

[Evangelical Theology:
A Biblical And Systematic Introduction](#)

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WHY AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY?

The purpose of this volume on Christian theology is to produce a textbook for Christians that represents a biblically sound expression of the Christian faith from the vantage point of the evangelical tradition. It is intended to be a book about theological doctrine that is accessible to laypeople, seminary students, and leaders in the evangelical churches. That statement, of course, implies a question: What is an evangelical? The term *evangelical* can be used in diverse ways. For some it is a pejorative term meaning basically the same as *fundamentalist*. For others it is largely a cultural term describing those aligned with a particular social, political, and moral bent associated with conservative American politics. When I refer to *evangelicalism*, I am referring to a

historic and global phenomenon that seeks to achieve renewal in Christian churches by bringing the church into conformity to the gospel and by promoting the gospel in the mission of the church.¹

In my reckoning, six key factors led to the formation of modern evangelicalism.

1. The Protestant Reformation with the rediscovery of the doctrines of grace over and against medieval Catholic notions of salvation through merit and penance.
2. The convergence of Puritanism and Pietism in North America and the British colonies that brought together diverse groups in shared social and religious causes like seeking revival and working for the abolition of slavery.
3. The missionary movements of the last two centuries with newly planted churches established in the Majority World.
4. The liberal versus fundamentalist controversies of the early twentieth century over core Christian doctrines.

¹ See further David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975); Leonard I. Sweet, ed., *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984); David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond 1700-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *A Family of Faith: An Introduction to Evangelical Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); D. A. Carson, *Evangelicalism: What Is It and Is It Worth Keeping?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

5. The separation of “evangelicals” from the fundamentalist movement in the mid-twentieth century.²
6. In the last quarter of the twentieth century there has been a steady decline of Christianity in the West and a surge of evangelical Christianity in Asia, Africa, and South America. This surge has led to increasing interaction between the Western and Majority World churches through more affordable international travel and because of increasing access to the Internet, so that churches and organizations are becoming more readily aware and influenced by what is happening in other parts of the world. The international representation in the World Evangelical Alliance and Lausanne Covenant shows that evangelicalism is a truly global phenomenon.³

Evangelicalism as a theological ethos can be defined by a number of cardinal points. One way of summarizing these points is the “Bebbington Quadrilateral”:⁴

- *conversionism*, the belief that human beings need to be converted to faith in Jesus Christ
- *activism*, the belief that the gospel needs to be proclaimed to others and expressed in a commitment to service

² The separation between evangelicals and fundamentalists was hastened by a number of factors. Foremost was the rise of a number of Christian leaders who retained belief in the fundamentals of the faith but rejected the separatist ethos and legalistic subculture of fundamentalism. This was led through the ecumenical efforts of Billy Graham in his evangelistic crusades and by other leaders like Carl F. Henry, J. I. Packer, John R. W. Stott, and Henry H. Ockenga.

³ See Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁴ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1-17.

- *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible as inspired and authoritative
- *crucicentrism*, a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross

I think Bebbington’s scheme holds true enough, though I would want to add a few nuances, such as that “biblicism” is not bibliolatry, and “crucicentrism” does not mean ignoring the resurrection. We also need to add something on respect for historic Christian orthodoxy (what I call the “catholic” dimension of evangelicalism).⁵

Another summary of the cardinal points of evangelicalism is given by Alister McGrath:

- the supreme authority of Scripture for knowledge of God and as guide to Christian living
- the majesty of Jesus Christ as incarnate God and Lord, and the Savior of sinful humanity
- the lordship of the Holy Spirit
- the need for personal conversion
- the priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and for the church as a whole
- the importance of Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth⁶

I have written this volume in the first place for the benefit of evangelical churches who embrace this general pattern of belief and practice. It is a gospel-centered theology for Christians who seek to define themselves principally by the gospel. What we need, as a matter of pastoral and missional importance, is an authentically evangelical theology -

⁵ See Roger Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicalism View,” in *The Spectrum of Evangelicalism: Four Views* (ed. Andrew D. Naselli and Collin Hansen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 175-78.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1995), 51.

- that is, a theology that makes the evangel the beginning, center, boundary, and interpretive theme of its theological project. Such a project is justified by the observation that the gospel is the cause and criteria of authentic evangelical existence.

