Introduction

I believe the word of God,
the teaching of the Holy Ghost in the divine word,
and not the Evangelicals[1]

— J. N. Darby.

Evangelicalism is like Jell-O. It's hard to define and just as jiggly. Is Jell-O a food or drink? I believe I was in high school when I first thought of that question. Up until I wrote this line, I still didn't know the answer. I heard Jell-O had something to do with feet.[2] You don't chew it, so it must be a liquid. But you can't use a straw, so it's not really a drink. Some people, me included, do *something* with their jaws while rolling the bouncy substance around in their mouth while slurping it. So that sort of makes it

1. J. N. Darby, "A letter on the righteousness of God," in *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed., William Kelley, 34 vols. (London: Morrish, 1862), 7:498.

2. I actually looked this up. Turns out Jell-O is not made of cow or horse hooves. It's a powder mix that's considered a food product or premade desert made primarily of the protein gelatin (a derivative of animal collagen).

a food, I suppose. In the end, a case can be made for Jell-O being either a food or a liquid—or a hybrid! Evangelicalism is similar.

What is evangelicalism? The current landscape is all over the map. In the US especially, there is no consensus as to what evangelicalism actually is. It's a Protestant tradition, on that much we can all agree. Or is it? There are groups of "evangelical Catholics" and "evangelical Hindus."[3] Who is authorized to define evangelicalism? Many appeal to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) as the flagship organization for answers, while others view the NAE as passé, political, or largely irrelevant. The amount of "evangelical" groups staking their claim is overwhelming. They include: Evangelicals for Social Action, Evangelicals for Peace, Evangelicals for Biblical Immigration, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, Evangelicals for Life, The Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus, and so on. Each of them offers a different definition of what makes someone "evangelical." In the end, the word "evan-jello-cal" may be the best descriptor.

On an academic scale, the consensus becomes a bit narrower; but struggles of identity remain. At the time of writing this book, I not only teach full time at a historically evangelical seminary, but I also serve as president of a region of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) that covers seven states, from Colorado to Hawaii. Surely, the assumption would go, I know precisely what makes someone "evangelical," since it is only those-types who are allowed membership in the largest evangelical academic society in North America. But if I am writing with pure honesty, there are some members of ETS whose bona fides I question. There are only two convictional requirements for joining ETS and publishing in their journal: a belief that the Bible is God's Word and inerrant

3. For variations of these labels, see George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the Twenty-First Century* Church (New York City: Basic Books, 2014); The Evangelical Catholic, evangelicalcatholic.org; Merwin-Marie Snell, "Evangelical Hinduism," *The Journal of Religion* 6, no. 4 (Oct 1895): 270–7.

in the autographs, and that God is triune in essence.[4] That these are evangelical doctrinal stances is without question. The question is if these are the *only* doctrinal stances that comprise evangelicalism. Can evangelicalism really be reduced to just two theological positions? If so, then it is not surprising to find Roman Catholics and members of the Orthodoxy tradition identifying as "evangelical," as they too believe in the Bible as God's inerrant Word (however nuanced) and in the Trinity.

Even so, the amount of *Protestant* academics willing to sign off on this doctrinal basis without the consistency of personal belief is alarming. One leading evangelical uses the term "theoretical inerrantists" for those who affirm the doctrine of inerrancy, for example, in order to maintain a ministry job or teaching position while lacking submission to its divine authority. These less-than-genuine evangelicals have the "satisfaction of verbal affirmations and signatures on documents rather than by lives lived in humble submission and conformity to Scripture."[5] Cases like this are all too common as the pressure for professors to gain (or retain!) tenure in evangelical universities and seminaries can be unreal. To compromise one's beliefs for job security does happen, even among self-identifying evangelical scholars.

Not only am I an officer of ETS, but I participate in other scholarly evangelical groups as well. I am an active member of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, Institute for Biblical Research, and the Evangelical Foundation for Biblical Research.[6] Each of these venues provides excellent publishing platforms as well as camaraderie for the more academically-minded who care

4. Evangelical Theological Society, https://etsjets.org/. These two doctrinal bases are listed on their membership application form requiring signatory agreement. They are also printed on the inside cover of every issue of JETS (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*).

5. Tom Ascol, "Theoretical Inerrantists," Founders Ministries, n.d., https://founders.org/articles/theoretical-inerrantists/.

6. Evangelical Philosophical Society, https://www.epsociety.org/about/; Institute for Biblical Research, https://www.ibr-bbr.org/; and the Evangelical Foundation for Biblical Research, https://efbr.net/.

about advancing Christian scholarship in service of the church and the academy.[7] They are dedicated to advancing knowledge and scholarship from a Christian worldview and formed around certain doctrinal stances, such as the authority of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. But again, having just one or two broadly "evangelical" positions inevitably opens the door for just about anyone to participate who identifies as "Christian."

