

The Ordinary Theology of British Evangelicals

The Bebbington Quadrilateral and Beyond

Greg Smith

Associate Research Fellow, William Temple Foundation, UK
gregcity3@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Evangelical Christians represent a minority of the population of the UK but are a significant and growing religious force in the life of the Christian churches. Historically they have been defined theologically, around the Bebbington quadrilateral (Biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism), largely in contradistinction to Catholics and Modernist-Liberal Christians. But how far does this represent the 'ordinary theology' of ordinary evangelical believers in Britain today? Are there additional key distinctives, rejection or nuancing of the four elements of the quadrilateral, or a limited understanding of the received theology taught in Bible schools and from pulpits? Drawing on panel survey findings from the 21st Century Evangelicals Research Programme of the Evangelical Alliance in the UK, this paper explores the theological continuities and questioning that is emerging among British evangelicals. After highlighting some of the discrepancies between the normative positions held by evangelical authorities and the everyday beliefs of evangelical believers we examine some of the implications for church leaders as pastors and teachers seeking to form their church members as disciples of Jesus.

Keywords

Evangelicalism, Christianity, Identity, UK, Evangelical Alliance, David Bebbington

Introduction: Evangelicalism in the UK

According to the recently published Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism:

Evangelicalism, an inter-denominational religious movement that has grown to become one of the most pervasive expressions of world Christianity in the early twenty-first century, had its origins in the



religious revivals ... of the eighteenth century. With its stress on the Bible, the cross of Christ, conversion and the urgency of mission, it quickly spread throughout the Atlantic world and then became a global phenomenon.¹

Significantly, while all the indicators of the influence of Christianity in the West show decline, evangelicalism is relatively thriving. Within the main Protestant denominations, the majority of congregations that are surviving, flourishing and even growing are those with an evangelical ethos. Many new congregations of recent decades, and ministries that have proved to be effective among younger people, are charismatic or Pentecostal in style and evangelical in belief. In multicultural urban areas, especially in London, the rapid growth of churches among diaspora communities in Britain reflects the vitality of Christianity in the global south, and much of it is evangelical in emphasis, though the Roman Catholic, Orthodox churches and mainline Protestant denominations have also benefited.² A Korean-American pastor gives an account³, enriched by his own personal experience, of the cultural and social change brought to the church in the USA thanks to globalization and migration. He is highly critical of the western and white cultural captivity of the North American church that is grounded in systemic racism, and shows how church growth thinking has led to a consumer religion. He expresses hope that God is mightily at work in most of the nations of the world and their diaspora communities. Likewise Jenkins's essay on global evangelicalism portrays a wider international movement.⁴ While evangelicalism in Britain has been influenced both by churches from North America and the Global South it has its own distinctive ethos. In the UK evangelical churches do not, with some exceptions, exhibit the excesses of prosperity theology and political captivity to conservative right wing populist parties. In fact many British evangelicals seem embarrassed and reluctant to use the 'evangelical label' given the growing toxicity of the brand as used in the USA by white Christian supporters of Donald Trump.⁵

Holmes tackles some of the difficulties of defining evangelical identity. He contrasts theologically normative with socially constructed approaches, finding both attractive, but neither totally convincing.⁶ He also develops two alternative conceptions, one defined

¹ Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, (eds) *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), back cover.

² David Goodhew and Anthony-Paul Cooper (eds), *The Desecularisation of the City: London's Churches, 1980 to the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

³ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

⁴ Philip Jenkins, 'Evangelicals and Globalization', in Atherstone and Jones (eds), *History of Evangelicalism*. (Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 267–80.

⁵ Greg Smith, *Trans-Atlantic Evangelicalism: Toxic, Fragmented or Redeemable?* Temple Tracts, Book 21 (William Temple Foundation, 2020).

⁶ Stephen R. Holmes, 'Evangelical Theology and Identity', in Evangelical Alliance (ed. G. Smith), *21st Century Evangelicals: Reflections on Research by the Evangelical Alliance*. (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2015), 23–36.

around social networks following Noll,⁷ and a historically located one following Larsen.⁸ He then flags up and rejects other issues which have been suggested as defining of evangelicalism such as belief in a recent literal six day creation or a conservative stance on homosexuality. In this paper we are engaged on a descriptive rather than a prescriptive exercise. This approach concentrates on beliefs and values more than on social or political identities of evangelicals as a social group. Our task resonates with the field described by social scientists as 'lived religion' or what Holmes describes as 'ordinary theology'.

One of the most widely accepted and quoted attempts to define the theological boundaries of evangelicalism in recent years was first found in Bebbington:

There are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: conversionism, ...; activism, ...; biblicism, ... and what may be termed crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities.⁹

Bebbington has been critiqued, for example by Harris which explores the adequacy of the quadrilateral in the context of growing evangelical diversity.¹⁰ McGrath lists six characteristics of evangelicalism which partially overlap the Bebbington quadrilateral. They are the supreme authority of scripture, the majesty of Jesus Christ, the lordship of the Holy Spirit, the need for personal conversion, the priority of evangelism, and the importance of Christian community.¹¹ Other writers with insider knowledge of the movement explore a wider range of evangelical characteristics and issues. The volume of essays edited by Brady and Rowdon covers the history and issues in the movement towards the end of the twentieth century.¹² Warner traces, somewhat controversially, the internal politics of the UK Evangelical Alliance in the last decades of the twentieth century.¹³

Contemporary scholarly thinking about evangelicalism, is very firmly rooted in an historical and theological approach. One should note that much of the academic literature has been written by theologians and church historians, the majority of whom are Western, white and male. Most of the contributors to the volume edited by Atherstone and Ceri Jones, reviewed critically by Smith (2019),¹⁴ take as a default definition the Bebbington

⁷ Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

⁸ Timothy Larsen, 'Defining and Locating Evangelicalism' in Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Trier (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ David W. Bebbington, 'Towards an Evangelical Identity', in S. Brady, and H. Rowdon (eds), *'For Such a Time as This': Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present, and Future*, (Queensway, England: Scripture Union, 1996), 37, and David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁰ Brian Harris, 'Beyond Bebbington: The quest for evangelical identity in a postmodern era', *Churchman* 122 (2008), 201–19.

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994).

¹² Brady and Rowdon (eds), *'For Such a Time as This'*.

