

# Assumed Evangelicalism: Some Reflections En Route to Denying the Gospel

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## Introduction

You may have heard the story of the Mennonite Brethren movement. One particular analysis goes like this: the first generation believed and proclaimed the gospel and thought that there were certain social entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel and advocated the entailments. The third generation denied the gospel and all that were left were the entailments.

Another story. In 1919, Trinity Great Court in Cambridge saw a meeting between Rollo Pelly, the Secretary of the liberal Student Christian Movement, and Daniel Dick and Norman Grubb (President and Secretary of the evangelical Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union). The meeting was to discuss the re-unification of the two movements that had split in 1910. Norman Grubb's account of the meeting is infamous:

After an hour's talk, I asked Rollo point blank, 'Does the SCM put the atoning blood of Jesus Christ central?' He hesitated, and then said, 'Well, we acknowledge it, but not necessarily central.' Dan Dick and I then said that this settled the matter for us in the CICCUC. We could never join something that did not maintain the atoning blood of Jesus Christ at its centre; and we parted company.'

In its earliest days the SCM believed and proclaimed the atoning blood of Jesus. The next generation assumed it but did not make it central. The following generations have rejected and denied the apostolic gospel.

Proclaiming, assuming, denying. This description of a movement's history is admittedly something of a caricature - any such development would always be the result of many complex

factors. Nevertheless, it is a useful way of attempting to identify defining decisions that profoundly shape a movement's evolution and it has lessons for us about the dangers and challenges facing other similar movements.

In this article, I want to suggest that evangelicalism - Christianity that gets its definition from the gospel, the good news - is exactly one such 'movement', and to try to examine what evangelicalism in the middle stage, the assumed stage, looks like. This article suggests that individuals, churches, movements and institutions that use the name evangelical, and which are therefore claiming an important commitment to the gospel, are all susceptible to the very subtle drift that can take place from proclaiming through assuming to denying the gospel.

Let me suggest a definition:

Assumed evangelicalism believes and signs up to the gospel. It certainly does not deny the gospel. But in terms of priorities, focus, and direction, assumed evangelicalism begins to give gradually increasing energy to concerns other than the gospel and key evangelical distinctives, to gradually elevate secondary issues to a primary level, to be increasingly worried about how it is perceived by others and to allow itself to be increasingly influenced both in content and method by the prevailing culture of the day.

It is relatively straightforward to point to individuals, churches, movements and institutions that are clearly either proclaiming the gospel or denying it. However, it is extremely difficult to spot assumed evangelicalism and to evaluate and critique it. The reason that it is so hard to evaluate and critique is precisely because it is assumed evangelicalism. In other words, it acknowledges all the right things. The theology of assumed evangelicalism could well be faultless and, when asked to do so, is probably able to articulate itself in an exemplary way. The danger of assumed evangelicalism is precisely the fact that it has come from somewhere very distinct and is heading to somewhere very distinct but the in-between-ness of it makes it a lot harder to evaluate clearly. The crossing of boundaries is notoriously hard to see until you have arrived on the other side. This means at least two things.

Firstly, it means that attempts to question people, churches, or movements and institutions that are perceived to be sliding into assumed evangelicalism will always risk being labelled judgmental at best and, at worst, the scare-mongering of the 'fundamentalist' fringe. Those raising the questions must be willing to accept that their judgements may be misplaced and unfair. Nevertheless, if assumed evangelicalism is a reality, then it is in all our interests to be

willing to discuss, with love and humility, how far its characteristics may be true of us and our institutions.

Secondly, it means that many assessments of assumed evangelicalism will be largely criticisms of potential as opposed to actual. A fundamental worry aroused by assumed evangelicalism is generational - if we continue down this line in this particular way where will the next generation stand on this issue? In many cases (although certainly not all) criticisms may need to be tentative and provisional, to guard against the unnecessary fragmentation of evangelicalism and the drawing of lines before they need to be drawn. Such criticisms may be considered rude, but they show a commitment to the need to draw lines somewhere. We cannot afford to ignore the deceptions of our own hearts and the world in which we live. Both of these can subtly distort and truncate the biblical gospel.

If, then, assumed evangelicalism is a recognisable phase in which an individual, or movement, or church may find itself, what does the phase actually look like? What are its characteristics? We can address the issue positively by asking two questions to determine which of the three stages best describes ourselves and our ministries.

## **1. To what extent does the gospel dictate our priorities in life, and the visions and strategies of our churches, movements and institutions?**

In Romans 1:1-6, Paul summarises the gospel that the rest of the letter will unpack. Paul says that the gospel is God's (v. 1); is in the whole Bible (v. 2); is about Jesus as man and divine king; concerns his death and resurrection (v. 3); and is confrontational (v. 5). The organising principle or heart of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is Lord (v. 4b).

