

# What is an evangelical?

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Date: 22 September 2019

Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] All right, then, in English, 1 Peter 1 and verse 13. Peter says, I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.

But I think it's right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by a way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me.

And I'll make every effort so that after my departure, you may be able at any time to recall these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. When he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was born to him by the majestic glory, this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.

We ourselves heard this very voice born from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you'll do well, to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

[ 1 : 20 ] Knowing this, first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man. But men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

But false prophets also arose among the people. Just as there will be false teachers among you. And just flip along to chapter 3, the first couple of verses there.

This is the second letter that I'm writing to you, beloved. In both of them, I'm stirring you up. Stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder. That you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.

Knowing this, first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days. Scoffing and following their own sinful desires. Amen.

May God bless us his word. And we'll come back and be looking at these and some other parts of scripture a little later on. Perhaps you'd open your Bible with me.

[ 2 : 38 ] Not at the passage that we read. We'll come to that. But at John's Gospel, chapter 14. I think that's page 901. I want to address the question tonight.

What is an evangelical? And what is an evangelical church? What does it believe? And what does it look like, more importantly? It's an important question.

Because today, it seems many, perhaps nearly everybody in the church, claims that term of evangelical. It's become a very elastic term indeed.

And sometimes, it seems as though it's come to mean nothing more than just being lively or enthusiastic and not dead. Well, I hope we're all alive and enthusiastic and not dead in this church. But I think we do need to be a little bit clearer than that. After all, the devil is alive and enthusiastic and not yet dead. And the devil, I can assure you, is not an evangelical. So I want to get our heads clear on this question of what we mean or what we ought to mean by this word evangelical and what it means to be an evangelical church.

[ 3 : 49 ] And I thought it was a good opportunity when we're all together at the start of a new term to do that. So what is being an evangelical all about? Well, it's all about the gospel and the Bible.

The evangel, the gospel, is the published public news about the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

And the gospel comes to us in and through the words of Scripture, comes through the Bible. And so at the foundational level, any discussion about the word evangelical is about the gospel and what it means to be a gospel person and a gospel church.

And that, in turn, is all about the Bible. It's all about the Bible, the nature of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and the absolute sufficiency of Scripture.

That's what everything depends upon. And that's why the first chapter of the confession of faith of our church is called the Westminster Confession. That's why the first chapter is entitled of the Holy Scripture.

[ 5 : 03 ] It's the first chapter and it's the longest chapter. And that's because it's absolutely foundational to everything else that follows in the 32 chapters of that confession of faith.

Immediately, some people will say this. They'll say, well, that's wrong. Scripture can't be the foundational thing about our faith. Surely, Jesus is the real foundation of our faith.

Surely, Jesus is where we must begin. Surely, the word of God incarnate is Jesus Christ. So, he's our only ultimate authority, not the Bible.

Of course, when you say that, that sounds clever. It sounds true, doesn't it? Because Jesus is indeed the living word of God. But it only takes you a moment to see just how facile that kind of comment actually is.

It's because we've got to ask, haven't we, well, which Jesus Christ are we talking about? Which Jesus is the supreme revelation of God, the incarnate word? Where does our authoritative view of Jesus come from in the first place?

[ 6 : 08 ] Is it the Jesus of Islam? Because Jesus is written about in the Koran as a prophet. Is that the Jesus we're talking about? Or is it the Jesus of Judaism today?

Or is it the Jesus of Hinduism that sees Jesus as one God, but among many gods of the Hindu pantheon? Or is it the Jesus of majority opinion?

Shall we go out on the street and take a poll and ask people who they think Jesus is? Or is it the Jesus of the false teachers that Paul speaks about in the New Testament?

Because he says of their Jesus that actually he's no Jesus at all that they're speaking about. Which Jesus is our authority? Well, of course, the simple fact is that the only Jesus that we can know or take seriously at all or engage with at all is the Jesus of Scripture.

The Jesus whose words and whose works are recorded for us by the eyewitness testimony of the apostles and preserved for us in the Scriptures, our Bibles. Everything depends upon the Scriptures.