¹³ Robert Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001: A Theological and Sociological Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

¹⁴ Greg Smith, review of Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (eds), *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 34 (2019), 212–15.

quadrilateral. Some scholars of the early history of evangelicalism in the revivals and awakenings of the eighteenth century such as Stout and Brekus have read Bebbington in a way which stresses the importance of personal spiritual experience as the foundation of the movement and have linked this to the epistemology of Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke, who wanted to base knowledge on experiment and personal experience rather than on traditional authorities.¹⁵ The most detailed recent critical discussion of the theological and sociological bases of evangelical identity from within the movement is that of Roberts which only appears online. He argues for an abandonment of the term in view of the movement's fragmentation and its toxic link to American populism and prefers tight doctrinal boundaries and stronger institutional discipline in Protestant denominations.¹⁶

In the USA the debate about the spectrum of evangelicalism has been cast in somewhat different lines suggesting categories of Fundamentalism, Confessional Evangelicalism, Generic Evangelicalism and Post conservative evangelicalism.¹⁷ Here the boundaries of the movement and the subcategories are defined in terms of doctrine. Most recently Kidd,¹⁸ and Noll, Bebbington and Marsden explore the changing contours of American evangelical identity, in the context of the close alliance between white evangelical churches and the Republican Party.¹⁹

David Fitch in 'The End of Evangelicalism' asks if evangelicalism has a future and in a later more popular volume offers a trenchant insider critique.²⁰ Drawing on the theoretical insights of Žižek he describes a section of the church that is fixated on three master signifiers, the inerrancy of the Bible, the need to make a decision for Christ and the concept of the Christian nation. These issues, although so poorly defined as to be empty of meaningful content, become the boundary markers by which evangelicals distinguish themselves from unbelievers, including liberal Christianity. The result is a section of the church which rejects science and scholarship, accepts cheap grace without the need for repentance and transformation of lifestyle, and has sold out to right wing conservative politicians.

In Britain some sections of evangelicalism are also politically conservative and most are conservative in terms of personal morality and life issues. In an ethnography of conservative

¹⁵ H. Stout, 'What Made the Great Awakening Great?', and C. A. Brekus, 'The Evangelical Encounter with the Enlightenment', in H. W. Carter and L. R. Porter (eds), *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 1–18, 19–43.

¹⁶ Alastair Roberts, Alastair's Adversaria Blog (2012–2019) <https://alastairadversaria.com/?s=evangelicalism> (accessed 11 November 2019).

¹⁷ Kevin R. Bauder, et al., *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011).

¹⁸ Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George Marsden (eds) *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

²⁰ David E. Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism? Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission: Towards an Evangelical Political Theology*, Theopolitical Visions 9 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011); David E. Fitch, *The Church Of Us Vs. Them. Freedom from a Faith that Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019).

evangelicals in London, and various papers that are also outputs of her doctoral thesis and subsequent research, Strhan deals with the struggle among conservative Christians to maintain a coherent personal and religious identity as a minority of 'aliens and strangers' in a plural urban culture. They find this tolerant of everything except intolerance, when for the most part they uphold a fixed traditional framework of religious belief and sexual morality.²¹ Kettel's work based largely on interviews with leaders of conservative evangelical lobbying organizations seeks to explore the notion of a 'religious right' in Britain and seems rather inconclusive leading to the view that *the question of whether or not a British 'Christian Right' can be said to exist, is to a large extent a definitional one*. In any case it is far less organized and less politically influential than its counterpart in the USA.²² Guest discusses data that shows British evangelicals are spread from right to left across the political spectrum with the majority voting slightly to the left of centre.²³

Key Research Questions

Many of our survey questions were designed to test the congruence of the opinions of ordinary believers with the most widely held theological norms of evangelicalism. In this paper we discuss how far the four elements of the Bebbington quadrilateral remain distinctive and central to the theological identity of evangelicals? In what respects are they universally and absolutely held or where are they nuanced or changing over generations? Are there other beliefs and values which need to be added? What are the implications for church leaders as pastors and teachers seeking to form their church members as disciples of Jesus?

The Surveys

Quantitative research data on Evangelical Christians in the UK is extremely hard to find as the category 'evangelical' (or synonyms such as 'born again' or 'bible believing') has rarely if ever been used in representative sample surveys of the general population.²⁴ This contrasts strongly with the more quantitatively based sociology of religion in the USA where countless representative samples of the public have been asked whether they are 'born-again' or members of denominations taken as evangelical. Hart explores how opinion polls

²¹ Anna Strhan, *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); 'The Metropolis and Evangelical Life: Coherence and Fragmentation in the "Lost City of London"', *Religion* 43 (2013), 331–52; 'English Evangelicals, Equality and the City', in Heather Shipley (ed.), *Globalized Religion and Sexual Identity: Contexts, Contestations, Voices* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 236–55.

²² Steven Kettel, 'I Do, Thou Shalt Not: Religious Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage in Britain', *The Political Quarterly* 84 (2013), 247–55; 'Always Read the Label: The Identity and Strategy of Britain's "Christian Right"', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 17 (2016), 1–17.

²³ Mathew Guest, 'Evangelicalism and Politics', in Evangelical Alliance (ed. G. Smith), *21st Century Evangelicals*, 82–99.

²⁴ A search of the ESRC UK Data Service 'Discover' variable and question bank reveals only one survey in the current century, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, (2004) when a question using the word 'evangelical' has been used, https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/variables/variable/?id=5227_V444 (accessed 6 November 2019).

and surveys have defined and used the category 'evangelical' and thereby reinforced White evangelical identity until it became a voting block. Surveys enable pollsters to label over 25 per cent of the American electorate as evangelical, but the categories used contrast them with 'Black Protestants' who are excluded from the evangelical grouping, even though very large numbers hold to classic evangelical doctrines but tend to vote Democrat. Hart suggests that the negative consequence is to define 'a religious identity which is a mile wide and an inch deep'.²⁵

Ethnographies, such as Strhan or Schuurman provide fascinating insights but cannot be generalized or extrapolated for the whole movement.²⁶ Even questions such as 'How many evangelical Christians are there in the United Kingdom today?' are far from simple ones. Estimates vary from the 5.5 million mentioned in Wikipedia to the ballpark figure of two million regularly used by the Evangelical Alliance and derived from a Tearfund survey in 2007 in which 7,000 people were interviewed. Among the regular churchgoers, a little more than a quarter (27 per cent) self-identified as evangelical. In fact no one really knows, as there has never been a relevant question in a reliable representative survey or census.²⁷ Neither is it possible to derive statistics about evangelicals from church attendance or membership figures. For evangelicals are found in almost all the Christian denominations, in congregations which may, or may not, be described as evangelical in ethos and belief.

