what the Bible says about how the universe was created. He doesn’t believe people must acknowledge Christ as Lord and Savior—or even know anything about him—in order to have God’s favor. He doesn’t believe Satan is literally real. He doesn’t believe God is full of wrath against sin. And he certainly doesn’t believe in eternal punishment. In fact, he doesn’t particularly care for words like *sin*, *atonement*, *repentance*, *expiation*, or *propitiation*. He dismisses such terminology as useless religious jargon that fails to communicate anything to normal people. But in reality, what he despises most of all about those words is the underlying doctrine of substitutionary atonement, which he also doesn’t believe in. He is convinced that God will forgive without demanding any payment for guilt.

Furthermore, while he isn’t certain Jesus is “perfect,” this person *does* believe human nature is fundamentally good. He believes God accepts the worship of all religions. He believes acts of benevolence can make up for our moral failings. He believes science has disproved parts of the Bible. At the same time, however, he believes biology does not determine a person’s gender; *that* is determined solely by how the person feels.

He also believes it is wrong to regard anyone’s sexual orientation as sinful. In fact, while he is loath to call *any* act of personal wrongdoing “sin” or “evil,” he *does* believe—with all his heart—that people of European descent have inherited collective guilt because their ancestors enslaved or oppressed other ethnic groups. He doesn’t regard Adam as a historical person or the Genesis flood as true, so he sees humanity as an assortment of rival races. He further believes each race is either privileged or oppressed—and skin color is what determines the difference. He will go on to tell you that several other factors, including gender, sexual orientation, disability, body weight, and worldview can further marginalize an already-oppressed individual (or conversely, amplify the empowerment of an already-privileged person). He believes *justice* demands the leveling of all such socio-economic imbalances, and the chief end of religion is the pursuit of that goal.

In other words, he totally believes in Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality. He is therefore “woke,” culturally savvy, politically liberal, and (by his own assessment) deeply spiritual.

How would *you* classify such a worldview?

He calls himself an “*evangelical*.” And leading voices in the current Evangelical Movement are happy to welcome him into their number without any serious or sustained challenge to his belief system—even though every one of his most strongly-held opinions is a direct denial of one or more vital points of *historic* evangelical conviction.

The profile I have just described is by no means unusual. Recent surveys reveal that a large percentage of people who self-identify as “evangelical” do not understand even the most basic principles of gospel truth. In a recent poll of self-styled evangelicals, 52 percent said they reject the concept of absolute truth; 61 percent do not read the Bible daily; 75 percent believe people are basically good; 48 percent believe salvation can be earned by good works; 44 percent believe the Bible does not condemn abortion; 43 percent believe Jesus may have sinned; 78 percent believe Jesus is the first being created by God; 46 percent believe the Holy Spirit is a force rather than a Person; 40 percent believe lying is morally acceptable in certain circumstances; 34 percent accept same-sex marriage as consistent with biblical teaching; 26 percent reject Scripture as God’s Word; and 50 percent say church attendance is not necessary.

Most of those views are categorically incompatible with saving faith. In other words, many who self-identify as evangelicals are not believers at all.

No matter. The media consider them evangelicals. Evangelical churches grant them membership. In some cases, evangelical presses publish and promote their writings, and evangelical conferences feature them as keynote speakers. Consequently, *evangelical* has come to mean anything and everything. And that’s why, as it is used today, the word hardly means anything at all.

The root of the expression is the Greek term for “gospel”—*euangelion*. That word and its cognates are used some 130 times in the New Testament, reflecting the apostolic commitment to the centrality of the gospel message and the importance of understanding it and preaching it correctly. “Evangelicals” are *gospel* people. The term is loaded with profound biblical and theological significance, and God’s people must not stand by passively while it is evacuated of all meaningful import. Sadly, however, what most people today think of as “evangelicalism” bears little resemblance to the rich heritage of *historic* evangelicalism.

How could this happen? *Only by a catastrophic failure of leadership.*

The biblical instructions for church leaders could not be more clear: “Preach the word . . . in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort” (2 Timothy 4:2). That’s the task, even when people with itching ears demand to be affirmed, amused, pacified, or entertained in various ways. Paul tells Timothy to preach God’s Word “with great patience and instruction”—meaning he should faithfully continue teaching sound, biblical doctrine, even when people seem unable to endure it because their ears are itching for something different. The apostle tells another protégé, Titus, “Speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you” (Titus 2:15).

The favored style of leadership in today’s Evangelical Movement is precisely the opposite. Most preachers work hard *not* to use a tone of authority, and they strive to be as subtle and indistinct as possible when they refer to Scripture. They crave popularity, and they know that postmodern audiences don’t like emphatic truth claims, precise doctrine, or settled convictions. Unchurched people today especially don’t want to listen to a preacher who earnestly contends for the exclusivity of Christ. They want their religion to be as unbounded as the open air, as soothing as a lullaby, and as fluid as the incessant stream of public opinion polls. They also want it shallow, unchallenging, and fashionable. Evangelical leaders have willingly obliged.