Of course, such compact sentences are not the absolutely last word on the gospel, but they at least provide a framework for the truths that are at the very centre of our lives and the proclamation in our churches and evangelical organisations. The spiritual health-check for assumed evangelicalism is to look at these key gospel truths and to ask: are we gradually beginning to move on from these truths to new initiatives which are effectively leaving the gospel behind ... or are we pouring our lives into reliving, retelling, re-believing this same gospel story? Are we doing so day after day, with increasing personal understanding and deepening joy and gratitude? Let me try and illustrate this further.

## **Evangelical Church - and an assumed gospel**

Imagine Soundville Evangelical Church round the corner from you. It is a typical evangelical church with a Sunday school and youth work, a mid-week prayer meeting, two services on a Sunday with lively hymns, contemporary songs and half hour sermons. How would we know if this was a church that was beginning to just assume the gospel? There could be at least two symptoms:

### **Legalism**

It is quite possible that the gospel is preached in the life of the church but the Christian congregation do not make the connection between that gospel and their own lives. One of the hallmarks of an assumed gospel in an evangelical church is that the gospel is regarded as being for the outsiders, the non-Christians who ever so rarely slip in to one of the services. When we limit the gospel in this way to unbelievers we begin to adopt extra ways of relating to God and to others, and they all fall under the label of legalism. This is the opposite of the gospel of grace - striving to be acceptable first of all to God and then to others by keeping rules and by outward behaviour. Churches at the Reformed or conservative end of the spectrum can be especially prone to their own set of extra rules: what we wear on a Sunday, how many services we attend, the version of Bible and hymn book that we use, what must happen at which point in the service, whether we keep the pews or the organ. Churches like this are often only a generation away from extinction and from denying the gospel by losing sight of its primacy.

But in any church legalism may also exist in much more serious forms, such as everyone constantly appearing sorted and problem-free, or preaching that constantly scolds and sets unrealistic standards. You will know your pastor is assuming God's grace instead of daily experiencing it if they are the sort of person you would never go to with your moral failure. This kind of legalism then begins to take various forms in our lives: pride, because we class ourselves as better than others and can keep some of the rules some of the time, or guilt and despair because behind closed doors we know that really we don't keep most of the rules most of the time. Assuming the gospel means that we regard it as what gets us to heaven but that other things are needed to make us good Christians - it is Jesus plus-something-else as what we really need to be right before God and others. When Paul rebuked Peter in Galatians 2:11-21 it was because he was assuming the grace of the gospel but saying Jesus plus-certain-dining-customs were essential as well.

The antidote to legalism is always to recover the sheer scandal of the gospel of grace. In this church the question to ask is: when was the last time my pulse quickened because of the wonder of God's forgiveness of my sin that was so clearly being presented? Expounding Romans 6:1, Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones had this penetrating insight:

There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this: that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret to mean that ... because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace ... If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding then it is not the gospel.

In other words, the effect of truly grasping the gospel is to find ourselves amazed at the fact that what we do adds nothing and takes away nothing from what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus. When the church realises that this gospel is what we need to encounter every day as Christians then it stops assuming the gospel and begins to give it centre-stage in every aspect of the church's life.

## **Licence**

The other symptom of assuming the gospel is exactly what we meet in Romans 6:1 and in the Lloyd-Jones quote above - licence. This is thinking that because the gospel of grace is so amazing it really does not matter how we live from now on. Licence means we assume the gospel is what makes us right with God but because of that we can now do whatever we want.

The most common form that this takes is moral licence - I am saved by grace so my sexual immorality or my gossiping and coveting does not really bother God. In Soundville Evangelical Church there may be some Christians who are assuming the gospel like this. They are ignoring the effect that grace really has in our lives when we grasp it properly: it is actually grace that 'teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age' (Tit. 2:12). However there is another type of licence and this is probably more likely to afflict the church as a whole: practical licence.

What happens here is that the gospel is assumed as being true and important but the actual practice of the church has little to do with the structure and content of the gospel. So for instance, a church that is just assuming the gospel in this way will begin to foster distorted spirituality. We know about the contemporary fascination with spirituality, where the word is used to mean any

way which you choose to relate to the divine - whether that's he, she, it or yourself. We are, however, less aware of our evangelical approaches to spirituality that are distorted. The gospel tells us that we draw near to God only by 'the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body' (Heb. 10:19-20). But we act licentiously towards a truth like that when we regard singing or 'worship' as what actually draws us close to God, or anything else that we can think of: religious art, breathtaking scenery, a church building. The fact is that we are no closer to God in the pew than the pub. I once heard a conference speaker recommend that evangelical churches learn from other Christian traditions and deepen their spirituality by adopting the best of Catholicism, Anglo-Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and so on. This is profoundly mistaken because it is assuming that the gospel is true but we can draw near to God by other means as well. It is practical licence.

