This podcast episode has an interesting genesis. And listen: what follows here could have a large impact on you challenging where you really are and where you are headed as a believer this very day!

You see, in one of my college classes I require that students craft an analysis as to their personal brand. You know, a personal brand is who that person really is, what a person is known for by those who know that person best. But here's the rub in that, right off the bat: sometimes what a person is widely known for in the public square is not who that person is…or who that person really aspires to be and is striving for…or who God directs that person to be.

So, here we go: many persons who are serious about Christ and Him crucified identify themselves as Evangelical. And in my notes here in front of me, that word "Evangelical" is capitalized. That's because that word has been seen as meaning something pretty particular for a very long time.

So, not long ago, the highly-regarded British scholar David Bebbington spent a whole lot of time and effort defining what a capital-E Evangelical was in the often-lauded and certainly storied British Evangelical tradition. And Bebbington came up with four elements, as summarized by the website of the National Association of Evangelicals, the "NAE."

"Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a 'born-again' experience and a life-long process of following Jesus.

Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority.

Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts.

Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity."

So far, so good—Bebbington's thoughtful, thorough attempt at defining an important category for thinking about an effective life in Christ. But immediately thereafter, the NAE website cuts to the chase with these words. "These distinctives and theological convictions define us—not political, social or cultural trends. In fact, many evangelicals rarely use the term 'evangelical' to describe themselves, focusing simply on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism and discipleship." Did you notice what's inherent in the clarification by NAE that followed? Yes, the NAE muted the idea of "social reform efforts" in Bebbington's definition. So, let me repeat what the NAE said in the words following: *"These distinctives and theological convictions define us—not political, social or cultural trends."*

But while the evangelical tradition of Britain is complex and nuanced, certainly flames still burn bright that a British Evangelicalism pillar to be remembered most was the ultimately successful effort to stop British involvement in slave trade in 1807—led by William Wilberforce, who championed the cause in Parliament. In the minds of some, this was a high-water mark of the effectiveness of Christianity—and often regarded not just the effectiveness, *but to them the core purpose of Christianity: to effect meaningful social reform.*

But wait: is British evangelicalism perhaps better represented by key folks like John Wesley and the movement of Methodism that sprung from his efforts beyond Britain in America, where countless souls were converted to Christ? In fact, it was that type of gospel evangelism and discipleship that ultimately helped spur on a worldwide missionary movement with hundreds of millions of disciples made in the 20th century across several key denominations! Yes, and that phenomenon essentially followed Bebbington's core categories of conversions, Biblicism, gospel activism, and the centrality of the Cross.

But what about that peculiar, core focus *on social reforms* in Bebbington's formulation? …So, here's the thing. For attentive Christians, social reform is asserted to come via two main flavors: those social reforms that are required of a populace through laws…contrasted with those made through the individual change of hearts made new in Christ. And those are two significantly different methods that cut to the very meaning and practice and effectiveness of Christianity itself. Hey, one path has an inherent goal of

changed behavior required of the individual and the society they are in. But the other path is focused on the eternal destiny of the person, all the while trusting that an authentically-changed heart will organically lead to better behavior. Yes, in this second "changed-hearts" option, the good behavior that social-reform folks want ends up happening anyway—through relationship with Jesus and without human coercion!

Let me cut to a key dimension of these issues. In America today, my long-time experience is that the label "Evangelical" is very often understood by unbelievers in a consistent way. Yeah, unbelievers experience "evangelicalism" as a movement *primarily devoting itself to laws imposed by Christians on others*…yes, forced social structures and laws to ensure that behaviors are kept in line in such areas as abortion, drug use, and sexuality. But here's the thing: sadly, many who label themselves "Christian" and are indeed working towards these goals *would agree with the primacy of that very structure!* For them, their everyday efforts are *not* about the centrality of the Cross, not *centrally* about God's desire that all people be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), not *centrally* about their responding to the gospel proclaimed to all creation by believers.

Yet this has always been the case. Many have always favored human traditions and laws as the true path to the good life, whether they were secularists or religionists. But Jesus died on the Cross as the only answer for all persons' reconciliation to the Father and eternal life. Bluntly, the Son of God was not sent to the Cross for the primary goal of social reforms.

Now here's a most interesting thing. In a Christian university setting, quite often some passionate students confidently voice the assertion that the supreme value of the Bible that we are to work toward as God-followers in the lives of others is *life* or *the preservation of life*. This assertion is almost always made in the context of the fight against abortion…hence, the "pro-life" movement. But, of course, abortion and infanticide are not new inventions of the modern era.

But here's the thing: the all-encompassing gospel truth is that *eternal* life is the supreme value of the New Covenant. Yes, Christ died as a ransom for all, His desire is that all people on earth be saved (1 Timothy 2). Let me summarize that succinctly: Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross for all humanity was foundationally for eternal life and complete reconciliation to His Father in heaven—and all social reforms are secondary…even if they are important. Further, Matthew 16:25 (ESV) says, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

When students assert this view about *life* as the supreme value, a view that inherently shuns the gospel message of *eternal life* as secondary, I point this out: whenever any person is rescued from the abortionist's hand…or the drug-dealer's wares…or the human trafficker's trap…we gladly rejoice! But even those saved temporally from these gross social evils *will only be saved unto eternal life through their acceptance of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ!*

Before the Cross, God gave His people the law alongside His foreknowing that they would be unable to keep or fulfill the law. In this way, the law pointed to Christ and humanity's need for His being their Savior. Yet, social reforms unadorned by the gospel of Christ merely jump on the crowded merry-go-round of insufficient, legalistic solutions for solving humanity's sin problem. No matter how much virtuous people want broad social reforms and laws to make their society better, they will always fall short.

So, the title of this episode is this: *are 21st-century Evangelicals evangelical?* Well, if you embrace Bebbington's formulation as to British evangelical history as yours, too, then social reforms are part of the package. But look at Britain today, *a well-meaning quagmire of social reforms absent the sustaining core of the Cross and conversion of people as true followers of Christ!* And so it goes with America or any other nation, too: does the New Covenant mandate true evangelism of Christ and Him crucified, person by person…or social reforms and laws crammed down from the highest levels of centralized government?

For those with an ear to hear these past twenty centuries, that answer has always been the sufficiency of Christ, not the efforts of temporal social reform! So, are 21st-century Evangelicals evangelical? *Are you?*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you think that many unbelievers are essentially correct when they think that many Christians care more about their behavior than their eternal destiny? Discuss.

2. Do you believe the Christian's work is done in a particular baby's life when a planned abortion is averted? Discuss.

3. Are you a Biblical Evangelical? Why or why not?