Our data on evangelical Christians relies therefore on the 21st Century Evangelicals research programme, carried out since 2010.²⁸ The research programme took the form of a quarterly online survey on various topics of relevance to Christians. It was completed by a panel of volunteers recruited through the membership and networks of the Evangelical Alliance. Typically around 4,000 people were invited by email with about 70 per cent of respondents from the preceding wave, and 30 per cent of the total pool of contacts responding. Further open invitations via social media recruited a few hundred additional respondents in each wave of the survey. Regular monitoring suggests a consistent demography in the samples, with approximate proportions over all the survey waves, in terms of age (58 per cent born before 1960), gender (55 per cent male), ethnicity (92 per cent white British),²⁹ social class (70 per cent graduates), places of residence (concentrated

²⁵ D. G. Hart, 'Live by the Polls and Die by the Polls', in Noll et al. (eds), *Evangelicals*, 228–33.

²⁶ Peter J. Schuurman, *The Subversive Evangelical: The Ironic Charisma of an Irreligious Megachurch* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2019).

²⁷ Jacinta Ashworth and Ian Farthing, *Churchgoing in the UK: A Research Report from Tearfund on Church Attendance in the UK* (Teddington: Tearfund, 2007).

²⁸ Evangelical Alliance (ed. G. Smith), *21st Century Evangelicals*. Further documents including published and unpublished data reports, working papers offering interpretation in thematic sections, and links to the data sets and questionnaires available to researchers via the UK Data Archive, University of Essex can be found at <http://gregsmith.synthasite.com/21st-century-evangelicals---resource-page.php>.

²⁹ It is probably the case that this figure somewhat under-represents the growing proportion of Christians from ethnic minority backgrounds who worship in British churches. The numbers involved are almost impossible to estimate, and many while holding core evangelical beliefs, might prefer labels such as Pentecostal. While the Evangelical Alliance

in London and the South of England) and church denomination (30 per cent CofE, 25 per cent Baptist, 25 per cent charismatic independent).

While this is a self-selecting opportunity sample and cannot be taken as truly representative of a population of evangelicals, it draws on networks of the organisation which is widely recognized as representing the largest and broadest constituency of evangelicals in the UK. This gives us a fair degree of confidence that the sample captures the views of the 'committed and activist core' of the evangelical movement.

It is also the case that church leaders, both those who are ordained or full-time ministers (approximately 10 per cent of our survey panels) and voluntary lay helpers who give some time in ministry, church governance, children's or youth work (55 per cent of respondents), are over-represented in comparison with ordinary weekly worshippers in evangelically oriented churches. Inevitably this will mean that our sample will overemphasise the views of people who are sophisticated in their theological understanding and committed to evangelical doctrines, and those for whom evangelicalism as an identity is particularly important. Key leaders are also more likely to be male and older than average. Detailed data analysis, which cannot be presented in this paper for lack of space, tested for significant difference in responses between church leaders and others but only found it for a small number of questions. However, it could well be the case that church leaders were more likely to give extended and theologically articulate answer in open ended questions and comments about theological issues, many of which have been selected for inclusion in this paper. In this sense the reader may be picking up more voices 'from the pulpit' than 'from the pews'.

Truths Universally Acknowledged

Table 1 shows that there were several issues and beliefs which were endorsed and accepted by the vast majority (90 per cent or more) of evangelical respondents, many of which are likely to mark them out from 'nones', from adherents of other religions and in some cases from other types of Christian.

We can see that evangelicals are characterized by a deeply personal faith that transforms their life and shapes their being. For them it is *not a 'religion' – it is a personal relationship with Christ*. Almost all UK evangelicals believe in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and hold the traditional orthodox view of the resurrection of the body in line with the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. They expect to personally share in an eternal happy future, though this does not divorce them from the present world – rather they engage socially and politically with commitment to social justice and creation care. While they believe in a powerful interventionist God they also trust and turn to scientific medicine. They value a

has been working for several decades to build links with this constituency, but the reality remains that most remain on the margins of mainstream evangelical institutions and were not easy to recruit as survey respondents in the research programme.

regular prayer life and are very active and committed participants in church activities. They are also very sceptical about the mainstream media – especially when it covers religion, and evangelicalism in particular.

Table 1. Truths universally acknowledged by UK evangelicals

Statement	% 'strongly agree or agree' (or affirm)	Survey name and date
For me Christianity is not a 'religion' – it is a personal relationship with Christ.	92%	Religions and beliefs, 2016
I can see God at work in my life over the long term	98%	Time for discipleship? November 2013
Christian faith is a very important element of my personal identity,	99%	Omnibus Survey 3, February 2015
Jesus is the only way to God	92%	Baseline Survey, 2010
Jesus rose from the tomb with a physical body	91%	Does Belief Touch Society, Spring 2011
At the end all who have died will be raised to face judgement.	91%	Does Belief Touch Society, Spring 2011
I'm looking forward with great hope to the new heavens and the new earth promised in the Bible.	95%	From generation to generation, Feb 2016
The Bible teaches us to pray and struggle for economic and social justice.	91%	Ethical Consumerism, Jan 2016
It's a Christian's duty to care for the environment.	94%	Baseline survey, 2010
Certain or likely to vote in the coming General Election	94%	Faith in politics? Summer 2015
Do you believe God miraculously heals the sick today?	98%	Health and Well-being survey, Aug 2015
When we are ill it is always wise to seek medical help, even if we believe God can heal us	95%	Health and Well-being survey, Aug 2015
Pray at least a few times a week	96% (77% daily)	Baseline survey, 2010
Say they attend a church service at least once a week	96% ³⁰	Baseline survey, 2010
The media generally does not understand religion very well	94%	Religions and Beliefs, Aug 2016
The media coverage of evangelicals always or often concentrate mainly on extreme views and/or controversial issues	91%	Omnibus 2, May 2014

³⁰ 77% attend a small group meeting at least once a fortnight.

The Bible

Our data shows that the Bible is of central importance to UK evangelicals. In the baseline survey of 2010 with over 12,000 evangelical respondents 83 per cent strongly agreed that the Bible has the supreme authority in guiding their beliefs, views and behaviour, compared with only 43 per cent of others surveyed who did not self-define as evangelicals. 93 per cent strongly agree that the Bible is the inspired word of God. Just over two thirds of evangelicals supported inerrancy (a belief that has been a litmus test for orthodoxy in North American Evangelical Fundamentalism); 54 per cent agreed a lot and a further 14 per cent agreed a little that 'the Bible, in its original manuscript, is without error'. The same statement was used in the survey 'Building Tomorrow's Church Today' where with a sample of Christians under 35 year old, a lower proportion of 56 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. However with respondents from BAME backgrounds the figure rose to 72 per cent.

