



# Our Evangelical Neighbours

## *A Catholic Reflection on Evangelical Christianity*

The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops



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Most Canadian Catholics have met an Evangelical Christian. They are our neighbours, our co-workers, and our classmates. Sometimes they are members of our own families. Despite these interactions, Evangelicals remain something of a mystery to many Catholics. Who are these Christians? What do they believe? What do they believe about us?

On the one hand, Catholics feel hurt, or at least confused, by fellow Christians who are sometimes unsure whether we Catholics are even Christians. On the other hand, Evangelicals offer some exciting things that we may not always find in our own parishes: lively worship music, a strong sense of congregational community, and a genuine enthusiasm about the Christian faith that comes out in daily conversation. What are Catholics to make of all this?

With the decline of mainline Protestantism in Canada, Evangelicals are more and more likely to be the non-Catholic Christians that Catholics encounter today. There are Evangelical churches, educational institutions, and service projects all across Canada, and they are growing and vibrant. Catholics also meet Evangelicals in the halls of power, where they are frequently on the same side of contentious social issues.

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Christ the Redeemer: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Furthermore, Evangelicalism is rapidly expanding in many places around the world, especially the global South – in places like Brazil, for example, with a historically Catholic population. Anyone who wants to know about the place of Christianity in Canadian society and in the world at large cannot ignore Evangelical Christianity.

The goal of this resource is to introduce Catholics to Evangelicals and Evangelical Christianity. It contains information about the history and beliefs of Evangelicals, with special attention given to the relationship between Evangelicals and Catholics.

Evangelicalism is not a denomination in the strict sense of the word, though it sometimes functions as an umbrella term for groups that include denominations such as Pentecostals, Baptists, or the Christian & Missionary Alliance, as well as many non-denominational or independent churches.

If there is a “megachurch” on the outskirts of your city that is not obviously affiliated with another Christian community, it is probably Evangelical. The adjective “Evangelical” does not just describe churches or denominations; it also describes individual believers. There are people in the mainline Protestant communities, and even in the Catholic Church who, because they share the basic defining features of Evangelicalism that we will investigate below, will, for example, identify themselves as Evangelical Christians.

## ■ A Brief History of Evangelicalism

Evangelical Christians trace their origins to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and, like the Reformers themselves, consider the Reformation to be in continuity with the faith of the early Church that had become obscured. They accept the twin pillars of the Reformation: the authority of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) and justification by faith alone (*sola fide*). Often they also share the Reformation’s view of Catholicism, which was and is suspected of burying the Gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ under a mountain of human traditions and even superstitions. Indeed, Evangelicals have typically been much more wary than mainline Protestants of engaging in dialogue with Catholics, though there are signs that this is changing.

The history of Evangelicalism in North America is complicated. It began with the Puritans, non-conformists who had left England, where Anglicanism was the state religion, in search of religious freedom. Theologically, the Puritans were

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Calvinists, following the teaching of the French Reformer John Calvin. Within this branch of Protestantism, which believes that God has predestined the elect to salvation, assurance of salvation is a central preoccupation: How do I know that I am saved?

One response to this question was experiential. Christians knew they were saved because they felt God had forgiven their sins in Christ. This experience of forgiveness is what Evangelicals usually mean when they speak of being “born again.”



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This experience has also led to the phenomenon of revivalism that has shaped North American Evangelicalism. Revivalism is focused on the personal religious experience of believers, often stimulated by charismatic preachers. Images of big tent meetings and altar calls inviting people to accept Jesus are typical cultural representations of revivalism.

Another important historical development in North American Evangelicalism is the emergence of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism arose to defend the Bible from modern secular criticism that rejected not only certain supernatural events in Scripture, but also the belief that Scripture itself was supernaturally inspired. By de-emphasizing tradition and the historical context of the text, the fundamentalist interpretation of *sola scriptura* sometimes leads to a very literal reading of Scripture on matters pertaining to science, as well as to prophecies about the “end times” – the return of Christ and the end of history.

At stake in these debates is the doctrine of biblical inerrancy: if Scripture is perceived to be in error on historical or scientific matters, its authority on matters of faith would likewise be seen to be undermined. While the specifics of Christ’s second coming and a strictly literal historical reading of Genesis were at one time held to be essential beliefs by many Evangelicals, they are less emphasized today. Even so, such teachings still maintain a strong hold on many Evangelical communities.