I do not list my scholarly associations here in a subtle attempt to advance my *curriculum vitae* (not really). Rather, it is simply to point out that I engage and interact with self-identifying evangelicals at the highest academic levels and have come to realize that the term "evangelicalism" is anything but identifiable. It's as jiggly as Jell-O and just as unstable. And like evasive substances, it seems the only way to identify what is truly "evangelical" is by no other means than personal intuition. Perhaps, that is where we've gone awry. In the free-spirited vein of Western individualism, self-identifying evangelicals have *personalized* evangelicalism to such an extent that it has become anyone's right to define.

Critical theorists, political pundits, and social media influencers all join the sea of opinion of what makes someone "evangelical." For many, the word evangelical is a synonym for republican, or worse, *white-male-racist-conservative-republican-facist-misogynist*.[8] If such is accepted, it is not long before a reference to Donald Trump gets thrown into the mix, eventually morphing "evangelical" into "Trumper" as a shorthand for the longer moniker. Thomas Kidd highlights the problem when self-identifying evangelicals who lack historic evangelical convictions intuitively understand "evangelical" as an ethnic and political designation, rather than a theological or devotional one. "Some critics of evangelicals might say they're right: to such observers,

7. "Promoting scholarship in service of the church" is the stated vision of Bible Faculty Summit (www.biblefacultysummit.org), another annual academic group of conservative Bible teachers and seminary professors on whose steering committee I proudly serve.

8. Several books mentioned throughout either define or strongly suggest "evangelical" as this very thing.

'evangelical' carries as much racial and political freight as theological significance. That freight, critics would say, bolsters Trumpism."[9] From there, the downhill slide is inevitable. At best "evangelical" gets cataloged as a particular voting bloc and, at worst, is discarded as a label for anything resembling white supremacy or oppressive patriarchy.[10]

Taking as virtually useless the modern descriptor "evangelical," this book argues a few things. First, it is possible that defining evangelicalism simply by those who *self-identify* as "evangelical" has resulted in vain attempts to define the movement. (Is it even a movement?[11]) In other words, the "-ism" signifying the noun *evangelicalism* is not the same as the "-al" when used as an adjective identifying an *evangelical*. If accurate, then it is quite possible—even expected—to have so many self-identifying "evangelicals" who do *not* fit at all within "evangelicalism." In such cases, I believe there is no warrant for designating evangelicalism as their theological tradition.

Thus, contrary to most treatments on the subject, some of which are very helpful,[12] this book does not argue for *who evangelicals are* but rather *what makes up* (or should make up) *evangelicalism*. In doing so, it raises questions of retaining "evangelical" as a moniker as the best step forward for those who hold to traditionally conservative theological beliefs. As

9. Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 151.

10. Such are the relentless premises behind Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), and her *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

11. David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 8, offers several criteria that suggest evangelicalism may not qualify as a "movement" at all.

12. One example is Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George M. Marsden, eds., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

I contend, it is not about belonging, but belief. That is to say, evangelicalism is not about social-identity or self-identification. Instead, it *is* about belief and the behavior that results from belief. There are certain doctrinal positions, what I call "vintage," that historically set evangelicalism apart from other faith traditions. And these beliefs become tangible as they work themselves out in Christian conduct. Identifying evangelicalism as a vintage expression of biblical Christianity, rather than by gender, race, genetics, or political preferences, has the advantage of staying clear of virtually every (misleading) poll that documents an "evangelical" constituency.[13]

Of course, this book is not the first to argue for a set pattern of beliefs as the benchmark for what makes someone "evangelical" in a meaningful sense. The best-known example is historian David Bebbington's noteworthy "quadrilateral" of evangelicalism.[14] Bebbington classified evangelicalism in the UK under four main convictions, what he termed *conversionism* (the need to be "born again"), and *activism* (expressing gospel-belief through effort), *biblicism* (a high regard for the Protestant Scriptures), and *crucicentrism* (a strong emphasis on the atoning work of Christ on the cross). Bebbington's laudable metric offers a helpful guide in defining evangelicalism. However, I believe there are fundamental elements missing in it that this book includes.

Another relevant and more recent example is a 2016 article by Leith Anderson and Ed Stetzer entitled, "A New Way to Define

13. Most mainline polls (e.g., Pew, Gallup, and Barna) usually categorize "evangelicals" by how they *self-identify* regardless of whether they actually believe a constellation of core biblical positions, such as the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the triune nature of God, the conscious reality of heaven and hell, the need for personal repentance and trust in the exclusivity of Jesus Christ for salvation, or the need for consistent church fellowship.

14. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2–3. An updated and expanded version of collected essays is David W. Bebbington, *The Evangelical Quadrilateral: Characterizing the British Gospel Movement* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2021).