Gaps in Australian Evangelical Theology

And letting Indigenous thought begin the repairs

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Table of Contents

"Explore the gaps in Australian evangelical theology that have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty"

Introduction

Although derided for his comment in 2013, Former England cricket captain David Gower was not the first, nor will he be the last person to say that "Australians have no culture" (in Ward 2013). This widely held perception naturally extends itself to contextual theology; if there is no identifiable Australian culture, than there is no identifiable Australian theology. Yet this perception is misguided. While the distinctiveness of Australian culture - and by extension its theology - are difficult to map, Australians do not live in a contextual vacuum. Our unique location and history, our demographic and language, our resources and weather have all helped shape the dominant Australian culture - and by extension - our theology. This in turn shapes our response to poverty, and impacts the poor; for better or for worse. Drawing on a wide range of sources, from poetry to statistics, I will trace the development of three significant gaps in Australian evangelical theology that have contributed to the plight of the poor and blossomed in the unique Australian climate. I will then highlight a fourth gap – the Indigenous voice in Australian evangelical theology – as a possible way forward, plugging the gaps in Australian evangelical theology while also deepening the evangelical heart for the poor.

Exploring an elusive terrain

In order to examine the gaps in Australian evangelical theology, the landscape of Australian evangelical theology must first be surveyed. This is a difficult task for a number of reasons. The availability and number of published works on Australian evangelical theology is relatively low, particularly in comparison to the high availability – and influence of – books by American and European theologians (Hynd 1984:45). Further, Australia, and its churches have an average 20% migrant population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015; Carey 1996:162), blurring the edges of this vast theology. And yet an Australian evangelical theology exists (Malone 1999:7ff; Kelly 1988:52), half-made from borrowed ideas, a little patchy perhaps; a metaphor of Boake's o*n the boundary*:

…My mother says that boundary-fence
Must surely be bewitched;
My father says that through that fence
The neighbours are enriched;
It's always down, and through the gaps
Our stock all get them hence –
It takes me half my time to watch
The doings of that fence…

We begin the exploration of the boundaries of Australian evangelical theology with a short foray into the history that helped shape it.

Historical shaping of Australian evangelical theology

Evangelicalism arrived in Australia with the first fleet, wrapped up in the European invasion[1] and colonisation of Australia; shaping society while also being shaped by its new surroundings (Carey 1996:xvf; Piggin 2012:13). While a number of books have been written outlining the movements of Christianity, particularly the Catholic tradition in Australia, I will highlight four key periods that have had a significant impact on Australian evangelical theology.

Significant missionary enterprise

It appears that the waves and ripples of the great revivals of the 1730s and 40s in England lapped even the distant shores of Australia some 50 years later (Piggin 2012:1). The lingering effects of the revivals produced not only a fierce determination to convert the indigenous 'heathens' of Britain's new colonies, but were also evangelicalism's primary hope for 'renovating' the convict masses (Piggin 2012:2f, Carey 1996:xvi). Australia's first church service was held no less than 16 days after the first fleet landed in Botany Bay, with the declaration; "Let no man be absent on any account whatsoever" (Murray 1988:3). A few years later, in 1792, William Carey highlighted the missionary need, estimating that Australia had some twelve million 'pagans' with only '1-2 ministers' (Carey 1792:51). However, within 25 years of Carey's lament, the people of New Holland had sent their first

[1] While using the word 'invasion' may seem (in Australia's current dominant worldview) to be a political statement, that is not what I am attempting here; to speak of European 'settlement' is just as problematic. In attempting to provide a fair representation of recent Australian history, my assessment is that 'invasion' is an appropriate word to describe the European encounter with Australia.

international missionary *out from Australia* (Piggin 2012:15).[2] While evangelicalism at first struggled to gain a foothold in the new Australian context (Evans 2000:1), by 1901 the percentage of Christians in Australia was 96% (ABS 2008:458), with churches in Adelaide outnumbering hotels 908 to 770 (Piggin 2012:49).

A cursory reading of Australian church history gives the impression that missionary enterprise, local and international, has been a foundational aspect of the Australian evangelical context, even the 'thermometer of its spiritual temperature' (Piggin 2012:65, 79). This legacy continues today; on average, every church in Australia sent slightly more than one person on a short-term mission trip in 2014 (Sterland 2014a:n.p.), and partially supported more than one missionary (Sterland 2014b:.n.p.). The evangelical missionary enterprise lives on today in Australia.

Holiness movement

In true evangelical style, a holiness movement followed the missionaries on their wanderings around the Australian communities (Evans 2000:455). Evans documents revival after revival in Australia up to the year 1880, with two repeated elements: preaching a call to repentance, and an expectation of personal holiness; the 'discontinuance of sin in any form' (Evans 2000:247f). It was not uncommon for towns that hosted revivals to experience significant drops in crime and see surges in personal morality; the revivals in 1902 not only seeing bad debts being repaid and alcohol consumption reduced, but the impact extending to pit-ponies in mines that suddenly stopped working, unable to understand instructions *sans* swearing (Piggin 2012:63).

