

# The Problem of “Evangelicalism” in Discussing Christianity in Korea and China since 1900: A Preliminary Inquiry by a China Historian

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The term “evangelicalism” is widely used today for many different purposes. It is used by historians of religion or church history to refer to particular trends, doctrines, or behaviors in Protestant, especially North Atlantic Christianity, from the 18th century to the present. This despite the fact that the phenomenon of “evangelicalism” in the UK, Canada, and the US is very different in the 18th century and today. And then such a widely used term, and one so tied to Anglo-American church history, is now used to identify or describe Christian churches, movements, and groups of people all over the world. In this short paper I just want to point out some of the potential problems that may exist in using this term in E. Asia, in particular in doing the church history of China and Japan. I am NOT arguing, at least not at this point, that we not use the term evangelicalism, just thinking about the implications of its use. And I welcome comments and discussion on these matters. I have just started to think about this topic, and this is the first thing I have written on it.

## The Diversity of Western Prototypes

The early Protestants of the Reformation period in the 16th century, especially Lutherans, used the term evangelical to denote their emphasis on justification by grace through faith, for individual salvation. In early modern England, evangelicals were a party within the Church of England; many were Puritan in theology and loyalties. Some scholars of church history have defined “evangelicalism” since the early 18th century as being characterized by four common features:<sup>1)</sup>

- 1) A theological and devotional BIBLICISM, -- the Bible inspired by God and uniquely authoritative.
- 2) The need for a personal CONVERSION experience involving a personal encounter with Christ, repentance, and faith (even for those who practice infant baptism).

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1) Many works, especially by Mark Noll, and David Bebbington

- 3) FOCUS ON THE CROSS: Jesus's death on the cross as absolutely crucial, and the cross as the center of piety, preaching, and identity.

- 4) ACTIVISM in missions, and "witnessing" or proclamation. Some would add social ministry.

One of the questions I pose is whether this commonly-accepted list of features is appropriate and sufficient to describe what we call "evangelicalism" in China and Korea.

In 18th-century England and North America, the label of evangelicalism was used for those associated with the Great Awakenings and the revivals associated with them—the work of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, John Wesley, etc<sup>2</sup>). Revivalism remained a key part of evangelicalism in the first half of the 19th century(e.g. Charles Finney). IN the late 19th and early 20th century, evangelicals were the Protestants who remained loyal to revivalism and maintained a fairly conservative theology in contrast to the rise of liberal theological ideas in mainline Protestant denominations. The Fundamentalist movement in Britain and North America came directly out of the evangelicalism of the early 20th century, as did the Pentecostal movement, and together they overshadowed the evangelical roots of both movements. By the 1940s, some elements of the fundamentalist camp became tired of its militance and its anti-intellectualism, and used the term "evangelicalism" for a conservative but postfundamentalist set of ideas and behaviors that actually had much in common with fundamentalism theologically but which was more irenic and ecumenical in tone and practical action. Its leaders, e.g. Billy Graham, Fuller Theological Seminary, Christianity Today, emphasized cooperation and coalition with non-fundamentalist conservative Protestants. The other earlier 20th century outgrowth of evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, in the 1960s also began a steady movement back towards the evangelical "mainstream." (if "mainstream" is the right word).

Finally, beginning about 25 years ago, the more radical elements of the politically active sector of the evangelical coalition created a neofundamentalist political movement which continued to use the term "evangelical" to describe its identity, and most news media used it in this senses as well. Here I am referring to Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and their organizations. To many casual observers, they have become synonymous with "evangelicalism." As a result, many theologically conservative Christians, who seem to have the 4 widely accepted characteristics of evangelicalism, mentioned earlier, do not like being called or considered to be "evangelicals," preferring other descriptions (though these are hard to find—"Reformed" is one, but its meaning is not widely understood).

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2) Large literature, including George Marsden's recent biography of Edwards. The newest book here is Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: the Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*(Yale,2007). [Canada –GeorgeRawlyk]

This brief survey of the history of the term “evangelicalism” shows, I think, the closeness of its ties to the particulars of Anglo-North American history. Can we safely use it in making broad analysis of Protestant Xty in China and Korea?

## China

In China since the arrival of Protestantism 200 years ago, it may appear that the four characteristics of evangelicalism—biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, and activism, are clearly present. —in fact, they seem to be overwhelmingly present. For the entire 20th century, these features would characterize a majority of the foreign missionaries present in China in the first half of the 20th century, and also a huge majority of the believers in the churches, especially in the post-missionary era after 1950. So perhaps, we might ask, the term is not very useful, since it does not differentiate very much or identify any sector of Protestantism as being particularly “evangelical.” Today, practically everyone is evangelical, it appears. How then do we do any analysis of the Christians in China?