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It is important to underscore that “Evangelical” does not equate to “fundamentalist,” but fundamentalism is part of the heritage of Evangelicalism, and traces of it can be found in many Evangelical communities. Catholics find these fundamentalist beliefs unfamiliar: the rejection of the scientific theory of evolution in favour of a literal six-day creation and a 6,000 to 10,000 year-old universe; the speculation about the apocalypse, often accompanied by detailed historical expectations concerning events like “the rapture” or “the Millennium” (thousand-year reign of Christ). Not all Evangelicals approach questions about the relationship between Scripture and history or science in this way, though most will be familiar with such beliefs from their community or upbringing.

Fundamentalism also defends several key doctrines against current trends that downplay or deny them. These include beliefs that Catholics also insist on, such as Christ's divinity, the virginal conception of Jesus, and the Resurrection. It likewise insists on Christ's atoning death on the cross and his second coming, beliefs that Catholics also affirm, but in terms that may be unfamiliar to Catholics. These doctrines and the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture were dubbed "fundamentals" and are the root of the term "fundamentalism," though the term has now become a generic, and often pejorative, descriptor for any religious, and sometimes even non-religious, narrow-mindedness. Due partly to this negative connotation, many Evangelicals do not identify themselves as fundamentalists. Furthermore, while many Evangelicals agree with fundamentalists and Catholics about basic doctrines of the Christian faith, many Evangelicals are more open to the findings of contemporary science and biblical criticism than the label "fundamentalist" implies.

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While the roots of contemporary Evangelicalism are in Puritan Calvinism, revivalism, and fundamentalism, it is important to highlight just how diverse a group Evangelicals are. Just as many are not fundamentalists, many are decidedly non-Calvinist, emphasizing human free will instead of predestination. Others have roots in the Methodist tradition, following the teachings of John Wesley. Still other Evangelicals come from Anabaptist traditions such as the Mennonites.

All of these influences and more exist in a great variety within Evangelical communities, which are often very eclectic and include people raised in different Christian traditions, including mainstream Protestantism. Evangelicalism's varied history and non-institutional nature make it difficult to define in purely historical terms. Rather, it makes more sense to define Evangelicalism with reference to several of its key characteristics that transcend differences in history and, to some extent, even theology.

## ■ Defining Characteristics

It is relatively easy to tell if someone is a Catholic Christian. He or she believes certain things, yes; but that is not what finally determines whether one is Catholic. A person can believe and profess everything in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but that person only becomes a Catholic when that profession of faith manifests itself in the Rite of Christian Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. To be Catholic is to live in sacramental communion with the Catholic Church.

Evangelicalism, on the other hand, is defined primarily by adherence to certain core beliefs. Though Evangelicals are a diverse group, they share several defining features. While it is tempting to begin a list of such features with points that distinguish Evangelicals from Catholics, that would be misleading.

Our differences, however significant, only make sense against a background of our common faith. Both Catholics and Evangelicals can say the Nicene Creed without crossing their fingers. Evangelical Christians believe in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and

expounded in the councils of the early Church. They believe in Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, who by the Incarnation took on our humanity, suffered and died for our sins, rose again in glory, and will come again to judge the living and the dead. On the two essential features of Christian belief, the Trinity and the Incarnation, Catholics and Evangelicals are in full agreement.

The following are some of the distinctive aspects of Evangelicalism.

- 1. Holy Scripture:** Evangelicals consider the Bible to be the only genuine authority in matters of faith. The Scriptures are inspired by God and considered infallible (though exactly what this means in practice may vary). Much Evangelical devotional life is biblically based, as is Christian education in an Evangelical context. Familiarity with the Scriptures, often encouraged by the practice of daily Bible reading, is an essential component of Christian life. Some Evangelicals like to memorize large passages of Scripture.



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The media often portrays American Evangelicals as synonymous with the Republican Party. Such a stereotype is not helpful for understanding our neighbours. Much breadth and nuance exists in the political commitments of Evangelicals in both Canada and the United States.