In other survey waves:

99 per cent of evangelicals think every church should faithfully teach the Bible as the word of God. Life in the church? – February 2013

96 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'God spoke to people thousands of years ago and that message is recorded accurately in the Bible.' Are we communicating? – August 2011

90 per cent say they study the Bible every day or several times a week Time for discipleship? – November 2013

However evangelical respondents do not limit the voice of God to what is written in the Bible:

94 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I believe God often speaks directly to people today not only through the Bible but in other ways.' Are we communicating? – August 2011

Table 2 shows some responses to some slightly more nuanced questions about the authority of the Bible. Many respondents added comments which suggested their views about the authority and interpretation of Scripture were less than absolute and literalistic. The selection below illustrates four recurrent themes.

I believe the Bible is God's word to us, but it includes documents of all kinds including historical accounts and poetry, so it is not all to be taken in a literal way, although it contains absolute truth. It is all too easy to make mistakes when trying to follow the Bible because we don't usually appreciate the context and culture in which it was written So called plain meanings can be plain wrong because they are too literal and/or too zealous.

I believe the Bible is perfect in the original autographs but there are a few manuscript errors/controversies.

Jesus is the highest authority. The Bible is a vital revelation about him but has become a god in its own right to some.

Table 2. Evangelical views on the Bible³¹

	I'm totally convinced	I accept and believe this in general terms	I have some doubts or questions about this	I used to believe this, but can't any longer	I have never believed this
The Bible is the revealed word of God	87%	11%	1%	0%	0%
The Bible is the highest authority in matters of faith and doctrine	82%	15%	2%	0%	0%
It's important for children to have a good knowledge of the Bible	76%	22%	2%	0%	0%
It's important to me to try to read the Bible every day	71%	24%	3%	1%	1%
We should obey the plain teaching of the Bible in every part of our lives	62%	29%	6%	2%	1%
The Bible is a reliable and accurate historical document	56%	31%	9%	1%	2%
The laws of our country should be based on the teachings of the Bible	32%	40%	20%	2%	5%
Every word of the Bible is literally true	18%	37%	18%	6%	21%
The Bible is subject to new understandings and interpretations with each generation	10%	37%	28%	2%	22%

The Cross and the Atonement

Bebbington's second distinctive may be termed 'crucicentrism', a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In some of our surveys we posed a range of specific questions around this issue, some of which sought to unpack more detail about the various emphases and atonement theologies held and debated by UK evangelicals today. Our data (see Tables 3 and 4) give the clearest evidence that the cross is important for all evangelicals with the finding from the 'Does belief touch society?' survey that 99 per cent either agree (12 per cent) or strongly agree (87 per cent) that *the message of the cross has made a huge difference* in their own lives.

³¹ Data from '1846 and All That: What is Evangelicalism?' Spring 2016.

In the same survey almost as many endorsed a penal substitution view. 91 per cent strongly agree (and a further five per cent agree) that *on the cross Jesus bore the punishment for my sins*. Even among younger Christians surveyed for the 'Building Tomorrow's Church Today' report in 2016, 89 per cent agreed that *On the cross Jesus received God's punishment for our sins* (81 per cent agreed a lot – eight per cent agreed a little). In 'Confidently sharing the gospel?' (August 2012), 90 per cent agreed (27 per cent) or strongly agreed (63 per cent) that *the central message of the gospel is that on the cross Jesus bore the punishment for my sins*.

However, this is not the final word on the atonement from our respondents. 98 per cent affirmed a Christus Victor approach that *Jesus defeated the powers of evil through his death*, and 95 per cent that *Jesus' sacrifice inspires Christians to make sacrifices for others*. The most interesting response in this section was to the statement that *at the cross God poured out His holy anger upon His son*. Just 50 per cent of people agreed with this particularly stark formulation about propitiation, with 22 per cent unsure, and nearly 27 per cent rejecting it. Women were less likely than men to agree, while those aged 35–55 were less likely to agree with the statement than younger people or older people. There was a significant variation in terms of denominational beliefs about the statement: members of the Pentecostal tradition and the Church of Scotland had high levels of agreement (50 per cent+), compared with Anglicans, Methodists and those from emerging churches (less than 30 per cent).

Table 3. The cross: tabulation of views on the atonement³²

Statement	% 'strongly agree or agree'
The message of the cross has made a huge difference in their own lives	99% (strongly agree 87%)
On the cross Jesus bore the punishment for my sins	96% (strongly agree 91%)
Christ's blood is the final and only effective sacrifice for our sins	97% (strongly agree 91%)
Jesus defeated the powers of evil through his death	98% (strongly agree 89%)
God Himself was suffering in Christ for us in the crucifixion	95% (strongly agree 84%)
Jesus' sacrifice inspires Christians to make sacrifices for others	95% (strongly agree 59%)
At the cross God poured out His holy anger upon his Son.	50% (strongly agree 39%)

³² Data from 'Does Belief Touch Society?' survey, Easter 2011.

Table 4, based on the survey ‘What is Evangelicalism?’ (Spring 2016), reveals a similar pattern. Some of the statements intentionally map understandings of the atonement unto lines taken from some popular and familiar hymns and worship songs used in evangelical circles. Seven per cent expressed some doubts about satisfaction of God's wrath. It also allows us to contrast the responses of self-identified evangelicals with those of some 186 (11 per cent of total) respondents who described themselves as Christian, but not clearly evangelical in outlook. For these the cross appears less central and accounts based on penal substitution or blood sacrifice are less popular.

Table 4. Evangelical agreement with statements on the cross

Answer Options	I'm totally convinced	I accept and believe this in general terms	I have some doubts or questions about this	Non evangelicals who were totally convinced
All who come in faith find forgiveness at the cross	94%	5%	1%	71%
Jesus died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world	93%	5%	1%	58%
Love so amazing so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all	93%	6%	0%	71%
Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment for my sins	90%	6%	2%	50%
On the cross Jesus defeated all the powers of evil	90%	7%	2%	59%
The crucifixion is the greatest turning point in history	87%	8%	3%	64%
On the cross as Jesus shed his blood and died the wrath of God was satisfied	80%	11%	7%	39%

In comments such as the examples below, many respondents placed a penal substitution view as central to true evangelical faith, though others added some nuance and questioning to these views.

... it is vital that we believe in penal substitution, that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of the sins of those who have faith in him, taking upon himself God's righteous anger against sin. This isn't just 'a theory' of the atonement, it is the heart of the gospel.