[ 7 : 15 ] And everything that we could and everything that we must know about God must come from God's revelation to us. Which is what we have in the Scriptures. If God really is God, then by definition, he is quite beyond merely human, merely finite analysis and description.

If he's not, then he's not God. He's a creation of ours. But if he is God, if he's the creator, if he's the infinite being, if he's above and beyond all created things, then of course, he's beyond our discovery, isn't he?

He's beyond our fathoming all by ourselves. The characters in a play, they're created by the author of the play. They can't step outside the universe of that story that they belong to and get to know the playwright.

They can't do that, can they? Well, so it is with our world, our world of creation. If we're to know our creator outside and beyond us, then he's got to reveal himself to us from the outside.

And he's got to himself come down into our environment, join our story and show himself to us. You think about a remote island in the middle of a great ocean, where islanders live in total isolation, and they've got no idea about any people beyond that island.

[ 8 : 41 ] They could imagine possibilities, couldn't they, that there might be people from elsewhere. But it's only when people from elsewhere actually come there and reveal themselves to them that they can really know that there are such people and what they're like.

That's the way it is with God. And from the beginning, he's been doing that. He's been revealing himself to human beings by coming down into our world and speaking and acting so that we become truly conscious of his presence.

That's what we saw this morning in Hebrews chapter 1. And so majestically long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things and through whom he also created the whole world.

You see, God speaks and God has spoken that climactic word of revelation in his son, in Jesus himself. And God reveals himself all through history, in his works, in the events that are recorded in scripture, but also in his own explanation of these events through his own divinely appointed mouthpieces, all the prophets, those who speak for him.

And the ultimate event, of course, is in the person and work of Jesus himself, the son of God, which is interpreted to us through his very own words, his words about himself, about his own significance, and about what his works really mean.

[10:16] We see that in the gospels and through the words of the apostles that Jesus himself appointed to go out and to teach others about him with his authority commissioned.

And we also see it through all the words of the Old Testament, again, as we saw this morning. It's Jesus himself says, all speaks of him and is fulfilled in him.

And that's why, you see, the Bible, the scriptures, are absolutely central to any faith in which the real Jesus is absolutely central.

And that's why an evangelical church and an evangelical Christian are those for whom the Bible is the full and final and clear authority in everything we believe, in everything we do, and in everything that we proclaim.

We believe the word of God in scripture is God's supreme word for all. And so we honor the biblical gospel as the supreme authority of God. We obey the word of God in scripture as God's sovereign will for all.

[11:25] And so we humble ourselves under the biblical gospel as the supreme rule of God for our lives. And we spread the word of God in scripture as the only saving way for all people to God.

So we hold out the biblical gospel as the only way of encountering God in reality. Let me say something about each of these three vital evangelical perspectives.

First of all, an evangelical is one who honors the biblical gospel as the full and final and clear authority of God. So an evangelical church is one that will believe the word of God written in scripture to be God's supreme word to all.

We believe that God has spoken an ultimate word of revelation, a full and final word to mankind in the gospel of his son, the Lord Jesus. But here's a question.

How do we today have that full and final revelation? Well, I've already told you the answer. In the Bible, in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, in the word of God written as our confession of faith calls the Bible.

[12:45] I want to give you three key portions of the Bible that are vital for that understanding here. And the first of these is in John's gospel, chapter 14 and 15 and 16 here. Let's start with John 14 at verse 21.

That's where Jesus tells us plainly what the definition of a Christian disciple is. John 14 verse 21. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me and he who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

What is Christian faith? It's loving obedience to Jesus Christ as supreme Lord. That's what he's saying. But remember that in this whole upper room discourse, Jesus is preparing his apostles, isn't he, for the time after his death and resurrection and ascension back to the Father.

So here's the question. After that happens, how will anyone be able to know how to obey Jesus' commands, as he says here, and love him?

We'll look down to verse 25. John 14, 25. These things I've spoken to you, the disciples he's speaking to, while I'm still with you.