- 2. Salvation by Faith:** Evangelicals emphasize that salvation is the work of God alone and cannot in any way be earned. All people are sinners and can receive God's gift of salvation in Christ only by faith in his promise. To think that one can earn salvation through good works is to misunderstand both human sinfulness, which corrupts even the best intentions, and God's offer of salvation, which is in no way contingent upon our righteousness. This does not mean, however, that Evangelicals reject the need for good works. They are an essential component of Christian life, but they follow from God's gifts. Those gifts can never be earned.
- 3. Centrality of the Cross:** The central emphasis of Evangelical faith is the cross of Christ. Christ's triumph at Calvary over sin and death is the only way of salvation. It is singular and all-sufficient, unique and unrepeatable. To accept God's forgiveness of sin through Christ's work on the cross is to be saved. This is often expressed through the language of "accepting Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour," or "being born again." Evangelicals mark this acceptance as the beginning of a "personal relationship" with Jesus.
- 4. Evangelism:** The experience of freedom and salvation through Christ's cross impels Evangelicals to share their faith with others, so that they too might experience salvation from sin. Evangelicals want to share the Gospel with non-believers and are encouraged to do so in their churches and other institutions. They believe that every

person must accept the grace of forgiveness in Christ to be saved (though they can differ among themselves as to how to apply this to people who have never heard the Gospel). Evangelicals also believe that Christian mission involves contributing to God's kingdom by charitable action. The Evangelical commitment to mission has typically been transdenominational. They are happy to work within, across, or alongside denominational structures, as long as the Good News is being proclaimed and the kingdom of God is being built up. Consequently, many Evangelicals have little or no denominational loyalty. When asked about their religious affiliation, it is very common for an Evangelical simply to answer, "Christian." The media often portrays American Evangelicals as synonymous with the Republican Party. Such a stereotype is not helpful for understanding our neighbours. Much breadth and nuance exists in the political commitments of Evangelicals in both Canada and the United States. In this, they are very much like Catholics.

## ■ What Do Catholics Think about Evangelicals?



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Catholics find much in Evangelicalism that is attractive. Many are inspired by Evangelical devotion to Scripture, which Catholics hear proclaimed in their churches but may not read on their own. From their tradition, Catholics understand that the Bible is God's Word, but many have almost no biblical literacy. Such Catholics can be

awed by an Evangelical who reads the Bible every day, quotes it regularly in conversation, and can list every book in order.

Furthermore, Catholics who know and love Jesus admire Evangelicals whose relationship with Him often seems much more personal and intimate than what they themselves experience. They are also impressed by the virtuous lives of Evangelicals, whose commitment to living according to classic Christian moral norms – especially in the area of sexuality, but also in other areas such as honest business practices, and acts of kindness and service to the less fortunate – stands out in ways that Catholics respect and sometimes envy. Indeed, former Catholics who have joined Evangelical communities often highlight that precisely these factors led to their decision.

Nevertheless, Catholics do have concerns about several matters of faith and practice in Evangelical communities. Many think that Evangelicals read the Bible too literally. When the legitimate findings of science and the claims of Christian faith seem to conflict, or when the end of the world becomes an unhealthy preoccupation, Catholics are convinced that something is amiss. Though they might not know exactly how to interpret books like Genesis and Revelation, they are uneasy with literal, scientific, or historical readings of texts that, to them, are not meant to be read as science or history.

At a more refined theological level, Catholics are nervous that Evangelicals feel authorized to interpret the Bible in isolation from the Christian community extended both in space and time. In this way, it easily becomes subject to individual whims, and passages whose meaning is unclear can be manipulated. Furthermore, Catholics note that the various interpretations of Scripture that flow from this kind of reading have fractured the Church's unity. In this they are not alone. At the beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther himself lamented this dynamic.



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

The visible unity of the Church is a major concern for Catholics, and so anything that casually disregards or even works against this unity will not sit well with Catholics.

The Protestant tendency to fragment based on doctrinal disagreement stemming from reading the Scriptures in isolation from the broader Christian

community combines with Evangelicalism's tendency to down play denominational identity to produce an undefinable body that Catholics have difficulty identifying with the body of Christ. In response, Catholics will highlight the value of structures of communion that have served to preserve the unity of the Catholic Church throughout its history. Every Catholic parish is in communion with its local bishop, who is in communion with the bishops throughout the world and with their predecessors back through history. The symbolic nexus of this structure is the Bishop of Rome, the Pope; Catholics are in visible communion with every other Christian Church that is in communion with the Bishop of Rome. For Catholics, then, Evangelicalism is tough to square with the profession of faith that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

A similar difficulty plays out in the Catholic assessment of Evangelical worship. While many Catholics are drawn to the emphasis on lively music and preaching that is often lacking in their own parishes, they can also leave an Evangelical service feeling as if they have been to a prayer meeting, a concert, or a lecture, but not to "church." From the Catholic point of view, the Church as the body of Christ is fed by the Eucharist. The comparative lack of sacramental life in Evangelical communities leaves Catholics thinking that there is a hole right in the centre of the worshipping community.