So I intend to undertake this theological exercise of constructing an evangelical theology by putting the “evangel” at the helm. That is because I unabashedly believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is the most important doctrine of them all. The gospel is the “canon within the canon” simply because the biblical canon is the scriptural expression of the “rule of faith,”⁷ which itself is an exposition of the gospel. Furthermore, the gospel permeates all other doctrines, it defines the church’s mission, and it constitutes our identity as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In terms of Christian theology, the gospel is the glue between doctrine, experience, mission, and practice. I submit that an authentic evangelical theology should be a working out of the gospel in the various loci of Christian theology (i.e., the topics in theology like the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, the church, last things, etc.) and then be applied to the sphere of daily Christian life and the offices of Christian leaders. The gospel is the fulcrum of Christian doctrine. The gospel is where God meets us and where we introduce the world to God. So my task is to lay out what a theology driven and defined by the gospel looks like. I will defend the view that at its essence theology is the art of *gospelizing*, that is, making the gospel shape our thinking, praying, preaching, teaching, and ministering in relation to God.

⁷ The “rule of faith” (*regula fidei* in Latin) is a short summary of the basic tenets of the ancient church’s faith, covering creation and salvation, and was important to many of the church fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian.

A second reason I have written this book is to try to strike a balance between biblical exposition and engagement with contemporary theological debates. On the one side, there are those theological books that invest so much time documenting what a certain theologian of the past believed on a given issue that they never seem to get around to asking as to what Scripture actually says on the topic. If a theological textbook has more references to Anselm and Barth than to the Major Prophets and the Gospels, you've got some serious problems. That's not to say that we shouldn't earnestly study the theology of an Augustine or a Luther, for theologies of "retrieval" are important, but at the end of the day retrieving the voices of the past for the present must be married to, rather than be a replacement for, good biblical theology.⁸

On the other extreme are those theological textbooks that are so biblical that they are basically doing theology armed with nothing more than a concordance and ignore every other voice in Christian tradition. For such authors, church history is something that happened to other people. I have a hard time learning from anyone who thinks we have little to learn from our forefathers in the faith. I reckon, in contrast to all this, that a good theology textbook should not simply be a commentary on other theologians. Nor should a decent theology textbook be an exercise in compiling an avalanche of proof texts. Thus, this modest contribution to evangelical theology endeavors to be *canonical* by accepting the Holy Scriptures as the normative guide for the faith and life of the church. It also attempts to be *creedal* and *confessional* by taking into account the witness of the ancient church and the Reformation into the process of how we think about living a Godward life.

⁸ For a good example of this, see Oliver D. Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

A third reason I have written this book is to avoid two encroaching extremes in the evangelical scene. As I look on the evangelical churches in the West, I see some disturbing trends. On the extreme left of the spectrum are those who want to find ways of speaking about Jesus Christ to a post-modern, post-Christian, and pluralistic world. That is all well and good, except that the way that certain chaps go about that is by assimilating to the culture around them, trying to renegotiate nonnegotiable doctrines like the Trinity and the atonement, replacing the boundaries of the faith with a conversation, buying into the postmodern mantra of “there is no god but pluralism and diversity is his prophet,” and holding up doubt as the key virtue rather than faith, love, and hope.

On the extreme right of the theological spectrum are those who care deeply about doctrine and upholding Christian morality. Yet luminaries in this quarter are defined mostly by what they are against rather than what they are for. They labor to impose Christian ethics on people who are not Christians, proudly draw the boundaries of the faith around themselves and their clientele of admirers, and invent shibboleths and code words that one must utter in order to be one of the accepted few. One gets the impression from them that their zeal for doctrines about Jesus has almost eclipsed Jesus himself as the center of faith.

In contrast to all this, I want to advocate that the most central thing in evangelical theology is *the evangel*. A gospel-driven approach will not force us into a dichotomy of orthodoxy (truth) pitted against orthopraxy (love); instead, we will find the courage to guard the good deposit of the gospel while loving our neighbor as ourselves. The gospel is an expression of the truth of God and the love of God, so it is the best platform on which to integrate a Christian love ethic and Christian creedal convictions.

Before I go any further, I must lay my ecclesial and theological cards on the table. On the church side of things, I did not grow up in a Christian home, but I came to Christ through a Baptist church in Sydney, Australia. I also attended a Baptist seminary (Malyon College) and have been a pastoral intern and itinerant preacher in Baptist churches. I taught for five years in an interdenominational theological college committed to the Reformed tradition in Scotland (Highland Theological College); more recently I spent three years teaching at an interdenominational college in Brisbane while being on the preaching team of a Presbyterian church (Crossway College). I am now a lecturer in theology at an Anglican College (Ridley Melbourne). Strange as it sounds, I would describe myself as an ex-Baptist post-Presbyterian Anglican.