Underlying this is a tendency to assume the gospel by elevating experience. Where this is happening, the church will be marked by an increasingly personalised approach to the Christian life. Christians begin to act only on what they believe God is saying directly to them, with the end result that the biblical gospel begins to seem less immediate and relevant than the latest 'word from the Lord'. The subtle drift towards 'personalised truth' leads to all kinds of distortions: God becomes known only in as much as we experience of him, we relate to God on the basis of what we personally find helpful, we believe the right things but become reluctant to state that the opposite of those things is wrong.

Far from being innocuous, practical licence is only a generation away from establishing a skewed conception of the Christian life as the accepted norm. The antidote to this kind of assuming the gospel is to reflect more deeply on the content of the gospel and to ask whether this content is actually the substance of what we are about in the life of the church. Is our spirituality gospel spirituality - marked by the Bible, the cross, Christ as Saviour and Lord? Is our experience gospel experience - marked by growing awareness of our sin and deepening experience of God's grace in our life? This brings us to our second question.

## **2. To what extent do the key features of evangelicalism dictate our priorities in life, and the visions and strategies of our churches, movements and institutions?**

The biblical gospel points us to an evangelical understanding of Christianity. This is theology that is constructed outwards from, and built on, the gospel. For example, the message of a truthful God revealing good news in the Scriptures points us to belief in an authoritative and reliable written word. That the Father's mission in sending the Son, and the Son's willing obedience to

the Father, climaxes in the death of the Son, points us to the belief that the cross is central to biblical Christianity. And so on. This means that biblical authority, the cross, Christo-centricity in life and doctrine are necessary entailments of the gospel. We cannot claim we are gospel people if we are not also Bible people, cross-centred people, conversion-focused people, Christ-knowing and Christ-adoring people. This also means that a vital way to evaluate our evangelicalism is to ask to what extent these issues dictate our priorities in life and our visions and strategies. Again let me illustrate this in two separate areas with regard to two key features of evangelicalism - biblical authority and the cross.

## **Evangelical study of theology - and assumed biblical authority**

In the book *Letters Along the Way: A Novel of the Christian Life*, the senior scholar Professor Paul Woodson writes to the young Timothy Journeyman who has just embarked on theological study:

I doubt very much that evangelicals are wise to pursue academic respectability. What we need is academic responsibility. There is a world of difference. Elevating academic respectability to the level of controlling desideratum is an invitation to theological and spiritual compromise.

Academic respectability and academic responsibility adopt different approaches to the matter of biblical authority. Respectability will often simply assume that the Bible is truthful and authoritative but realises that to draw attention to this in the academy will often bring scorn and derision. One practical outcome of this is that evangelicals then set out to study Scripture using accepted critical tools, while all along quietly assuming that the Bible is also a product of the divine mind and therefore authoritative. What this leads to, however, is an explicitly non-theological approach to the Bible which ultimately leaves the Bible answerable to all the latest critical theories. In reality, the divine and human aspects of Scripture present themselves to us together as 'the very words of God' (Rom. 3:2; Acts 7:38) and this means that any study of those words, in their human-ness and with critical tools, must be guided by that theological presupposition. Responsibility, on the other hand, recognises this as our evangelical starting point and accepts that it is not a presupposition shared by the academic world at large. Striving to be responsible though, means that the students work to the best of their ability, weighs all the options, thinks openly and creatively, and reads widely - but is governed by the desire to remain faithful to the Bible and not the academy.

This has a number of implications. Firstly: on a personal level, as we study theology in the now largely secular academy there is a need to make hard decisions about whether we prize

intellectual respectability and prestige on the exam results board, more than we cherish a desire to sit under and be mastered by Scripture. Of course, in some situations good results can be compatible with faithfulness to the Bible but in many places they are not. However the dangers are often more subtle than a plain choice between compromise or respect - the real temptation will be to just assume the authority of the Bible and then to expend our academic energy on other acceptable concerns. However regularly trying to articulate biblical authority will ultimately mean that we are forced into a way of studying that is critical of the prevailing sources and criteria for theology and that means we ask in each essay and exam: is what I am writing compatible with the fact that I believe the words of Scripture are the very words of God? In what way is that belief expressed in my academic work and, more importantly, the way that I live?

Second: for institutions such as an evangelical theological college, there is a need to actively contend for biblical authority and to appoint staff who find it liberating, joyful, and want to teach it to produce students who want to live by it. I would want to go as far as saying that, in an evangelical theological college, rigorous commitment to biblical authority must rank higher on the list of required qualities for a member of staff than academic qualifications - and the latter are extremely important. Of course, in such a college, fidelity to Scripture will never be explicitly displaced by academic qualifications and requirements but when it is assumed rather than articulated then the real esteem in which it is held is unwittingly put on display. The generational question is: how long will it be before it does not even have to be assumed?