Someone identifying as an "Evangelical Catholic," then, will differ from most Evangelicals in several significant ways. A Catholic will agree with an Evangelical that Scripture is God's authoritative Word, but will want to ensure that it is read within the Church community: that is, within what Catholics call "Tradition." Tradition does not refer to teachings not found in the Bible, but rather to all that is believed by reading Scripture with the Christian community through time and space.

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Moreover, there is agreement on the centrality of Christ's cross and even on the personal appropriation of it, but Catholics will want to embed that personal appropriation within the context of the community of faith in a more explicit way than is common for Evangelicals. Someone who identifies as an Evangelical Catholic, however, usually feels called to share the Good News with others in a way that until recently has not been common among Catholics.

## ■ What Do Evangelicals Think about Catholics?

Many Evangelical Christians have serious questions about whether Catholics are truly Christians. It has been quite common, though not universal, for them to consider Catholics as non-believers, the terms "Catholic" and "Christian" being more or less exclusive. In certain circles, the Catholic Church is even identified with the



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whore of Babylon in the book of Revelation. Even among those Evangelicals who are happy to admit that Catholics can be Christians, it would be rare to find someone who would say, without qualification, that Catholics simply *are* Christians. This attitude is confusing and hurtful to Catholics, who do not know how to respond to someone who asks them if they are also Christian, or simply presumes that they are not.

Furthermore, Catholics use the biblical language of salvation differently from Evangelicals. The Bible uses such language in the past ("I was saved," Romans 8:24), present ("I am being saved," 1 Corinthians 1:18), and future ("I shall be saved," Romans 5:9) tenses; Catholics tend to focus on the future, while Evangelicals tend to focus on the past. A Catholic who is asked by an Evangelical whether she or he is "saved" often does not understand the question. It can be heard as implying that one's Christian commitment is not genuine because certain language is not used.

In such situations, Catholics should remember that the Evangelicals' concern is that one has a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Evangelicals know, often from the presence of former Catholics in their own communities, that being a baptized Catholic is no guarantee of the personal appropriation of the Christian faith or of a personal relationship with Jesus. When they ask Catholics whether they are Christian or whether they are "saved," this concern underlies their question.



As society becomes increasingly secular, Catholics and Evangelicals can see more clearly that what separates them is less significant than what unites them.

Ecumenical theology and dialogue have been successful in clarifying divisive issues. A more nuanced understanding, rather than simple rejection, of many Catholic teachings is becoming increasingly common in the Evangelical community.

In recent years, however, as Evangelicals get to know more Catholics who live a deeply personal relationship with Christ and as they become increasingly aware that sometimes particular ways of phrasing questions can be a barrier rather than an opening, some Evangelicals have started asking Catholics simply, "Tell me about your relationship with Jesus." Such open-ended questioning leads to much more fruitful encounters. If an Evangelical asks you if you are "saved," it may be helpful to answer as if they had asked, "Tell me about your relationship with Jesus."

As society becomes increasingly secular, Catholics and Evangelicals can see more clearly that what separates them is less significant than what unites them. In such a context, Evangelicals are more likely to understand Catholics as their brothers and sisters in faith rather than as potential converts to genuine, "biblical" Christianity. Nevertheless, even with these friendlier relationships, Evangelicals will still have real concerns about the Catholic Church, just as Catholics have about Evangelicalism. Because of their focus on a personal relationship with Christ, anything that seems to obscure that relationship is a serious matter. This includes their rejection of the Catholic priesthood (especially confessing one's sins to a priest), prayer to or with the saints and veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Eucharistic devotions such as benediction and adoration. While Catholics see these practices as ways to Jesus, Evangelicals worry that they distract from him. "Why not go straight to Jesus?" they ask.

Evangelicalism also has a tradition of distrusting institutions. The institution of the Church, which Catholics see as necessary to the visible unity of Christians, can be viewed as obscuring the centrality of Christ. They are sometimes concerned that Catholics grant the institutional Church too much authority in the realm of interpreting the Christian faith, instead of reading the Bible for themselves and discerning God's teaching directly from that source. The Pope's ministry is often thought to override Christian freedom and predetermine how all Catholics must understand Scripture.

