

*Michael Reeves*

*A Call for*

EVANGELICAL

INTEGRITY

gospel  
people

“God has always wanted a people, but how are they to be defined? In a day of growing confusion, Michael Reeves provides a superb description of their identity in his book *Gospel People*. Captivated and shaped by glorious gospel truths that motivate and excite them, they are to demonstrate a humility that is not quick to judge and divide from others while contending for definitive doctrines that must be clearly proclaimed to a needy world.”

**Terry Virgo**, Founder, Newfrontiers; author, *God’s Treasured Possession*

“Michael Reeves has written a simple explanation of Christian faith. Reeves considers the word *evangelical* biblically, theologically, and historically. *Gospel People* is written in the best tradition of Ryle, Stott, and Packer yet reaches back to include the Puritans and the early church fathers as well. This book is simple, clear, and clarifying. Read and profit.”

**Mark Dever**, Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

“Michael Reeves is an evangelical in every best sense of the word—a gospel person who lives for the spiritual unity and integrity that his book *Gospel People* so beautifully illustrates. In a time of moral confusion, political polarization, and doctrinal apathy, Reeves gives the church a clear picture of Christian orthodoxy and the humble, holy lives that ordinary Christians ought to live as a result.”

**Philip Graham Ryken**, President, Wheaton College

“In both contemporary culture and the contemporary church, the term *evangelical* is discussed, distorted, or debased to such an extent that some think it should be discarded. In *Gospel People*, Michael Reeves undertakes an engaging process of theological retrieval and provides a clear, concise, and compelling definition of *evangelicalism*. His approach is thoroughly grounded in Scripture and draws on the wisdom of church history down through the centuries. His focus on God’s work of revelation, redemption, and regeneration will not only inform the mind but also warm the heart. His warnings against both doctrinal compromise and an overemphasis on secondary or tertiary issues will foster a deeper commitment to gospel unity and meaningful fellowship that is not rooted in mere politics or personalities.”

**John Stevens**, National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches

“In *Gospel People*, Michael Reeves challenges us as evangelicals to take a fresh look at the foundation that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ as he is revealed by the Father in Scripture and in the power of the Spirit (1 Cor. 3:11). We are exhorted to build high together from that foundation for the glory of God. Anchored deeply in church history, this book is very convicting. It calls us to reexamine what we today may be wrongly holding up as the dividing line between friend and foe. May we heed its call!”

**Conrad Mbewe**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia

*Gospel People*

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# Gospel People

*A Call for Evangelical Integrity*

Michael Reeves

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*Gospel People: A Call for Evangelical Integrity*

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*How good and pleasant it is when brothers  
strive side by side for the faith of the gospel.*

*For Dan*





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To you all: thank you!



## What Are Gospel People?

*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*

JUDE 3

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT being people of the gospel. In other words, this is a book about what it means to be evangelical. I believe that there is a *biblical* case to be made for the importance and the goodness of being evangelical.

I do not at all mean to defend everything that calls itself evangelical. Far from it. Looking around at the phenomenon of evangelicalism today, it often seems a mile wide and an inch deep. As Mark Noll famously put it, “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical

mind.”<sup>1</sup> The success of the label in the twentieth century meant that more and more wanted to appropriate it in some way, leaving it ever more theologically vacuous. Across the world, swathes have come to self-identify as evangelical without holding to classic evangelical beliefs. And then there is the problem of how being “evangelical” has become associated with particular cultures, with politics, or with race.

In other words, evangelicalism today is facing a crisis of integrity. “The evangelicals” are being defined—and even defining themselves—by agendas other than the gospel. We need to go back to our foundation, to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints,” to become truly people *of the gospel*.

So what should it mean to be evangelical? We cannot simply look around at what we see of “evangelicalism” today. To understand and define evangelicalism properly, we must do as evangelicals themselves have traditionally done and hold it to its etymology in the evangel. Evangelicalism is defined by the evangel (*euangelion* being the Greek word for “good news”). Evangelicals are “gospel people,” or people of the evangel. Some gospel people may dislike “evangelicalism,” and others may use the label without being people of the gospel. But it is a distortion of the very meaning of the word “evangelical” to define it in any other way. To be evangelical, by definition, is not to be of a race or of a party, but of the gospel.

Evangelicalism, then, must be defined *theologically*. To be evangelical means to act, not out of cultural or political leanings, but out of theological, biblical convictions. The subject matter of

1 Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

evangelicalism is the gospel, which is known through Scripture. Or, to put it more technically, its material principle is the gospel, and its formal principle is the truth and supremacy of the Scriptures where that gospel is found. It is a commitment to the good news of Jesus Christ found in Scripture. It is uneccentric Christianity. That means that people of the gospel are evangelical, whether or not they choose to own the label. It also means that if something or someone purports to be evangelical, or is paraded in the media as such, and yet is not about the gospel, they are not evangelical. Whatever else they stand for is not proof of the emptiness or shapelessness of evangelicalism, but only that the label is no longer being applied accurately.

