A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Evangelical Christians
Acts 8:26-40

There are all sorts of adjectives you could put in front of the word "Christian." Conservative Christian. Liberal Christian. Fundamentalist Christian. Mainline Christian. Traditional Christian. Contemporary Christian. Protestant Christian. Catholic Christian. And another one that's frequently used: Evangelical Christian.

That term is widely used but not always widely understood. So to get a better handle on what it means, we need to remember that the word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means the "good news" or the "gospel." Evangelical Christians center their thinking and their practice around the "good news" of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ. This "gospel" is the focus of evangelical life and mission.

Many of the values that shape and guide evangelical Christians are a legacy from many centuries of Christian history. But the roots of American Evangelicalism, as a historical movement, can be traced back to a series of religious revivals in the mid-eighteenth century, known as the Great Awakening. This was a period of increased spiritual fervor and religious revitalization, led by the preaching and ministries of leaders such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. These, and other revival preachers, emphasized the unmerited grace of God and the importance of personal salvation through repentance and faith in Christ. They stressed the idea that all individuals, regardless of social status, could have a direct and emotional connection with God, often characterized as spiritual rebirth. During the twentieth century, one of the great examples of evangelical preaching and mission was Billy Graham.

In addition to the spiritual revitalization that the Great Awakening brought to individual lives, it also had a major impact on the growth of religious denominations, such as the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Keep in mind too that this was all taking place in the American colonies, which meant that the emphasis on spiritual devotion, individualism, and freedom also contributed to some of the ideals of the American Revolution. In other words, evangelicalism, from its very beginning, has unfolded and come to expression in a larger social and political context.

And the same is true today. In fact, one of the challenges in getting a handle on what evangelical Christianity means is the ongoing interaction between evangelical faith and American politics. Especially during the past four decades, the term evangelical has become more and more of a fixture in debates and decisions about social issues and public policy. In one respect, that's appropriate. People who consider themselves evangelical Christians should be deeply engaged with public affairs and matters of government. There are times when the church, and the faith it professes, have become parochial and disconnected from public life.

The problem is that in the eyes of many, particularly because of the way it's portrayed in the media, evangelical Christianity is now seen as what one person has called "a political

movement with a religious veneer."[1] When many people think about evangelical Christians, they think about their political positions more than their theological convictions. They associate them primarily with conservative candidates and officials, and conservative policies. Now this doesn't mean that evangelical Christians are all alike, with completely uniform political beliefs. The fact is, evangelical Christians are a diverse group. They're found in many different parts of the Christian faith, in many denominations, in many churches, throughout the world. They occupy various points on the political spectrum. Many are politically conservative, but others are more moderate or liberal. When it comes to social issues, evangelical Christians don't all think the same or vote the same.

What actually gives vibrancy to evangelical Christians, and what ultimately unites them, isn't affiliation with a particular political party or a specific policy position, or a certain social or cultural trend, but a shared set of theological convictions centered in the gospel, the good news, of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Go back to the name, "evangelical" Christians. Evangelical Christians are gospel people, good news people. We're people who proclaim and practice the good news of redemption.

I say "we" because our congregation stands within the greater evangelical stream of the Christian faith. Our church's historical roots and heritage are grounded in the eighteenth-century revival movements that I spoke about earlier. I'm guessing that many of you who have come to faith in Christ did so in an evangelical setting of some sort. An evangelical congregation or community or group or family, an evangelical program or event, an evangelical curriculum or resource, a personal evangelical witness, or some other context that centered on the gospel and your personal response to Jesus. To this day, each of us who confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior, and our congregation as a whole, have been shaped and formed, and are being shaped and formed, by the emphases and convictions of the evangelical tradition.

Now by this point in my sermon, you may be wondering what all this has to do with today's Scripture from Acts about Philip and the Ethiopian. I want us to explore this text further today because I believe it reflects several key distinctives that define evangelical Christianity. I'm not saying that looking at this passage is like looking in a mirror and seeing a perfect reflection of evangelical Christians in our day and time. But I do believe that this story from the life of the early church can renew a sense of our spiritual heritage and help us reaffirm some of the core convictions that define us as evangelical Christians.

To do that, I want to use the rest of this sermon to build on a summary of evangelical distinctives provided by historian David Bebbington. He identifies four primary characteristics of evangelicalism.

First, there's an emphasis on conversion. That is, "The belief that lives need to be transformed through a 'born-again' experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus."[2] The language of being "born again" comes from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. This kind of terminology doesn't appear in today's text, where Luke gives us a different kind of description of someone coming to faith in Christ. But still, the Ethiopian's faith is faith called into being through "the good news *about Jesus*" (v. 35). Evangelicals, as much as any other part of the Christian Church, have always treasured and emphasized the necessity of a personal, living relationship with Jesus, not simply affirmation of a set of beliefs or formal membership in a congregation, though these are important and have their place.

Most of all, individual salvation comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, who moves in a person's heart and mind, making them aware of sin as well as God's mercy, enabling them

to see who Jesus is, creating faith, and bringing forth spiritual life from spiritual death. Could there be any greater change in a person's life? When we speak about "accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior" or "committing your life to Christ," we're underscoring your need to be changed, to be raised from the dead, to be made new, and to make progress in that newness through relationship with Jesus and the community of Jesus' people. It's no wonder that after the Ethiopian came up out of the water, and Philip was taken away by the Spirit, the Ethiopian "went on his way rejoicing" (v. 39). Conversion matters. This doesn't mean that every believer's conversion experience will be the same or follow precisely the same pattern. But it does mean that conversion brings gladness and opens the way forward into a changed life.