[14:01] But the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all the things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. The Holy Spirit, he says, is going to come and enable the apostles to be absolutely clear about everything that Jesus had already taught them in his earthly ministry.

Very important to remember who he's speaking to here. He's not speaking to you, is he? He's not speaking to me. Jesus in his earthly ministry didn't teach you and me things that need to be brought to our remembrance. We weren't there.

Who was there? These men, whom he called to be his disciples and set apart as apostles. Now turn over to chapter 16 at verse 13. Again, speaking about that very thing.

When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you, the apostles, into all truth. He won't speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak.

And he will declare to you the things that are to come. He'll glorify me, for he'll take from what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. Therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

[15:14] Isn't that amazing? The Holy Spirit's ministry is to take all that is Christ's and declare it to these commissioned apostles of Jesus Christ. What an amazing gift that they should be given the ultimate revelation of God and his sons into their hands, into their hearts to share with others.

And that's the purpose, isn't it? Just look up to chapter 15, the end of the chapter, verse 26. He's very, very clear. Why is he doing it? When the helper comes, whom I send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

And you also will bear witness. Why? Because you, you apostles, you've been with me from the beginning. You've seen it.

You've heard it firsthand. He bears witness to the apostles so that they will go and bear witness to others.

Bearing eyewitness testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's exactly what he then commanded his apostles. Remember, just before his ascension in what we call the Great Commission at the end of Matthew chapter 28.

[16:23] You go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And so it was.

All through the early church, the churches honored the apostles' words. The apostles' words brought to them the word of the Lord Jesus as a full and final and clear authority from God himself through Jesus Christ.

And their authority in those churches was God's words spoken by the apostles. The apostolic church was under apostolic command.

But here's another question. What about when the apostles too were no longer on the earth in person? Where's the authority for the church going to come from now?

Well, let's turn to the passage we read in 2 Peter because that's the second key passage here, page 1018. And it's exactly what Peter is addressing as we saw.

[17:28] He's saying his death is approaching. Chapter 1, verse 13. And so, since he knows that that's going to be soon, he says in verse 15, I'm going to make every effort so that after my departure, my death, you'll be able at any time to recall these things.

He's determined that after he's died, in fact, after all the other apostles have died, he's determined that the churches realize that they are not left without God's authoritative word.

Noah's, chapter 1, verse 3 says, God has given them everything they need for life and for godliness through the great and precious promises of the gospel handed by Jesus to the apostles and now preserved after the apostles.

Look at verses 16 to 21, where is he appointing them to find that great authority to keep going back to so they never forget the authoritative word of God?

Well, it's the scriptures. The scriptures of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. Verses 16 to 18 speak of the apostolic witness, don't they? We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

[18:39] Verse 18, we ourselves heard this very voice born from heaven. We were with him firsthand. Eyewitnesses and earwitnesses. And so you've got to keep going back to the apostolic word for the authoritative word of God in Christ.

And the Old Testament, verses 19 to 21. Again, in the same way, that word came direct from God through his prophets. And it's still a lamp to shine the light of God into your lives right until the very last day when the morning star rises in your hearts.

because these men, verse 21, weren't speaking off their own bat. Men spoke from God as they were carried along, as they were driven along. It's a strong word by the Holy Spirit.

You see, he's saying the church has God's authoritative words through the prophets and through the apostles. And that's going to be essential for them.

Why? Well, look at chapter 2, verse 1, because just as there were false teachers in the past, there's going to be false teachers also in the future among you. And verse 2, the way of truth will be blasphemed through them.

[19:55] By the way, notice, read down to chapter 2, verse 10. Notice the characteristic of these false teachers. He says, they rejoice in the lusts of defiling passion and they despise authority.

That is the apostolic authority. In other words, they love to pervert sex and they love to pervert the scriptures. Well, isn't that very striking?

Isn't that exactly what we see so often in the churches today? That's what you're going to be faced with in the future, says Peter. So what do you do? You go on holding the biblical gospel, the words

of God written in scripture by his prophets and by his apostles as God's supreme authority. Nothing else, no matter what anyone says. It's his constant refrain through this letter. Look at chapter 3, verses 1 and 2 that we read once again. I'm stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember what?