In addition to the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, and between faith and works, Evangelicals hold other Catholic teachings in suspicion: papal infallibility, purgatory, and beliefs about Mary (the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption) and the sacraments (that the Eucharist can rightly be called a "sacrifice").

Ecumenical theology and dialogue have been successful in clarifying divisive issues. A more nuanced understanding, rather than simple rejection, of many Catholic teachings is becoming increasingly common in the Evangelical community. Still, more dialogue is necessary before Evangelicals and Catholics can agree on a number of theological questions and issues.

## ■ Prospects for Future Dialogue

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Fortunately, there are many venues where this dialogue is taking place. In Canada, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada co-sponsor a dialogue where pastors, theologians, and others in leadership meet twice a year to learn about each other and to propose

new ways in which the two communities can work together. Scholars too are taking up the questions that still divide Catholic and Evangelical Christians, having founded groups like the Center for Catholic–Evangelical Dialogue and the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. Both centres host annual conferences with prominent theologians addressing topics of concern in Catholic–Evangelical relations. The latter publishes the journal *Pro Ecclesia* in which these topics are seriously and profoundly pursued. Perhaps the most influential group in North America is Evangelicals and Catholics Together, which has published several documents on issues like salvation, Scripture and Tradition, the communion of saints, and Mary in the journal *First Things*. Official dialogues are taking place everywhere, from local Bible studies to international conferences sponsored by the Vatican.

Catholic and Evangelical Christians are forging new relationships and learning more about one another in the area of Canadian higher education. On most Canadian university campuses, the Catholic and Evangelical campus ministry groups are the most active and prominent Christian clubs. They often have very positive working relationships and host joint events. There are increasing official relationships between Catholic and Evangelical post-secondary schools. For example, two small Canadian Catholic colleges have strong connections with larger Evangelical schools. In Langley, British Columbia, Catholic Pacific College is located on the campus of the prominent Evangelical university Trinity Western.

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All students receive their degrees from Trinity Western, an accredited university, and there is an opportunity for Trinity students to take courses at Catholic Pacific as part of their degree programs. At more established places like the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto, Catholic and Evangelical graduate students take courses together, many of which are explicitly ecumenical. One popular course is called “The Church Evangelical and Catholic.”

Admittedly, not everyone is supportive of this new state of affairs in which Catholics and Evangelicals are overcoming past hostilities and growing in mutual esteem. Some within each community are scandalized by these relationships. Indeed, in the early days of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, a few of the Evangelical participants were stigmatized for their cooperation with Catholics, suffering personal attacks and losing significant funding for ministry projects in which they were engaged. This is less common today. Furthermore, although some criticisms were uninformed and unhelpful, criticism of ecumenical dialogue can be helpful. Those who think that agreements have been reached in ways that compromise the truth have the right and duty to make their case.



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For either dialogue or criticism to be fruitful, it must be rooted in personal relationships between fellow Christians who recognize one another as brothers and sisters and who are sincerely seeking the truth. For this reason, the most significant ecumenical dialogues between Catholics and Evangelicals today are not those of the scholars,

pastors, and theologians who attend official meetings and publish books and papers. As important as that work is, it is totally dependent on the informal dialogue of the Christian life between believers who have married into one another’s families, who work in the same office, or who pursue justice together in our communities outside abortion clinics and inside soup kitchens. Only these dialogues, where believers care for, pray for, and work with one another, can prepare the soil in which the results of the more official dialogues can grow. Believe it or not, the prospects for future dialogue depend, in great part, on you.

For more information on ecumenical and interfaith relations, visit the official website of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops: [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca)

This resource on Evangelical Christianity was developed in close consultation with our dialogue partners at the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Our aim was to create a resource that reflected faithfully the Christian identity of our Evangelical brothers and sisters.

Mr. Bruce Clemenger, the president of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, has written a letter addressed to Bishop Douglas Crosby, O.M.I., Bishop of Hamilton and President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, remarking that the new resource *Our Evangelical Neighbours* “offers a clear overview of Evangelical beliefs and practices; I believe that most Evangelicals in Canada would find themselves fairly represented in its pages.”

The complete letter by Mr. Clemenger can be viewed on the CCCB website at [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca) by clicking on the following links: “Commissions & Committees”, “Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue” and then “Documents”. You may also find the resource by entering the document by name in the search function of the website.

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This leaflet is also available in English and in French as a free download in PDF format from [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca)

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