Perhaps some criteria other than those of evangelicalism are in order, or should be elaborated upon in the Chinese case. For example, “conversionism,” one of the four criteria of evangelicalism, seems to have a different flavor in 20th century China. Rather than an experience of repentance and faith in a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, it looks like many Chinese evangelicals in conversion experience an affiliation with a god who is first and foremost efficacious, willing and able, if convinced to do so, to give both tangible and intangible blessings to the believer. The trick is to convince God to do this. How does one do it? Perhaps “by faith,” (or “believing in the Lord,” xin Zhu) a perfectly sound Protestant evangelical postulate at any time in history—but somehow having a different meaning in the Chinese setting?

Evangelical crucicentrism is also, it seems to me, different in modern Chinese Xty. There is typically a great deal of christocentrism, a focus on Jesus as savior, healer, intermediary with Heaven, respected teacher, even friend—some of these are prevalent in N. American evangelicalism as well, of course. But it seems to me that over the past 100 years there is relatively little stress on the cross (despite the fact that an important video production by Yuan Zhiming, a 1989 dissident-turned-pastor in the US, is called simply “The Cross: Jesus in China” (Shizi jia: Yesu zai Zhongguo). This would especially be true in the countryside, where many rural Christians have only a very slight familiarity with basic theological doctrines such as the death and atonement of Christ. So although Chinese Christians have had more than their share of persecution and suffering during the past 58 years, my guess is, that at least in the countryside, while many would know

that Jesus is important, or “Jesus is Lord” (Yesu shi Zhu), many fewer could give a “standard” account of the importance of the cross.

On the other two features of evangelicalism, biblicism and activism (evangelism/witnessing), I find less divergence for China. Even here, however, there is a different emphasis. The activism of Western evangelicalism in the 19th and 20th century was buttressed by constitutional bulwarks of civil society and the rule of law. And this activism did not just include witnessing and evangelism. Evangelical Xians were at the core of the anti-slavery movement, actions to address misery of the urban poor, the Sunday School movement’s aim to dramatically improve society, and the YMCA/YWCAs’ aims of social, intellectual, and spiritual enhancement of the lives of the urban lower-middle class. Now, it is true that some of this was done in China, some led by foreign missionaries and some by Chinese Christians. But the context in China was very different: no rule of law, no civil society with accepted rules of discourse, no state prepared to countenance a true discourse with its citizens on any important matter, certainly not any issue potentially involving national politics.

One more factor has shaped 20th century Chinese Protestantism in ways that it has not in the West and in Korea/ Protestants in modern China have had to answer the question, “Doesn’t your being a Xian constitute adoption of a foreign ideology, and abandonment or betrayal, not only of traditional Chinese culture and the Chinese people, but of the modern Chinese nation as well?” Both foreign missionaries and Chinese Protestant believers who were part of the Sino-foreign Xian enterprise were, whether they liked it or not, parts of the neo-colonial or imperialist scaffolding of foreign power and privilege in China. This power system had begun with the treaties which followed the Opium War in the early 1840s and lasted formally until 1943. It continued in some aspects until 1949 and even then continued for many more years in Taiwan. My point here is that both a relationship with the state and the place of Chinese Xians in the foreign-dominated “Sino-foreign Protestant Establishment” were issues in categories which never had to be faced by Western evangelicals, but ones which Chinese evangelicals had to face and deal with frequently and still do today.

Korea

[I want to acknowledge the kind assistance of Prof. Ryu of Handong Global U. in giving me a copy of his excellent article on the characteristics of Korean evangelical Protestantism in the years around 1900. It will be published soon in the prestigious journal Church History in the US—congratulations to Prof. Ryu, and I thank him for sharing it with me.]

In today's Korea, the words "evangelical," "evangelicals," and "evangelicalism" are ubiquitous. As Professor Timothy S. Lee recently wrote, over 90% of Korean Protestants are self-described as "evangelicals".<sup>3)</sup> This is a stunning fact. It seems to indicate an absolutely remarkable level of homogeneity for Korean Protestants. And as Prof. Ryu's forthcoming article tells us, if we look back a century or a little more, we can clearly see partial explanations of the "evangelical" characteristics still so prevalent today.<sup>4)</sup> Some factors that seem important to me, especially in comparing the experience of China with that of Korea, include the following:

- The extraordinary homogeneity of the foreign missionary community a century ago. No other Protestant mission establishment anywhere in the world was so dominated by Americans, Prof. Ryu tells us, and nowhere else in Asia was there such a uniformity of missionary views and practices. There really wasn't all that much difference between N. and S. Presbyterians, N. and S. Methodists, and Anglicans thrown in for good measure. By contrast, just after 1900 China had well over one hundred separate missionary organizations operating in the country. Of course Korea had only been open to missions for less than two decades, and soon, after 1905, the Japanese control of Korea made it very difficult for new missions to enter the county. This left in place the missionary establishment of the turn of the century, which was still uniformly "evangelical" in the sense that it shared a basic consensus of doctrines, beliefs, and practices. A few years later, when the "fundamentalist-modernist controversy" roiled the waters of Protestantism elsewhere, Korean Prot., somewhat buffered against major outside influence by the limitations of the Japanese control system, remained attached to these beliefs and practices of "classic" late 19th century evangelicalism. It was these, quite traditional (some would say "archaic") ideas and practices which are the legacy of the old missions to today's Protestants.