In Scripture the revelation of the cross is always accompanied, fulfilled and completed by the resurrection of Jesus. We do not worship a dead Saviour but a living Lord.

I believe the cross is multi-faceted, both absorbing and defeating evil (Christus victor), and satisfying God's righteous anger at sin (Christus mediator), as well as being an example for all disciples (Christus exemplar).

Difficult to understand how God who is love can decide that his Son must be killed even if it is because he 'so loved the world'. Easy to see that primitive cultures think that their god can be satisfied with a blood sacrifice (very simplistic), but harder to see that this is actually how it works with God who is so beyond us in everything

Substitutionary Atonement is primary way of explaining the Cross and its efficacy, but should not be taken as a sacrifice to appease God's Wrath.

Conversion and Salvation

Bebbington's third distinctive mark of evangelical religion is 'conversionism', the belief that lives need to be changed. Tables 5 and 6 show the pattern of responses to questions about the understanding of conversion and salvation. In several waves of our panel surveys evangelical respondents overwhelmingly affirmed the unique transforming power of faith in Christ, their personal account of being converted, the radical language around regeneration as 'being born again' and the costly nature of discipleship or entering the Kingdom of God.

Table 5. Evangelical views on conversion and salvation³³

Answer Options	I'm totally convinced	I accept and believe this in general terms	I have some doubts or questions about this	I used to believe this, but can't any longer	I have never believed this	Non evangelicals totally convinced
I personally have been converted to Christ (am born again)	93%	6%	1%	0%	0%	47%
Accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation	74%	18%	7%	1%	1%	35%
Everyone needs to be born again if they are to enter into the kingdom of heaven	72%	19%	6%	1%	1%	33%
Every Christian should be committed to telling people about the salvation in Jesus	68%	28%	3%	0%	1%	24%
You can't be a Christian unless you have turned from your sins and been converted	62%	29%	7%	1%	1%	25%
If you have not given your life to Christ you will spend eternity in hell	36%	27%	26%	6%	5%	11%

³³ Data from 'What is Evangelicalism?' Spring 2016.

It's possible to be a Christian from infancy without ever making a clear decision to follow Jesus	10%	23%	30%	5%	33%	18%
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On the other hand some evangelicals (the 41 per cent who agree *God's love is so wide and unconditional that he will welcome everyone into his Kingdom*) see the love of God as very inclusive – almost to the point of universalism – though a larger number are cautious about this. Evangelicals are split over their understanding of hell, which formerly was a distinctive of evangelical preaching and teaching. In the Baseline survey of 2010 only 37 per cent of evangelicals strongly agreed that hell is a place where the condemned will suffer eternal conscious pain. In 2016 (Table 5) only 36 per cent of evangelical respondents, compared with 11 per cent of non-evangelicals, were totally convinced that *If you have not given your life to Christ you will spend eternity in hell*. Typical comments included:

I believe that some people who have not heard about Jesus can go to heaven (this would include those who have heard incorrect things also), but that this will be uncertain – for certainty, you should be a Christian.

Will non-Christians go to hell? Well what does hell mean? Is scaring people into the kingdom really a good thing? I believe Jesus is the only way, that if no decision made to follow Christ then people will be excluded from Kingdom and be apart from God – but not sure that means a 'physical hell'.

I would be more convinced about annihilationism than the eternal conscious punishment of those who die impenitent

There is little evidence from the UK that making a decision in response to preaching and an 'altar-call' is normative, or as Fitch would have it a 'master signifier empty of meaning'.³⁴

Although many people cannot remember having a specific conversion experience, I believe that if are they obviously deeply committed Christians and evidence can be clearly seen in their lives, they are true Christians.

Evangelicals always seem to need to use the phrase 'born again' to talk about the process of coming to follow Jesus. Jesus used the phrase once with one person! Dividing and defining conversion by one phrase seems divisive and unhelpful.

I believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and life and we need to repent of our sins but we need to be careful about judging where people are in this – it is not our job to judge but to witness.

While I accept that children raised in the faith still need to make a decision to follow Jesus this can be such an easy thing that they may not be able to identify when it occurred.

It's possible to be a Christian from infancy – but one still would need to be making clear decisions to follow him throughout life.

³⁴ Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism?*, 81.

Table 6 is from 'Confidently sharing the gospel?' (August 2012). The comparison with the non-evangelicals who completed the survey suggests that clear views about the need for conversion, if not exclusive to evangelicals, are most firmly held in this section of the church.

Table 6. Beliefs and attitudes about salvation and evangelism

Answer Options	Strongly agree	Agree	SA + Agree	Non evangelicals SA + Agree
Jesus is the only way to God.	85%	13%	98%	84%
Everyone needs to be born again (i.e. repent of their sins and trust in Christ) in order to become a Christian and be saved.	71%	25%	96%	75%
People who come to Christ will see their lives transformed.	55%	39%	94%	88%
If a person becomes a Christian they will have to give up things or make sacrifices.	25%	50%	75%	71%
The central message of the gospel is the Kingdom of God.	35%	38%	73%	75%
God's love is so wide and unconditional that he will welcome everyone into his Kingdom. ³⁵	33%	8%	41%	59%
The best reason for sharing the gospel is to offer unbelievers the chance to escape hell.	12%	25%	37%	17%
Every Christian should be able to tell the date when they were converted.	2%	7%	8%	2%

How then did our respondents describe their own conversion or journey to faith? In several of our panel surveys we asked questions to elicit such accounts. Table 7 below suggests around half of UK evangelicals have been brought up in a Christian family and/or church community environment. They reveal a wide variety of experiences and influences (both for church and un-church respondents) that helped lead them to commitment and faith.

Table 7. Which contexts helped you find faith as a Christian (multiple responses)³⁶

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Growing up in a Christian family or church environment	54%	580
The influence of Christian friends who shared their faith	43%	470
Making a decision in response to a specific church event, mission or sermon	38%	408
A youth club, camp or similar activity	30%	322
Privately searching for God, reading the Bible etc.	24%	255
Seeing God at work in other people's lives	24%	254
Seeing God at work in my life	14%	153
A direct revelation, dream or miracle from God	10%	107
A Christian group for students	10%	103
A film, book, song etc. that made you think very deeply about life	8%	91
A programme such as Alpha, Christianity Explored, or other discovery groups	6%	60

³⁵ Women were most likely to agree with this statement.

³⁶ Data from '21st Century Evangelicals', August 2012.