The predictions of the holy prophets, the Old Testament scriptures and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, the New Testament scriptures. Obey my command, says Jesus.

[ 21 : 08 ] That's how you love me and you're my disciple. How? Well, in the commandment of our Lord and Savior that comes through the apostles and the apostolic scriptures.

Scripture is essential and absolutely central. The word of God written. One final reference. 2 Timothy, chapter 3, the one that Edward was looking at last Sunday evening.

Let's have a quick look there once again. Page 996, I think. Because here, Paul's saying the same thing. Paul knows that he also is going to die soon. And he's very concerned about the future once he also has gone.

What's Timothy got to do after Paul is no longer there? Well, verse 14, in the midst of all kinds of people deserting, you are to continue in what you've learned, knowing from whom you learned it. Paul himself, the apostle. And verse 15, not only the apostle's word, but the words of all the scriptures, the Old Testament scriptures, the sacred writings, because they too are able to be powerful to make you wise for salvation.

[ 22 : 15 ] And, verse 17, to equip you for every good work. They help you for salvation and for service. All scripture, the prophetic witness and the apostolic witness, all scripture, he says, is breathed out by God himself and it is his authoritative word of salvation and of shaping and directing every aspect of our lives in true Christian service to God.

And that's why, you see, friends, an evangelical Christian and an evangelical church honors the Bible as its full and final and clear authority. But notice, and this is important in Timothy here, it's not just what we say we believe about the Bible, it's actually, Paul's saying here, what we do with the Bible.

In that sense, it's best to think of true evangelicalism as being about doing, not just about believing. Look at chapter 4, verse 5, do the work of an evangelist.

You could translate that just as well, do the work of an evangelical. Do it. be an evangelical, be in practice, one who actually lives in line with this view of Scripture.

Make it real. Especially when, as Paul says there in verse 3, when lots of people don't want the Scriptures and want to wander off instead into all kinds of myths. And that's our second point.

[ 23 : 45 ] You see, it's not just having the Bible as a full and final and clear authority. Evangelicals are those who actually humble themselves under the biblical gospel as a full and final and clear rule for our lives.

We actually live it. We accept the authority of Scripture in practice, not just in theory. And we actually obey the Word of God in Scripture as God's sovereign will for everyone.

You see, many Christians, many churches like to call themselves evangelical, Bible-based. The Bible's very important to them in their belief. The Bible's never absent.

And it's honored to an extent. But as Edward was saying last week, the real question is, where in the vehicle exactly is the Bible? Is it actually in the driving seat, driving the car of your life and driving the car of our church?

Or is the Bible just being carried along in the passenger seat? Is it useful for frequent reference, but it's not actually in control of the vehicle? Or is it actually stuck in the back seat, not getting a look in very often?

[ 25 : 01 ] Or is it, as sadly it often is these days, somewhere just way back in the boot, buried under the really important things, which is all the equipment for the band? Now, in an evangelical church, the Bible is not just somewhere in the car, somewhere in the church.

It's in total control. It's in charge not just of the destination we're going to, but the route and every single aspect of that journey.

But you see, here's the truth, friends. It's surprisingly easy to think that the Bible is in control, when in fact, when push comes to shove, well, it ain't necessarily so. James reminds us of that very forcibly in his letter, doesn't he?

Be doers of the word, not just hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Easy to do. Easy to deceive ourselves. To think that the Bible is the ultimate authority, but in fact, in practice, when the chips are down, it's something else that will have the ultimate say.

Here's where an acronym that I borrowed from Philip Jensen, I think is helpful for us to remember. B-R-I-E. Not brie, not the cheese, but if that helps you remember it, then that's fine.

[ 26 : 13 ] But B-R-I-E. Let me explain. If the Bible is not the full and the final and the clear authority and rule in our lives and in our churches, then one of three other things will be our reason or the institution that we belong to or our personal experience.