### **Evangelical Theology**

There is no single, formal evangelical confession of faith one can sign. So is there such a thing as evangelical theology? We have seen so far that, by definition, the subject matter or material principle of evangelicalism must be the gospel. And it follows that its formal principle (or the way that subject matter is known) must be the truth and supremacy of the Scriptures where that gospel is found. But can we say more without promoting some party agenda? Let us see how the apostle Paul speaks of the gospel. Take, for example, the opening lines of his letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit



of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 1:1–4)

For Paul, the gospel is:

1. Trinitarian: it is the good news of the Father concerning his Son, who was declared the Son of God in power according to the Spirit.
2. Biblical: it is proclaimed through the holy Scriptures.
3. Christ-centered: it concerns God's Son.
4. Spirit-effected: it is by the Spirit that the Son is revealed.

We see the same when Paul writes to the Corinthians:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified. . . .

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:17–23; 2:1–5)

Again, Paul is clear that the gospel:

1. is not human wisdom but God the Father's revealed wisdom;
2. concerns Jesus Christ and him crucified; and
3. is made effective in the power of the Spirit.

And later in 1 Corinthians, the apostle returns to consider the matters “of first importance” with similar emphases:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1–4)

As before, the gospel is described by Paul as:

1. Biblical: it is in accordance with the Scriptures.
2. Christ-centered: it concerns Christ and his redemptive work, especially his death and resurrection.
3. Regenerative: though the Spirit is not expressly mentioned, the gospel is spoken of not as mere information, but as a message of personal salvation.

I will give just one more example, from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Writing to defend the gospel to a people who "are turning to a different gospel" (1:6), he says, first of all,

I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:11–12)

He then emphatically concludes,

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (6:11–15)

As in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians, Paul here speaks of the gospel as:

1. Revelation: it is not man's gospel, but one revealed by God.
2. Redemption: it concerns the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Regeneration: it brings the radical renewal of a new creation.

Any definition of the evangel and so of evangelicalism must follow apostolic teaching with its essential qualities of being Trinitarian, Scripture-based, Christ-centered, and Spirit-renewed. It must therefore be God-centered as the “gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1), concerning the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and the work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. And to be faithful to the apostolic gospel, it must share Paul's concern for each of those indispensable three *r*'s: *revelation*, *redemption*, and *regeneration*.

In that light, I suggest that true evangelicalism has a clear theology, and that at its heart lie three essential heads of doctrine, out of which flow all its concerns:

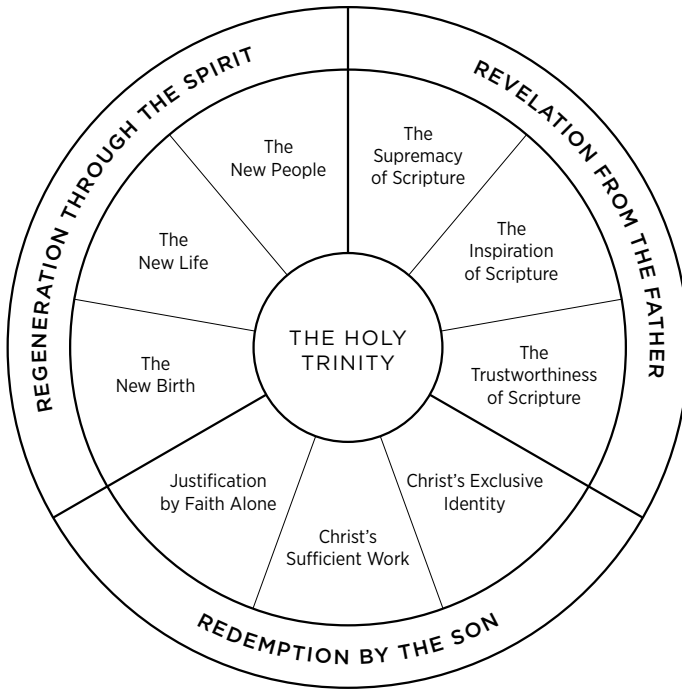
1. The Father's revelation in the Bible
2. The Son's redemption in the gospel
3. The Spirit's regeneration of our hearts<sup>2</sup>

These serve as a simple “table of contents” of evangelicalism. It is worth noting that this outline follows the shape of both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, demonstrating that

<sup>2</sup> See John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 28, 103; and J. I. Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem: An Analysis* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1978), 20–23.

evangelicalism seeks not only to be plain, biblical Christianity, but creedal, catholic Christianity.

It is but an outline. My aim over the next three chapters is to unpack an evangelical, biblical understanding of those doctrines, summarized in this diagram:



Then, when we have seen the defining theology of evangelicalism, we will be in a position to see how Paul's letter to the Romans gives an argument for the importance of evangelicalism.

“Evangelicalism” will be a threadbare, washed-up cultural relic for as long as it stands on any other foundation than this

apostolic gospel. But where people of the gospel have integrity to this gospel, we will see something of heavenly beauty and fruitfulness: a heartfelt unity in, and striving together for, the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.