Too many who would not qualify to serve as deacons or elders in the church by any *biblical* standard nevertheless hold positions of leadership and influence in the Evangelical Movement. That is evident from wave after wave of moral scandals that have rocked the movement over the past forty years. It is also reflected in the flamboyant superficiality that is the hallmark of most televised religion. The testimony of the true church is being drowned out by the voices of ostensibly evangelical people who are preaching themselves rather than Christ Jesus as Lord.

Meanwhile, the gospel is being neglected—and in some cases radically modified—even by some men and movements who not so long ago said they believed the gospel is the one viable basis for Christian unity. These are leaders who would describe their ministries as “gospel centered.” The word *Gospel* is enshrined in the names of their organizations. But they are setting aside the offense of the gospel in favor of a theme that is trending in the secular world: “wokeness.” According to them, one of the gravest threats to anyone’s spiritual well-being today is systemic injustice—not only in secular society, but also within the church. The remedies being offered for this perceived evil are laden with stylish buzz words and politically correct dogmas—including secular doctrines with blatant neo-Marxist overtones.

I don’t think it overstates the case to say that the true evangel is in danger of being swept away with a deluge of grandiloquence from some of the Evangelical Movement’s best known and most influential thought leaders. This downgrade did not happen suddenly. For decades key leaders in the Evangelical Movement, obsessed with gaining the word’s applause and approval, have shown a troubling willingness to adjust their political and doctrinal stance to whatever were the prevailing opinions in the academic world, popular culture, and (more recently) social media. Seeker-sensitive pragmatism has long dominated the Evangelical Movement and marginalized biblical teaching in the name of cultural relevance. As a result, the meaning of the term *evangelical* has become so thoroughly murky that it stands in urgent need of reclamation and redefinition.

The current generation of evangelicals are the malformed children of such utilitarian influences. The movement is full of preachers who use Scripture only to abuse it. They manipulate people with fables, sentimental homilies, self-help lectures, and pious vision-casting. Such methods have seduced doctrinally and biblically illiterate crowds into thinking they are Christians. There is no worse brand of soul-killing sin.

Before he went to glory, R.C. Sproul and I had several conversations about how compromise and corruption within the visible church have ruined vital theological terms by clouding their definitions. For example, the word *fundamentalist* once signified someone who was committed to the defense of Christianity’s cardinal doctrines. But too many in the Fundamentalist Movement lost sight of truly essential doctrines and became obsessed instead with petty preferences. As a result, the Fundamentalist Movement was corrupted by legalism and nominalism.

Today *fundamentalist* is a term of derision.

Similarly, the noble term *Reformed* has for generations been co-opted by countless churches and denominations that trace their organizational lineage back to early Protestantism but who long ago abandoned any commitment to the biblical principles that fueled the Reformation. The fact that a church has the word “Reformed” in its name is no guarantee that the message they proclaim will have anything in common with what the magisterial Reformers were willing to die for.

The term *evangelical* is suffering a similar fate. The movement that wears that label has become so theologically diverse that it belies its own name. Today the evangelical swamp is chock full of charlatans, heretics, socialists, Marxists, and race-hustlers. There is nothing truly and biblically *evangelical* about it.

But what is the answer? Should we abandon the term *evangelical* in favor of a more accurate name? Those who have long lamented the degeneration of the Evangelical Movement have had difficulty coming up with a better name. R. C. once suggested the term “Imputationists,” which pays tribute to one of the chief articles of gospel truth: that the sins of all believers were imputed to Christ and his righteousness is imputed to them. But that’s probably too obscure a term to replace “evangelical”—not to mention the fact that people unfamiliar with doctrinal terminology might think it has something to do with *amputation*.

So what is my preferred label? What group do I identify with? I wish we could simply reclaim the word *Christian*. I don’t know if you can identify any more closely with Christ than by using that term. The disciples were first called *Christians* in Antioch in Acts 11. We are told to rejoice that we bear the name *Christian* (1 Pet. 4:6). But that word likewise has been so polluted that it has little more than a generic significance. I could settle for “*Biblical Christian*,” but that seems redundant.

I fully embrace classic evangelicalism’s commitment to the gospel, but the movement that has co-opted the name *Evangelical* clearly does not. Every unbiblical attack on Scripture—both overt and covert, blatant and subtle—has produced a kind of Laodicean “evangelical” lukewarmness, evoking the imagery of Revelation 3:15-22, where our Lord threatens to spit that church out of his mouth.