I love the Baptist tradition as it has a rich heritage of being the church of believers and for believers, and I am most grateful for that heritage (indeed, its enduring influence will be obvious in the following pages). In my theological journey, I eventually came to feel that the Baptist way was somewhat lacking when it came to an understanding of the sacraments. I also think Baptists could use a lot more catholicity in their understanding of the church.⁹ I find the Presbyterian tradition full of a rich theological heritage that I admire, and I think that the Westminster Confession of Faith is one of the best Protestant expressions of the Christian faith. Yet I find myself now amidst the Anglican tradition because the genius of Anglicanism is in being able to be both Protestant and Catholic at the same time. I have learned to love the *Book of Common Prayer* and appreciate the liturgies in the Anglican tradition. Most of my favorite

⁹ On proposed correctives to these deficiencies in the Baptist tradition, see Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism* (SBHT 5; Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2003); idem, *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* (SBHT 25; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); Steve R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (SBHT 27; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

theologians are Anglican, and I have enjoyed seeing Anglican leaders in Africa defend the gospel against their liberal European and American counterparts.

As for my theological leanings, first and foremost I am a follower of Jesus; second I consider myself an evangelical; and third, I identify with the Reformed tradition. As a self-identified Reformed type, I thereby gravitate toward the Calvinistic scheme of theology. I am a Calvinist because I think it is broadly biblical and because it corresponds with my experience of slavery in sin and receiving God's efficacious grace in salvation. Calvinism often gets a bad rap as being a cold, wooden, and unfeeling system of doctrine. So when I explain Calvinism to people, I usually say this: "People suck, they suck in sin, they are suckness unto death. And the God who is rich in mercy takes the initiative to save people from the penalty, the power, and even the presence of this sin. This is Calvinism, the rest is commentary." I am more than willing to part company with Calvin and the Reformers when I feel compelled to in the light of biblical evidence and Christian tradition. That happens often, but generally the Reformed tradition is a fallible system of Christian thought that I think is as best on target as we can be.

I do not generally like tags or labels for one's position since they are by nature limiting and open to misunderstanding. Still, I rather like C. S. Lewis's description of "mere Christianity." I would like to think of myself, then, as a "mere evangelical" in that I belong to the big tent that is the evangelical church where Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, and Baptists go for fellowship and share in a common mission. It is a place where we can disagree about the six literal days of creation, baptism, church government, women in ministry, or the millennium, because we are united in the one holy catholic and apostolic church by our common profession of faith in Jesus as Lord.

That said, denominations are good because truth matters: truth about baptism, church government, ministry, and so forth. However, there is one Lord who is Lord over all the churches, and we all confess that Lord and partake of one Holy Spirit. As John Wesley said, “If your heart is the same as my heart, you can hold my hand.” There is no denying the differences in doctrine among evangelicals, and the differences are not always insignificant. Still, I like to think that the things that unite us like the gospel are ultimately far stronger than anything that might drive us apart.

J. I. Packer (a Calvinist Anglican) and Thomas Oden (an Arminian Methodist) joined together to write a book called *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*, which shows the agreement between a number of evangelical statements of faith written between 1950 and 2000 on key doctrines. The book shows just how much shared belief there is in the evangelical family.¹⁰ Whatever differences and diversity there is within the evangelical house, we can still speak authentically of one evangelical faith.

Next to “mere evangelical,” what is probably the label I like to describe myself with the most would have to be “catholic evangelical.” For me this means reading Scripture not in the isolation of my study, but as part of the “communion of the saints” that includes my local church and the departed saints of the past as well. The best definition of this “catholic evangelical” is given by Kevin J. Vanhoozer:

“Catholicity” signifies the church as the whole people of God, spread out over space, across cultures, and through time. “We believe in one ... *catholic* church.” The evangelical unity of the church is compatible with a catholic diversity. To say that theology must be catholic, then, is to affirm the necessity of involving the *whole* church in the

¹⁰ J. I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

project of theology. No single denomination “owns” catholicity: catholicity is no more the exclusive domain of the Roman Church than the gospel is the private domain of evangelicals. *Catholic* and *evangelical* belong together. To be precise: “catholic” qualifies “evangelical.” The gospel designated a determinate word; catholicity, the scope of its reception. “*Evangelical*” is the central notion, but “*catholic*” adds a crucial antireductionist qualifier that prohibits any one reception of the gospel from becoming paramount.¹¹