- The other major though unintended result of the Japanese colonial system, as you all know, was the close association of Protestantism with Korean nationalism and aspirations for independence from Japan. Korean Christians did not have the burden of being accused of betraying the national traditions, or of abandoning their "Koreanness," or of being less patriotic than other Koreans.

- On some of the so-called four characteristics of evangelicalism which we looked at in the beginning of the talk, a couple of them strike me as very relevant, because (if I continue on this

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3) Timothy S. Lee, "Beleaguered Success: Korean Evangelicalism in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century," in Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee, eds., *Christianity in Korea*, pp.330-350 (Honolulu: U.ofHawaii Press, 2006). This essay was also posted on the Religion and Culture Web Forum in October 2007.

4) Ryu Dae Young, "The Origin and Characteristics of Evangelical Protestantism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century."

line of research) I am expecting to find differences in the Protestant experiences of China and Korea. But whether these differences might be small or large I do not yet know. At any rate, one of the four characteristics is a defense of the Bible as entirely inspired by God. For most Korean Christians, this evangelical position is accentuated and harshened by devotion not only to the Holy Scriptures but to the most extreme doctrine involving them, the “inerrancy” of the Bible—the belief that not only is the Bible inspired by God and authoritative in all matters of faith, but that it is “inerrant” and is therefore authoritative in matters involving science, history, etc. Korean Christians adopt these beliefs about the Bible at a higher rate than do evangelicals elsewhere.

- Another one of the four characteristics of classic evangelicalism is devotion to conversionism—a personal encounter with Christ, resulting in repentance and faith. Korean Protestants seem to manifest this in abundance, and have for 100 years. Organized mass conversion, or revivalism, is still prevalent in Korean Christianity. This year is the centennial anniversary of the great Korean Revival of 1907, which also had an impact in China, though Chinese Protestants at the time did not experience anything like the wide impact that the revival had in Korea. [a year for centennials and bi-centennials, note Robert Morrison’s arrival in Canton in 1807]

On some of the features of Evangelicalism, therefore, the Korean version is if anything more clear or close to the model than in the Chinese case. This includes the rubric of “activism” as well. Both Chinese and Korean Christians have worked hard at internal evangelism of the country, and in both the Protestant movement has at times grown like wildfire. But Koreans have also turned their activism and energies towards foreign missions, and have more than 10,000 missionaries scattered across the globe. In China, since 2000 there has been a little concrete evidence and a great many rumors concerning a “Back to Jerusalem” movement promoted by Chinese house church groups. Spokesmen for this project claimed that 100,000 (at first it was to be 200,000) Chinese house church missionaries would evangelize the Middle East, ending up in Jerusalem, and (having taken the Gospel on the last leg of its historical trip around the world back to its place of origin) thus triggering the second coming of Christ. But despite a lot of publicity, there does not seem to have been much done to implement such a grandiose plan.

My conclusion is that the term “evangelical” can indeed be used to denote the Protestant movement in both China and Japan, with care taken to analyse carefully the actual situation on the ground. But I am still uneasy at the idea that there may be some elements in the cultural traditions that are functioning as the “undercarriage” or skeletal system (to use two different metaphors) of the visible phenomenon of apparently orthodox “evangelical” belief and practice.

## Thoughts on Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism

One characteristic of Protestantism that both China and Korea share is a strong penchant for Pentecostalism. Of course there should be no surprise in that fact. Pentecostalism has swept through many newly Christianizing societies in the global East and South in the past 20-30 years. Moreover, Pentecostalism has shown itself to be very adaptable to the social and economic changes that are part of the modernization process. In its origins in the West, Pentecostalism was a product of evangelicalism. In China and Korea I suspect that it is not. Briefly, my hypothesis is that in China, Pentecostal ideas about speaking in tongues and the here-and-now activity of the Holy Spirit may be a reflection of traditional millenarian sectarians' having visions and being transported to heaven for instructions from God or gods, or being possessed by a god who then speaks through him or her. Also in China, there is a strong tradition of millenarian sects which looked ahead to the end of history, with the world passing to a new cosmic age, and often involved a savior figure. In Korea, obviously the linkage is the similarity between Pentecostalism, esp. tongues and prophecy, and traditional shamanism. Therefore, my concluding question is, are features of traditional religion and culture firmly embedded in today's Pentecostal movements in both countries? Almost certainly. Is this true of the wider category of "evangelicals"? Probably, but I'm not sure.

Thank you for the opportunity to think through some of these comparative issues and the matter of the cross-cultural use of terms. I think that the more we can think about our terminology, the more clear our analysis can be.