## **Evangelical Movements - and the assumed cross**

I recently read through the magazine of an influential Christian charitable organisation. The magazine describes the organisation as an evangelical Christian movement. By the time I had finished reading, the word that I had met most frequently was 'justice' and its many applications to various socio-political and economic crises and the very right need for action and intervention by those able to do so. It was also clear that the word 'justice' was being used in an almost exclusively OT sense, and a one-sided OT sense at that i.e. the focus was on justice in social issues. In this kind of publication, what is being sidelined is a development of the theme of justice in a way which moves through the biblical literature to show how the theme reaches a decisive climax in the cross of Christ. What is being obscured is the fact that God's justice would consume the oppressed refugee in a shanty town as much as it would consume the privileged westerner with immediate enjoyment of all their human rights or the corrupt dictator who creates refugee crises. The storyline of the whole Bible presents us with the cross as the place where God uniquely demonstrates his justice with the result that, as one writer has put it, 'What Golgotha secured for us was not sympathy but immunity'.



I do not wish to be misunderstood here. I am not suggesting that organisations like this do not believe what I have stated about the cross. Thoroughly evangelical belief is doubtless enshrined somewhere in a Doctrinal Basis or Statement of Faith. However, by just assuming this truth, rather than clearly and repeatedly articulating it and letting it govern the contours of the movement's vital engagement with social issues, there is vast potential for the next generation to deny what they have simply never had the chance to understand.

It is worth simply asking at regular intervals what role the DB or Statement of Faith actually plays in the life of our movements. Does the DB gradually find its significance in being a certificate of orthodoxy, a flag of convenience, the criteria necessary for showing that we are 'sound' and truly belong in a certain constituency? The acceptable face of this approach to a DB is that it is presented at key moments in the annual calendar, or reprinted from time to time in all the right publications. When this happens, but then is practically ignored in the day-to-day policy of our movement, the DB is unwittingly beginning to function primarily as a boundary-marker. The truth it expresses begins to be assumed rather than cherished and preached and we only retreat to it to prove our orthodoxy under challenge. Ironically, it is this kind of approach to a DB that supports postmodern criticisms that movements like evangelicalism really revolve around power issues - we give credence to claims like this when we simply use a DB to paint ourselves within the correct boundaries. But it is a lot harder to sustain the power criticism when it is clearly seen that a DB contains the source of our joy, our humility, our love, and the motivation for our ministry. We need to be constantly asking ourselves: do we find these theological truths liberating and joyful or are they beginning to seem narrow and slightly restrictive? Are they worked out in the structures of our ministry, the conferences we organise, the partnerships we pursue, the topics we preach on, and the books that we write? This sort of questioning is needed to keep the truths alight and not just assumed.

## **Conclusion**

The particular examples and illustrations I have used all overlap. An evangelical church is just as susceptible to only assuming the cross; an evangelical theology student will always face the temptation to assume the gospel and live legalistically or licentiously; an evangelical movement is always susceptible to assuming biblical authority, or functioning legalistically or with practical licence. If the argument of this article is valid, then it is worth thinking through what the overlap in each of these areas would actually look like.

But for each of the areas it is vital to realise that the temptations we face are often exceedingly subtle. Some evangelical biographies and histories give the impression that difficult decisions

only need to be made when we reach a watershed moment, a clear-cut choice between truth and error. In reality, such crisis points come about because of daily decisions, made on a minute scale and over a period of time, to either assume evangelical distinctives or actively articulate them. Individually, every day, we face the choice whether to sit under the Bible alone, to run to the cross alone and look to Christ alone or to begin to shift our gaze on to other things. Once we begin simply to assume these truths, then we are already beginning to stop 'acting in line with the truth of the gospel' (Gal. 2:14). The potential consequences for ourselves are harmful; for the generation following us they are disastrous.

## Endnotes

D.A. Carson, *The Primacy of Expository Preaching* (Tape 1). Address given at Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, 1995.

Norman P. Grubb, *Once Caught, No Escape*, 56. Quoted in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986) 8.

See Risto Lehtonen, *Story of a Storm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

D. M. Lloyd Jones, *The New Man. An Exposition of Chapter 6* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972), 8.

For more on grace in the Christian life see Dominic Smart - *Legalism and its Antidotes* on [www.beginningwithmoses.org](http://www.beginningwithmoses.org)

D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge, *Letters Along the Way: A Novel of the Christian Life* (Illinois: Crossway, 1993), 174.

Donald Macloed, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1998), 178 This article first appeared in the RTSF Newsletter 'From Athens to Jerusalem', Vol 3, Issue 4, Autumn 2002 and is used here with permission.