And I have this diagram to try and summarize it. Let's start with reason. Many people in the church do appeal to the Bible as the final authority in matters of faith and life and even as a clear authority. But in reality, they reject its full authority. In practice, effectively, they remove parts of the Bible that they don't like or they don't want.

That was the approach of the old liberal theology. The liberal theology of the last century couldn't hold to the miraculous, but it was very happy and very keen on the ethical and moral teaching of Jesus.

So it rejected the miraculous. Also, it couldn't stomach any idea of atonement for sin. And so, it rejected any idea of a gospel that demanded a new birth and so on.

[ 27 : 35 ] So it just became a matter of morality. When I was at school, the primary school, I can remember still today in our scripture lessons when you used to get those sorts of things in school, we were being taught by our teacher about the feeding of the 5,000.

And the teacher said to us, well, of course, how were all these 5,000 people fed after that thing? Well, the truth is, boys and girls, that the teaching of Jesus was just so exciting and so enthralling that everybody quite forgot that they were hungry.

And that's why they all felt as though they were well fed. You see, she'd been reading the commentaries of people like William Barclay and so on. That was the standard fare. I got in terrible trouble because I asked her, well, how were there 12 baskets of food left over then?

But you see, our supernatural, our superior human reason can't believe in miracles, can't stomach that sort of talk about atonement for sin. So you excise, you explain away those parts of the Bible. And so you say, yes, well, the Bible's clear, it's final, but you're not allowing it to be a full authority, are you? You're subordinating it to our reason, to what we think is scientific truth and so on.

[ 28 : 49 ] It's the same today, although it's rather different in some ways in that postmodern people often don't seem to have any problem with ideas of the miraculous. What they have real problems with is actually Jesus' moral and ethical teaching, especially things to do with sexual ethics.

We can't have that. You read William Barclay, you'll find he's very strong on Christian morality and ethics. But today, no, those are the parts of the Bible people want to strike out and get rid of.

But either way, you see, the real authority is my own reasoning about things, colored by science or philosophy or sociology or whatever it is. That's all around us today in the Western world, in the church.

A second alternative authority, if it's not the Bible, is the institution of the church. We're happy to say the Bible's a full authority. Indeed, the Bible is a clear authority, but in fact, we reject it as the final authority because the final authority, when push comes to shove, lies with the institution, with the church.

And that, of course, is the position classically of the Roman Catholic church, the Orthodox churches. The final authority is tradition. It's the magisterium. It's the words of the Pope when he declares that is the final authority, not the scriptures.

[ 30 : 04 ] And it can be very similar in other institutions in many church denominations. At the end of the day, if the chips are down, they will bow to the establishment.

Don't rock the boat. It's for the good of the church. And that's what you see today mostly in the mainline denominations in the Western world. The real key comes when you ask which is the verb and which is the noun.

Are we Presbyterian or Baptist or Anglican or whatever, evangelicals? In other words, the noun is evangelical. Evangelical is first and always.

The adjective is just Presbyterian or Baptist or whatever else it is. That just describes an aspect of what we are but what we are always is evangelical or is it the other way around? Do we say, well, I'm an evangelical Presbyterian.

I'm an evangelical Baptist. I'm an evangelical Anglican or whatever. My real identity lies in that. I'm a Presbyterian. First, last and always.

[ 31 : 09 ] Or whatever it might be. I belong to the Church of Scotland. First and last and always. I'm evangelical but that's where I really belong when the chips are down. And when conflict arises, the question is, which will you always be?

Will you be always evangelical? Or will you be always for the institution? And actually, independent churches are not exempt either because very often within any congregation, it's the traditions of that congregation, the way we've always done things that trump the gospel.

When it comes to conflict, what is the deciding factor? Do we say, well, this is our way of doing things? And so often, even in churches that call themselves and think of themselves as evangelical churches, in fact, the authority actually is in the institution and its precious traditions.

And the traditions of man trump the truth of the gospel. people. A third rivalry, of course, is our experience.