Another confession that I have to make is that I am not by specialty a systematic theologian. I cut my scholarly teeth in the realm of biblical studies. I’ve worked in areas as diverse as the historical Jesus, Synoptic Gospels, the life of Paul, New Testament theology, Second Temple literature, and textual criticism, and I have even written a commentary on 1 Esdras based exclusively on codex Vaticanus. Not exactly the standard training ground for a systematician, who is supposed to do a mandatory PhD on Karl Barth and thereafter write a postdoctoral tome on something like divine aseity and divine freedom, enhypostasis versus anhypostasis, or sexual repression in Augustine’s sermons (not my bag unfortunately).

But this book was not something I dreamed up one Sunday afternoon. The first essay I ever published was on systematic theology.¹² I have also spent the better part of ten years

¹¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 27 (italics in original); see also Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (STI; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 158-59; Robert Jenson, *Creed and Canon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

¹² Michael F. Bird and James Gibson, “Quest for an Authentically Evangelical Prolegomena to Theology,” in *Proclaiming Truth, Pastoring Hearts: Essays in Honour of Deane J. Woods* (ed. R. Todd Stanton and Leslie Crawford; Adelaide, Aus: ACM Press, 2004), 95-106.

trying to figure out how to integrate systematic and biblical theology as well as musing over the nature of evangelical theology.¹³ In all of my scholarly ventures, be they historical critical inquiries or biblical theological surveys, I have always tried to be conscious of the big picture and the big questions that go with it. Simply asking, “So what?” can help the most myopic of textual hacks look at the world beyond their own microscopic postage-stamp-sized field on inquiry.

What is more, traversing biblical and theological studies is all the fashion these days. Many theologians are writing biblical commentaries, as in the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series. Meanwhile several biblical scholars are trying to be theologians in the Two Horizons series of biblical commentaries. If theologians can write commentaries, why shouldn't a biblical scholar write a systematic theology? What is more, I would point out that John Calvin wrote his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* primarily as a way of clarifying disputed matters that he never had time to engage in his various biblical commentaries. Great Christian thinkers like B. B. Warfield and Leon Morris taught and wrote in the fields of New Testament and systematic theology. I contend that systematic theology should, in its ideal state, be an aid and clarification to exegesis and be undertaken by those with a solid grasp of biblical studies.

Finally, I would point out that American Orthodox Theologian David Bentley Hart regards a breadth of knowledge as the best qualification for any theologian. He writes:

Theology requires a far greater scholarly range than does any other humane science. The properly trained Christian theologian, perfectly in command of his materials, should be a proficient linguist, with a mastery of several ancient

¹³ See esp. Edward W. Klink and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

and modern tongues, should have a complete formation in the subtleties of the whole Christian dogmatic tradition, should possess a considerable knowledge of the texts and arguments produced in every period of the Church, should be a good historian, should be thoroughly trained in philosophy, ancient, medieval and modern, should have a fairly broad grasp of liturgical practice in every culture and age of the Christian world, should (ideally) possess considerable knowledge of literature, music and the plastic arts, should have an intelligent interest in the effects of theological discourse in areas such as law or economics, and so on and so forth.¹⁴

I do not presume to think that I have all of these qualifications and proficiencies; only a polymath could. I hope that my biblical background and periodic forays into the church fathers and systematic theology will make me a well-equipped theologian -- surely it cannot hurt -- but how capable I am as a theologian will have to be decided by others. In addition, after seeing a few of the things that systematians do with Scripture, I have generally believed that some theologians should be routinely slapped in the face with a soggy fish in order to try to smack some exegetical sense into them. You can only watch someone struggling to push a round peg into a square hole for so long before you finally snatch the peg from them and say, "Just give it here; I'll do it for you."

It is rather embarrassing, then, when you discover that pushing the pieces through the holes was in fact a lot harder than it first looked. As a New Testament scholar now taken to teaching theology, I have learned that systematic theology is easy to criticize from a distance, but harder to actually do when you are a practitioner. It is my intention to

¹⁴ David Bentley Hart, *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 177-78.

engage in the task of constructing an evangelical theology, with a breadth of exegetical experience, in dialogue with theologians of the past and present, soaked in Scripture, with an ear to the door of current debates, in order to present to evangelical churches and students a faith seeking understanding.