Various comments or testimonies made clear that UK evangelical Christians have come to faith, or been converted in a wide variety of different manners and contexts, some almost instantaneously, some over a long period. Perhaps the majority have found God before they were adults, in the context of a Christian upbringing through family, school and church. Some conversions have produced a rapid transformation of lifestyle and circumstances, others have been followed by slower growth as a disciple of Christ. The selection below give a flavour of the range of experiences.

I had been sent to Sunday School from an early age and one night, when I was in bed, it just clicked between God and me.

Father was a Baptist Minister and both parents knew and loved the Lord. They lived out their Christian faith but at an S.U. camp I realised my need to ask Jesus to be my personal Saviour and to forgive my sins

In a University CU prayer meeting I read Col 1: 15 through which the Holy Spirit convicted me and I became a disciple

Seeing God at work in friends lives, leading me to go to church where the minister seemed to be talking to me about things in my life and I then knew it was true about Jesus

The meaning of life questions and God being the answer.

Billy Graham Mission England 1984

I was an addict at the time of conversion and was miraculously and instantaneously set free!

Getting sent to prison and meeting God there. He used my father (a lifelong committed Christian) and a Christian member of prison chaplaincy to do this.

God made Himself real to me when my son had meningitis

God intervened when I wasn't interested, to come off the fence and decide for or against him

A physical experience following the laying on of hands.

Attending church, hearing the Word, for five years before making a commitment

My mum took me to church when I was young. She drifted away but I continued going to Children's church. I always believed but made a personal firm commitment about age 11 or 12, but then recommitment about age 17 ... I can't say there was a time when I didn't believe but moments of commitment increased my discipleship.

Evangelism and Activism

The final corner of Bebbington's quadrilateral is 'activism', the expression of the gospel in effort. It can be seen as the working out of a believer's salvation via active mission, most commonly through personal evangelism. Our data confirms this commitment is still prevalent, though perhaps more in theory than in practice. In the 2011 baseline survey nine

out of 10 evangelicals agreed that *all Christians should be actively involved in evangelism*. Seven out of 10 believe this strongly.

In the Religions and beliefs survey in 2016, 92 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that *Christians should invite people from other faith communities to visit their churches* and 99 per cent that *Christians should share the gospel with those of other faiths*. In 'What is Evangelicalism?' (Spring 2016), 39 per cent said they were completely, and another 48 per cent to some extent, actively committed to *spreading the gospel among you friends, colleagues, neighbours and local community*. However, in the evangelism survey in August 2012, 47 per cent said that at least to some extent *'I am just too scared to talk about my faith with non Christians'*.

Table 8 suggests that the current culture of evangelicalism favours outreach through relationship building, youth work and social action rather than the formerly popular methods of open air preaching, mass meetings and mission campaigns.

Table 8. Effective ways of sharing the Christian gospel today³⁷

Answer Options	I've seen it work effectively in the last couple of years.	I think it might be effective these days.	I don't think it is very effective these days.	Don't know or not sure.
Building friendship.	81%	18%	0%	0%
Small group work – with sharing food – as in the Alpha or Christianity Explored courses.	76%	23%	0%	1%
Youth clubs, cafes, camps etc.	64%	34%	1%	1%
Faithful biblical preaching in church.	60%	33%	7%	1%
Social action and community involvement (such as food banks and drop ins for homeless people.)	54%	43%	2%	1%
Work in schools.	48%	47%	3%	3%
Street Pastor teams.	46%	46%	3%	5%
Church run events at Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter.	46%	46%	6%	1%
Healings, miracles, signs and wonders.	42%	44%	8%	6%
Services for baptisms, weddings, funerals etc.	36%	47%	14%	4%
CAP Money Courses and Debt advice work.	34%	53%	3%	10%
Messy Church sessions.	29%	46%	6%	20%
Local church-based mission weeks.	27%	49%	18%	6%
TV, radio and the mass media.	18%	57%	16%	9%
Mass meeting evangelism.	18%	41%	35%	6%
Taking part in current public debates about religion, different faiths, and atheism.	17%	57%	17%	9%
Social networking via the internet.	16%	58%	6%	20%
Open air preaching.	9%	29%	56%	7%

³⁷ Data from '21st Century Evangelicals', August 2012.

Tables 9 and 10 present responses to questions about general and specific commitment to mission and evangelistic activity. The answers suggest that active evangelism, beyond welcoming outsiders at the regular activities of local churches and their programmes and projects is in practice the work and passion of a minority.

Table 9. Commitment to action among evangelicals³⁸

Answer Options	completely	to some extent	only a little	not at all
passing on the Christian faith to the next generation	63%	30%	6%	1%
praying and working for the growth of the Church throughout the world	56%	37%	6%	0%
helping other people when you see they have a practical or emotional need	55%	42%	4%	0%
being involved in at least one social action or social justice project	44%	37%	14%	5%
spreading the gospel among you friends, colleagues, neighbours and local community	39%	48%	12%	1%
working to achieve political change in line with Christian beliefs and values	21%	43%	27%	9%

Table 10. Participation in evangelistic outreach activities³⁹

Answer Options	Within the last month	Since last Christmas	Less recently	Never	Don't Know or can't recall
Talking to or befriending a 'new' visitor to a Sunday service at your church.	48%	31%	16%	3%	1%
An outreach event or club aimed mainly at unchurched children or young people.	25%	18%	40%	13%	4%
An activity, event or meeting (other than a regular weekly worship service) aimed at attracting seekers or 'fringe' people.	20%	29%	37%	10%	4%
You preached or spoke in public with an evangelistic intent.	18%	16%	29%	33%	4%
Producing or distributing printed Christian literature.	12%	17%	38%	28%	4%
A small group for people to explore Christian faith.	9%	21%	54%	14%	2%
A broadcast or media ministry (radio, TV, internet).	6%	4%	18%	67%	5%
A door to door visitation programme.	3%	4%	52%	36%	4%

The comments below highlight perceptions of difficulties, barriers and stumbling blocks which hinder effective evangelism:

³⁸ Data from 'What is Evangelicalism?', Spring 2016.

³⁹ Data from '21st Century Evangelicals', August 2012.

The church is often too distinctive in culture and language and not distinctive enough in living differently – people in church are likely to be nice to each other but not likely to look like a radically different community sharing what they have, loving each other powerfully, and free from the anxieties and delusions of the society around them.

It is the attitudes and behaviour that put people off Christianity more than anything else. However successful evangelism strategy is, if Christians are perceived to be unloving, judgemental and quarrelsome it will not be effective. Conversely Christlike behaviour even in the absence of direct evangelism will always attract people to the faith.