I cannot support the trendy jargon or the pet causes that today’s stylish evangelicals are so enthralled with: systemic racism, white privilege, white guilt, critical race theory, intersectionality, socialism, neo-Marxism, reparations, same-sex attraction, abortion, homosexuality, transgenderism, and evolution. I have no regard for “Big Eva” or the celebrity culture that honors fashion more than faithfulness and esteems big crowds more highly than sound teaching.

So what is my confession of faith?

I am bound by Scripture and reason to declare that Jesus is Lord, in the full sense of *that* term, and I am his slave, also in the full sense of that term. *I love him*. I bow to him as God the Son in all the fullness of his deity and with faith in all the fullness of his work. My slavery to him springs from a heart of love that drives me to obey his Word gladly. This is a perfect reflection of his infinite mind and holy nature. What Christ do I love? What Christ do I preach? We preach Christ, who is the eternal Son, one in nature with the eternal Father, and one with the eternal Spirit—the Triune God. He is the Creator and Life-giver as well as the Sustainer of the universe, and all who live in it. He is the virgin-born Son of God and Son of Man—fully divine and fully human. He is the one whose life on earth perfectly pleased God, and whose righteousness is given to all who by grace through faith, become one with him. He is the only acceptable sacrifice for sin that pleases God, and whose death under divine judgment paid in full the penalty for the sins of his people, providing for them forgiveness and eternal life. He is alive, having been raised from the dead by the Father, validating His work of atonement, publicly declaring him righteous, and providing resurrection for the sanctification and glorification of the elect, to bring them safely into his heavenly presence. He is at the Father’s throne interceding for all believers. As regards his Word, which is perfect, pure, inspired, inerrant, and true, I approach it with objectivity, rationality, veracity, authority, incompatibility, integrity, and unreserved faith.

At the end of the day, when I search for a term to describe this confession of faith, I realize that *this* is what evangelicalism has historically meant. This is the faith once for all delivered to the saints through the inerrant Scriptures—the true gospel of God’s sovereign grace poured out on sinners through faith in Christ alone. *This is evangelical doctrine*. Those who have turned aside from these truths to the cheap substitutes of worldly immorality, socialist politics, or personalized, designer doctrines that remake God in the image of man are the ones who have abandoned the gospel. Whatever they call themselves, they are not evangelicals. Those of us who hold to genuinely

evangelical doctrine—to the fundamentals of the faith in the only saving Gospel—we must stake our claim on this doctrinal foundation, and we must withstand those who would lay claim to the name *evangelical* while they are compromising and corrupting the true gospel.

The biblical record and church history both reveal that apostasy is common, yet the Lord always preserves his truth through the testimony of a faithful remnant. My desire is only to be part of that unwavering remnant, “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

What Are the Essential Principles of *Classic Evangelicalism*?

The word *evangelicalism* has always signified an unbending belief in the core truths of the Christian gospel—with a resolute refusal to compromise or modify those vital doctrinal principles.

The *gospel* is what Jesus came to proclaim (Mark 1:14). It is what he sent his disciples into all the world to announce (Mark 16:15). It is what Paul spent his entire apostolic career preaching and defending (Romans 1:1). It is the sole means by which life and immortality are brought to light (2 Timothy 1:10). It is therefore the very heart and the defining feature of authentic evangelical conviction.

Specifically, the gospel is “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Necessarily implied in that summary are several other vital doctrines, including the authority and sufficiency of Scripture; the fallenness of all Adam’s offspring; the hopelessness of sin’s bondage; the necessity of atonement; the truths of Christ’s eternal deity, his perfect humanity, and his utter sinlessness; plus the sinner’s duty to repent from sin and trust in Christ alone for salvation.

The hallmark of classic evangelicalism is an immovable commitment to the same two principles upon which the whole Protestant Reformation stood:

1. The *formal principle* is a conviction that the Bible is the supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of doctrine and practice—*sola Scriptura*. This was the cardinal tenet that shaped all the Reformers’ confessions of faith.
2. The *material principle* is the truth that faith is the sole instrument of our justification before God—*sola fide*. This is the very heart of gospel truth, and it was the singular point of doctrine every disagreement between Rome and the Reformers ultimately came back to.

The expression *evangelical* has had this clear and precise meaning for nearly five centuries. Evangelicalism did not begin in the twentieth century with Billy Graham. The earliest Protestants were called “evangelical” because of their intense focus on the gospel and the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

To say it as succinctly as I can, these two unfaltering convictions are what has always bound true evangelicals together in unity: a commitment to the authority of Scripture, and a shared belief in the essential “first principles” of gospel truth—starting with the historical facts of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection; culminating in settled trust in Christ alone as Lord and Savior.

Those who deny any of those doctrines are not “evangelical” in any historical sense of the term.

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