In addition to emphasizing conversion, evangelicals have also stressed the centrality of the cross. That is, "a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity." The death of Jesus is where the mercy and forgiveness of God meet humankind, and each of us personally. At the cross, we see the depth of our captivity to sin and death. We get what one historian has called "an urgent sense of man's predicament."[3] In Jesus' death, our disobedience to God's will and our rebellion against his ways are revealed, and we recognize our need for reconciliation with God and with each other.

Only God can save us from this predicament. And thanks be to God, who comes to us through the cross to deliver us and restore our broken relationship with him. In his death, Jesus takes upon himself the penalty for our sin. He becomes our perfect substitute, and through his sacrifice we are redeemed. Notice how a text from Isaiah, which points to Christ, pointed the Ethiopian toward his inclusion in God's redeeming work: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (v. 32). Philip used that text to help the Ethiopian see what God has done in Christ. In Christ, God was enduring in his own self the wrath that we deserved, that you and I deserved. So we speak about how Christ died for you, and died for me. And the appropriate response to this self-sacrificing love of God is faith in Christ and a life centered in the cross.

The written witness to God's faithful love and to what he has done for us through Christ is contained in the Scriptures, which brings me to a third conviction that has distinguished evangelical Christians. That is, "a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority." We certainly don't view our relationship with the Bible as being on the same level as our relationship with Jesus, but we do look to the Scriptures as the rule for our faith and practice. Like Philip and the Ethiopian, we open the Scriptures, and in listening to the Scriptures, we hear a voice, the living voice of the living God speaking to us about who he is, who we are, and what his will and purpose are for us and for the world. We study the Bible in order to understand what we're called to believe and how we're supposed to live.

True, we often don't come to the same exact conclusions about these things. When it comes to how to interpret the Bible and how to apply its teachings to our context, there's plenty of debate and disagreement. But at the same time, there's also plenty of agreement and unity of understanding about so many of the basics of our faith and how we should live out that faith from day to day. Plus, we don't rely solely on personal, private interpretation. Yes, we evangelicals stress the importance of having you as an individual search and study the Scriptures for yourself, attentive to what God is saying to you. But you always do that within the larger community of believers, fellow disciples who are also seeking to hear the word of God. We don't just listen individually. We listen together. And most of all, we listen with the assurance that the Holy Spirit is with us to illuminate our study, to guide us in our understanding, and to, as Jesus promised, "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

As you and I, individually and collectively, search the Scriptures, we're mindful that hearing the word is inseparable from doing the word. The good news of Jesus Christ needs to be proclaimed in both word and deed, which brings me to a fourth distinctive of evangelical life and thought, namely, activism. That is, "the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and reform efforts." In one respect, the gospel is a verbal proclamation, an oral communication of what God has done through Jesus Christ. But the verbal is meant to become visual in the ways that we embody the good news in our lives, individually and together. Evangelical Christians have always stressed both the preaching of the gospel and the practice of the gospel, not only through changed lives but also through changed communities and societies.

In today's text, Luke doesn't tell us more about the Ethiopian's life after his coming to faith in Christ and baptism. But we do know that things changed for him. He already had some connection to the Jewish faith, and had been to Jerusalem to worship. He demonstrates at least some degree of familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures. Maybe he was already interested in the book of Isaiah because of its hopeful message about the day when people from all nations, including Ethiopians, would participate in the blessings of God. And yet there were rules and guidelines in the faith that had kept him on the margins, excluded from full participation in the life of God's people. Maybe he resonated with Isaiah's words about the suffering Servant, who was humiliated, cast out, cut off from the land of the living, without descendants, without a future. But now, because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Ethiopian had been brought into full participation in the life of God's kingdom. This was good news indeed, reason to go on his way rejoicing.

The Ethiopian's experience reflects an evangelical emphasis on outward mission to all people, and the overcoming of barriers that separate human beings from God and from one another. We evangelicals have always stressed the spread of the gospel through various forms of witness, especially preaching. But the message preached is about reconciliation with God and with each other through Christ, including addressing the social ills and issues that divide and destroy human community. This is why our commitment to the gospel has included compassion and care for others by sending missionaries, building hospitals, feeding the hungry, seeking justice for the poor and the marginalized, and working for peace. In short, we believe that we've been sent to bring good news, in both word and deed, to a world in desperate need of hope and transformation. We believe in what the gospel can do.

From its beginnings, the evangelical stream of thought and practice has aimed at being a source of renewal and transformation, within the Christian Church as a whole, and in the larger world. And to this day, we still cherish and emphasize the necessity of conversion, the centrality of the cross, the authority of the Bible, and the reform of society, for the glory of God. Mark Galli has captured it well when he says of evangelicals, "We are a movement in progress, never quite reaching the ideal we strive for, always laboring to reform not only the world but ourselves, that we might more perfectly reflect the life of Christ in us."[4]

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[1] Mark Galli, "Evangelical Distinctives in the 21st Century." Christianity Today. November 9, 2017. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2017/11/evangelical-distinctives-in-21st-century/ (July 2, 2025).
[2] The summary of Bebbington's description is found at https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/.
[3] Perry Miller, quoted in Mark Galli, "Evangelical Christians Are Sick." Christianity Today. December 6, 2017. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2017/12/evangelical-christians-are-sick/ (July 3, 2025).
[4] Galli, "Evangelical Distinctives in the 21st Century."