Although I agree completely on the sanctity of marriage and heterosexuality I was heartbroken to see Christians on main-time television reviling each other. I also think that people no longer believe that sin is wrong or any sort of problem; so why do we need a Saviour if we're perfectly good in ourselves? Conversely because the view that you have to be 'good' to get to heaven non-Christians see us as being smug and self-righteous unless they bother to listen to and engage with the truth.

The majority of people in the church – and particularly the ministers are out of touch with people in the 'real world' today. They are stuck in the mindset of getting people into church rather than going out into the world to meet people where they are. Those of us in the church who want to get out there feel discouraged and unsupported by the hierarchy so it doesn't happen.

I see my main area of service as the workplace where I have regular contact with 200 unsaved. My church doesn't compute that in it's thinking.

I feel I have a strong personal relationship with Jesus and I am very happy to talk about my faith. I have difficulty, though, with the thought of inviting anybody to attend church. It doesn't often do anything for me! I am closer to him at home and in my everyday life.

Most of us from Africa find it challenging to introduce Jesus to the white community the way it will matter to them.

In many churches, the Gospel message isn't preached clearly. I spent 12 years in the church, mostly Anglican, without understanding that Jesus died to pay for my sins and without being taught about needing to repent and to be born again.

Many are confused as to what the gospel is, in the context of evangelism, so false gospels grow in popularity. 'Jesus loves you' is not the gospel, and we are afraid to mention sin and repentance, in case we offend people.

The local church in general has no confidence to heal the sick, or to teach on it. This is tragic, considering Jesus commissioned the 12 and the 70 to 'preach the gospel and heal the sick'. The gospel is 'show and tell', but we neuter it when we make it a 'tell' gospel only. The church doesn't pray enough.

Individual Christians are just a bit too shy and reserved to talk about our faith as much as we could, even when the people we're talking to would not be hostile or would be actively interested.

I have confidence in speaking about my faith in public, but less confidence in talking to non Christian friends or family about faith – they don't seem interested and I fear alienating them all together by being too direct.

Social action with the gospel is powerful and scriptural – the essence of the gospel, but without the gospel, it is merely helping people on earth who will then go to a lost eternity.

Evangelism and Social Action are too often separated when they are like the actions of a wave – the wave moves in and out, but it is its overall action which creates the landscape.

Evangelical Identity

In this penultimate section we move on to the self-awareness and reflexivity of British evangelicals in terms of their identity. A more extensive discussion of this topic can be found in my recent Temple Tract.⁴⁰ Table 11 reflects their views of the essential beliefs and values which make up one's identity as an evangelical Christian: 'knowing God personally' and 'believing Jesus is the only way of salvation' are seen as the essential marks followed by the elements of the Bebbington quadrilateral.

There are several items in the table which refer to beliefs or values which are often associated with evangelicals in popular opinion such as opposition to same-sex marriage, patriarchal views on marriage and church life and opposition to the theory of evolution. These alongside the practice of believers' baptism and speaking in tongues are clearly seen by most evangelicals as optional extras rather than as essential fundamentals for evangelical belief.

Traditionally evangelicals were militantly Protestant: when the Evangelical Alliance was formed in 1846, one of the key objectives was '*Resisting the influence of Roman Catholic and Anglo Catholic ideas and rituals in the Church of England*'. How far does this concern persist among them in the twenty-first century? In our 'What is evangelicalism?' survey (Spring 2016) only 31 per cent thought it was important or very important for the EA to be involved in compared with 69 per cent who thought it was not very or not at all important. Although the vast majority of British evangelicals still belong to Protestant denominations of the church there is little indication of anti-Catholicism today, although it is stronger among evangelicals living in Northern Ireland.

Table 11. Evangelical essentials⁴¹

Answer Options	It's absolutely essential	It's usual and ought to be so	They may do so, but it's not required	They should not do so
know God personally	90%	9%	0%	0%
believe that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation	86%	11%	3%	0%
believe that on the cross Jesus took the punishment for our sins	85%	11%	4%	0%
do their best to study and follow the teaching of the Bible	73%	25%	2%	0%
strive to share the love of Christ with others	73%	25%	1%	0%
pray, speak and act so that unbelievers will be converted	55%	40%	5%	0%

⁴⁰ Smith, *Transatlantic Evangelicalism*.

⁴¹ Data from '21st Century Evangelicals Omnibus' survey, May 2014.

believe that the whole Bible is true	50%	35%	13%	2%
live in a way that sets them apart from the culture of today's world	49%	43%	7%	1%
spend time each day in personal Bible reading and prayer	39%	51%	10%	0%
oppose same sex marriage legislation	30%	31%	32%	8%
be a regular member or attender at an evangelical church	28%	44%	27%	1%
be actively involved in social action, social justice projects or working to achieve political change in line with Christian beliefs and values	20%	51%	29%	1%
believe in the equality of women in church leadership roles	19%	31%	42%	8%
be baptized as a believer by total immersion	14%	32%	52%	3%
support male headship in marriage and the family	14%	32%	42%	12%
support the current law that says a British monarch has to swear to uphold the Protestant religion and the Church of England.	14%	23%	52%	10%
oppose the theory of evolution	9%	15%	54%	21%
welcome the promotion of non Christian religious teachings in the media	2%	7%	54%	37%
speak in tongues	2%	9%	84%	6%

Conservative social and moral views, especially around abortion, marriage and sexuality are deeply embedded among British evangelicals and part of their public profile. Yet alongside this flourish more liberal views on freedom of expression and belief, toleration, economics, welfare, gender, race and immigration as discussed by Ackah.⁴² Our wider findings from the research programme lead us to agree with Guest that there is no evangelical political consensus or block vote and with Hatcher who said that: 'uniformly, British Evangelicals hold their religious identity very strong'. However, this religious identity was predominantly 'Christian' rather than 'Evangelical', which distinguishes them from Evangelicals in America. The 'us and them' mentality, so prevalent in U.S. Evangelicalism and fueling ongoing culture wars, is not present in Britain.⁴³

Concluding Reflections, and Implications for the Church

Our research on ordinary theology suggests that the key unifying factor for British evangelicalism is a faith which is based on a heartfelt commitment that is often described as 'not a religion but a personal relationship with Jesus'. In this the uniqueness of Christ as 'the way, the truth and the life' providing the only way to God and heaven is a distinctive doctrine. Our research has shown how Bebbington's four marks (biblicism, crucicentrism,

⁴² William Ackah, 'Evangelicals and Their Global Connections' in *Evangelical Alliance* (ed. G. Smith), *21st Century Evangelicals*, 157–80.