People are often happy to say, yes, the Bible's the full authority. It's the final authority. But in itself, it's not a clear authority. In other words, it's not sufficient. We need something more than just a Bible for living real life, for making decisions, and so on.

[ 32 : 30 ] If the liberal is the Bible minus, you cut bits out, then this is the Bible plus. And that's the classic Pentecostal or charismatic position.

The Bible's authoritative, but actually, in practice, it's not sufficient. And so you're looking for special revelations, personal revelations as extras to tell you what to do for real life, for guidance, for making decisions, and so on.

We're looking for a word from the Lord to tell me. A word of knowledge, you might call it. Some people might just call it a verse. I've got a verse for you, brother. Oh, I opened my Bible and I felt the Lord gave me this word.

Evangelical pietism is really just very similar. Very often, in people's approach to guidance, that's the way they'll talk. They're looking for a sign, a confirmation from God, a verse, something to tell me. I'm waiting on the Lord to lead me.

You see, that's very, very dangerous. Because our feelings, our experience are so powerful and they can easily lead us, can't they? To favor that kind of thing over and against the clear teaching and commands of Scripture.

[ 33 : 40 ] So you see, reason, the institution, our experience, all of these can easily, in practice, become the real authority, the real rule that we're looking to if we inordinately cherish these things.

but no, an evangelical will rely on the Bible and the Bible alone as both authoritative and sufficient for all things to do with life and godliness.

Because we've been given it in the Scriptures, that's what Peter says. The Bible has full authority over and against our human rationalizing, away, things that we don't like, things that we find hard to accept or hard to believe, like the Bible's sexual ethics or whatever.

No, the Bible's revelation must be obeyed. And the Bible has final authority versus all of our human traditions and institutions that we hold dear and that we don't want to let go of.

No, when there's a conflict between the authority of any institution and the authority of God's Word, God's Word in Scripture must have the final authority. And the Bible has a clear authority.

[ 34 : 50 ] Not our human experience. Not our gut feeling that tells us, oh, in this case, it's different. I feel the Lord's telling me to stay at home and meditate on the Bible and not go to church anymore.

God's told me that very specifically. I had a word from the Lord. Well, it's very hard to argue against that, isn't it? Who am I to say you haven't had a word from the Lord except that the Bible says do not give up meeting together as we find in Hebrews.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that human reason or institutions or our own experiences are unimportant. Of course, they're not unimportant.

They all have a place and you can be fully biblical, fully submitted to the Bible's authority without denying a proper place for all of these things. You can see there in the diagram, the Bible intersects all of these things.

And our natural temperamental differences between one another as Christians will incline some of us more to one thing, some of us more to another. Some of us are more experientially oriented.

[ 35 : 56 ] Some of us are more rationalizers. Some of us are more institutional people, company men and so on. But the point is none of these things can be the ultimate authority and rule.

If you move at all outside that circle, that line where the Bible stands above and over all of these other things, then you are no longer an evangelical.

Because the biblical evangel in that case has taken second place, hasn't it? And friends, it's easy, easy to do that in practice. Thinking that you are evangelical but actually denying it by your actions. But an evangelical church is not just one that believes that the Bible is the full and final and clear authority. It shows that it believes it by obeying the content of that full and final and clear authority. It does the evangel. It doesn't just speak about it. That's why it's possible, you see, to have an evangelical pulpit ministry preaching and teaching the scriptures but one that never actually produces an evangelical church.

[ 37 : 10 ] Because you can preach the gospel and people can hear the gospel, that's where it stops. It doesn't penetrate into the pores of the life of the whole church. It doesn't change and shape everything about the church authoritatively.

So you can have churches that are sound in doctrine on paper but actually in reality are very unsound in heart, can't you? But a church will only become a real evangelical church if together we humble ourselves under the real rule of God.

If we allow the Bible to set the whole agenda for everything that we do, all the structures of church life, set the agenda for how the church makes its decisions, how it sets its priorities, what it spends its money on, what meetings are held and stopped, whether staff are needed or not, how leaders are chosen or not, all of these things.

The question is never just, well what's practical, what's pragmatic at the moment, what does sociology tell us, what does the church growth science tell us about this and that, no, no, no. The question is always what does the biblical gospel demand of the church and especially in conflict situations within congregations or sometimes between congregations and their association or denomination.

We can't be driven by institutional concerns above real gospel concerns. The Bible always has to have primary authority, never the institutions of man or never just the emotions of man or the reasonings of man.

[ 38 : 52 ] And that's why establishing a real evangelical church is actually very tough, it's very draining, it's costly work, isn't it? It's hard because the Bible is setting a radical agenda always for everything.

But we don't have to do endless soul searching, trying to discern, oh, what is God saying to us as a church? As if the Bible wasn't clear enough. Of course it is.

We want to know what God is saying to us, we go straight to where God has said it, not to what we think God might say if we asked Him. If we believe the Bible is a full and final and clear authority, then we will honor the Bible as God's supreme word.

And we'll humble ourselves under the Bible as God's supreme will for us in all things. His divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us.

And we have that fully and finally and with great clarity in the Holy Scriptures. But finally, one very important point that I'll deal with briefly, but it is vitally important, and it's this.

[ 40 : 02 ] An evangelical is one who holds out the biblical gospel as the full and final and clear way to encounter God. We spread the word as God's saving way for all people.

See, it would be possible, wouldn't it, to be so taken up with preserving God's truth, so busy honoring it as true and obeying it, that we're actually in danger of turning inwards into a sort of preservation mode that escapes from the real battles of life.

No, no, no. One of the clearest themes that you find, especially in the pastoral epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, which are Paul's words for the church after the apostolic age.

One of the great themes is that gospel preservation will only happen through real gospel proclamation and propagation. So that means a real evangelical church can't possibly ever be an inward-looking one because that attitude will never preserve the gospel.

That attitude is what ends up poisoning the gospel into sectarianism. Now, a real evangelical church must always be outward-looking, spreading the word, holding out the biblical gospel as the only way to encounter the one living God through Jesus Christ.

[ 41 : 17 ] Do the work of an evangelical, says Paul, in 2 Timothy 4. Proclaim the word in season and out of season when people don't want it, as well as when they do.

The word of God, he says, is not bound. That's why he says to teach able men who then are able to teach others, who will go on teaching and spreading it to others. Pray, he says, for all people in 1 Timothy 2, because God desires for them to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Because there's only one God, there's only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. That's Paul's cry to the church, to go on, holding out the word of life, the word of a God of abundant mercy.

That's Peter's word. We saw it this morning. God's not slow as some of you think. He's patient, not desiring that people perish, but they should be brought to repentance. So what is an evangelical? An evangelical Christian, an evangelical church? Well, it means that we hold dear the Bible, the word of God written, and the biblical gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as the full and final and clear authority in all matters of faith and life.

[ 42 : 37 ] We honor it as God's supreme word. We humble ourselves under it as God's sovereign will. And we go on doing that in season and out of season.

Often today, it's very much out of season, isn't it? Even within the church, people don't want it. Certainly in the world, people don't. But we go on doing it together, helping one another for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if we do that, friends, whatever kind of church we may be or stop being or become in terms of trivial things like associations with others, certain practices of this and that and the next thing. Whatever may happen with any of those things, we will always, always be an evangelical church, a church that is founded on and that is standing on the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God. And we must do that, says Paul, because any other gospel is no gospel at all. So let's encourage one another to go on being a gospel church, a church of the word and a church that is taking that word into our own lives and into all the world.

[ 43 : 58 ] Let's pray. Amen. Help us, Lord, we pray never to be ashamed of the gospel of Christ or of the apostles of Christ or of the scriptures that testify to Christ.

Whoever despised, whoever rejected they may be and we may be in our own day. But help us rather to cherish the evangel, the gospel, as we have it in all its riches, in these scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Keep us honoring it as your supreme authority. Keep us humbling ourselves under it, we pray, as your supreme rule over our lives. And keep us holding it out to the world as the only way of salvation for all.

Help us. Help us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.