⁴³ Andrea C. Hatcher, *Political and Religious Identities of British Evangelicals* (New York: Springer, 2017), 81.

conversionism, activism) remain strongly and widely held by evangelicals, though in each case with a certain degree of nuance.

So what are the implications for evangelical church leaders and theological educators in terms of these six important features that seem to define evangelical Christianity as they teach and make disciples? Firstly they should welcome and build on personal commitment and the relationship with Christ that exists among believers. There are however, some potential dangers with the individualism that often characterizes evangelicalism, especially in an age where consumer choice is a dominant motif and authenticity, subjective experience and exploring diverse spiritualities are more popular than traditional orthodoxies as expounded by religious authorities. A higher level of theological literacy in the Christian community would be welcome, but depends on high quality teaching, or rather facilitating learning in the light of what we know about different learning styles and effective communication in a digital environment.

When believers affirm the distinctiveness of Christianity and the uniqueness of Christ as the way of salvation church leaders should be careful not to encourage an exclusiveness that builds walls restricting communication with people of other faiths or none, or which fosters any sense of superiority, racism, anti-Semitism or Islamophobia. My recent paper offers more analysis of data from the research programme focusing on views about religious diversity, inter-faith activity and the relationship between Christianity and Islam, contrasting 'Crusader' views with 'Franciscan' approaches to mission among Muslims.⁴⁴ Equipping Christians to understand their own distinctive identity within a multicultural context, and to live and speak faithfully for Christ while maintaining generous hospitality to the 'other', is a crucial priority for contemporary preachers and teachers.

Most church leaders will be happy that evangelicals value, read and seek to follow the teachings of the Bible. Our surveys show that relatively few are complete literalists in their approach and large numbers are not wedded to the doctrine of inerrancy that is a marker of evangelicalism in the USA. There is considerable appreciation of the hermeneutical issues in reading and applying scripture in the free text comments in our surveys. However, evangelical Christians are notoriously prone to proof texting, dipping sometimes randomly into the Bible as a treasure chest of individual verses available for encouragement, blessing, guidance and occasionally rebuke. Maybe preachers and teachers should consider devoting time to questions of hermeneutics, explaining texts in the context of the original writers and readers, how they fit within the grand narrative of Scripture, and how they might be applied in our very different contemporary world. They also need to be honest about their own positionality and its influence on the way the bible is being read, in dialogue with contextual theologians who advocate postcolonialist, feminist, liberationist and similar perspectives. In this way preachers can attempt to develop and deepen the theological literacy and faithful

⁴⁴ Greg Smith, 'Evangelicals and the Encounter with Islam: Changing Christian Identity in Multi-Faith Britain', *Entangled Religions* 5 (2018), 154–209.

discipleship of their congregations. A more sophisticated treatment of Scripture could also be of benefit in apologetics addressed to an unbelieving and sceptical culture.

The vast majority of British evangelicals still place a weighty emphasis on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as an atonement for the sins of the world. By far the most popular understanding is based on penal substitution, that Christ died in my place for my sins – he took the punishment I deserved. And yet this account of the cross, especially when expressed in terms of blood sacrifice, or satisfaction of the wrath of an angry God, is increasingly incomprehensible and sometimes offensive to people outside the evangelical community. Even many evangelicals are uneasy with the harshest expressions of this doctrine, when it is asserted or implied that God the Father poured out his anger on his Son or what some have described as ‘Divine Child abuse’. Many of our respondents were fully supportive of complementary perspectives on the atonement, especially the Christus Victor account. Yet in evangelism, worship songs and teaching, penal substitution dominates the field. Moreover, it is probable that hymnody is more influential in teaching and reinforcing ordinary theology than preaching or book reading. Maybe preachers, teachers, songwriters and worship leaders would do well to explore a much richer explanation of the Cross and Resurrection.

Of the four elements of Bebbington’s quadrilateral perhaps conversion presents the healthiest picture. Almost all the respondents can relate a personal testimony of conversion or commitment and it is clear that faith in Jesus has made a difference in their lives. There is a wide recognition that salvation does not depend on a single moment of decision, at least not for everyone and that discipleship, growth and repeated moments or repentance or even conversion are likely to be part of a normal Christian life. Compared with some of the classic conversion accounts with their emphasis on fear of damnation in evangelical narratives of earlier centuries those of British Christians in the 21st Century appear understated and soft. Some conservative evangelicals may find this a cause for concern while more open and progressive evangelicals may welcome this and see such an image as attractive to outsiders and seekers. It would be helpful to have a deeper discussion in the church about conversion, repentance, transformation and discipleship. From what are people being converted and to what, or rather whom, are they turning? And how does conversion or commitment to follow Jesus relate to the call to active participation in the mission and Kingdom of God?

Finally, as Bebbington would expect, twenty-first century British evangelicals continue to be characterized by their activism, though one might expect that busy working lives and lifestyles may limit the contribution of unpaid labour people can offer before they retire from paid work. In theory at least, they are deeply committed to sharing the gospel and passing on their faith to others, especially to the younger generation. There has been a welcome move in recent years to embrace social action as part of mission and the work of God’s kingdom. This can be seen as a recovery of the evangelical ethos of Wesley, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and the Booths that was largely abandoned in the mid-twentieth

century. Thus many evangelical churches and their members are now fully committed to local social action ministries such as food banks, homeless projects and debt counselling. Such projects have some limitations and are not beyond critique,⁴⁵ especially in terms of making donors feel good and beneficiaries becoming dependent while papering over the cracks in a profoundly unjust social and economic system. One of the downsides may be that while they develop contacts and a positive reputation for Christians in the wider community, projects and works of mercy tend to become a substitute for the verbal sharing of the gospel. Our research shows that many evangelicals lack confidence, gifts or enthusiasm for speaking about Christ with their friends, colleagues and neighbours, and in some cases wonder why anyone would want to join their church. Thus the final challenge for preachers and church leaders is to enthuse and equip their congregations so that they can appropriately offer enquirers a verbal account of the 'hope that lies within them', alongside offering compassion and building relationships of friendship and trust.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Greg Smith, 'Evangelical Social Action in the UK', *Crucible* (2017), 25–37.

⁴⁶ The author acknowledges the contribution to this research of the Evangelical Alliance who funded the programme and employed him part time between 2011 and 2016 during the data collection phase of the work, and of colleagues on the staff team, in particular Lauren Sibuns, Lucy Olofinjana and Dave Landrum, as well as the members of the project academic advisory group.