The impact of the holiness movement was noticed by the wider Australian public too, and helped to shape the evangelical churches' relationship with secular Australia. It spawned a new Australian word – wowser – and was caricatured as fun-snuffing, kill-joy Christianity as the *Truth* newspaper so brilliantly captured in 1909:

> …On tea the crowd carouses,
> And the whiskered wowser wowses,
> Old women garbed in trousers
> Interject their deep "Ah-mens."
>
> (in Australian National Dictionary Centre 2015:n.p.)

[2] While these missionaries were still technically sent by the London Missionary Society, it is significant that a missionary enterprise from Australia was sent out so early after colonisation.

Evidence abounds that the holiness movement, with its emphasis on personal morality, was evangelicalism's primary way of influencing secular Australian life. Evangelicals had significant influence on the prohibition of alcohol in the ACT in 1911, and the legislation of early closing hours for pubs in 1916 (Raftery 1987:5), re-writing the lyrics of old hymns like *Onward Christian Soldiers* to encourage the faithful against alcohol:

> Onwards temperance soldiers,
> Let your war cry sound.
> Plant the victor's banner,
> On Australia's ground… (National Library of Australia)

The legacy of the holiness movement, with its emphasis on personal morality continues today; the issues that Australian evangelical churches are recognised by the secular public for speaking up about are all issues of personal morality - homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia. The public perception is right; evangelicals are a rather lame, three-legged pony in the political circus (Appendix 1, Table 8). In a small online survey that I conducted for this paper I asked 26 evangelical Christians an open-ended question about what issues Australian Christians should be more concerned about. Issues pertaining to personal morality received the equal highest response (Appendix 1, Table 5). We now turn to consider the rise of market liberalism and its impact on the Australian evangelical context.

The rise of market liberalism and socialism

The out-workings of personal holiness by the evangelical missionaries and pastors were largely well aligned with the government goals of the day: "…frugality, moderation, sobriety and hard work' (Piggin 2012:24). This close alignment with government goals however, also saw Australian evangelicalism get cosy with the market liberalism that the Australian government promoted.

The socialist movement, on the other hand, began to gather momentum in Australia in the mid-late 1800s, slightly before the influence of American fundamentalism on Australian churches in the early 1900s (Piggins 2012:80). Prompted by the debates in America, Evangelical Australians began arguing over doctrinal issues that the average Joe cared little about; biblical interpretation and sinless perfectionism, with the in-fighting blunting,

> …the cutting edge of evangelical commitment to social reform, for the social gospel became identified with [social] liberalism and therefore had to be wrong (Piggin 2012:80).

The close alignment of evangelical ethics with material liberalism against a backdrop of falling social concern among evangelicals meant that the pro-market, anti-socialist political coalition of the Protectionists and Free Traders resonated with the Australian evangelical Church in the early 1900s. In 1944 the coalition was rebadged as the Liberal party of Australia (Ajorensen 2009:n.p.), and has largely held the evangelical church captive since.

I distinctly remember being told by various people through my teens and early twenties that good Australian Christians vote Liberal and should never vote Labor, risking their spot in heaven should they be tempted to vote for the Greens. Evidently, some historical cosiness with market liberalism lingers within Australian evangelical Christianity, and uncomfortableness with socialism persists.

Billy Graham crusades

The last significant event in Australian history that this paper will highlight is the Billy Graham crusades, particularly the first in 1959; his impact on the Australian evangelical scene widely accepted (Hynd 1984:40; Piggin 2012:125). In just 15 weeks, Graham conducted 114 services across Australia and New Zealand, the pinnacle service setting a record for the Melbourne Cricket Ground with 130,000 attenders (MCG 2015). The social impact of the crusade was no less significant; crime plateaued for a few years in some places and dropped in others; alcohol consumption was reduced and there were fewer children born outside of wedlock (Piggin 2012:169; Faase n.d.:n.p.). What is significant is that the crux of Graham's message was no different in essence to that of his Australian contemporaries – repentance and personal piety. His success therefore re-cemented these two elements as the primary means of social transformation in the Australian evangelical mind. Evangelism and personal morality continue to top Australian evangelical Christian concerns, achieving the highest number of responses in the survey I conducted; almost twice the number of responses regarding the environment and the marginalised (Appendix 1, Table 5).

Having surveyed four significant periods in Australian history that have shaped Australian evangelical theology, I will now proceed to draw out some theological gaps that were unwittingly created – or left uncorrected - in the shaping process.

Three contextual gaps in Australian evangelical theology

Dualism

While evangelicals such as George Fife Angas (1789-1879) and R.B.S. Hammond (1870-1946) were social activists who saw their faith and activism as two expressions of the same gospel (Linn 1994:7; Judd 1994:148), evangelicals like them appear to be an exception. Priority has typically been given to the spiritual in the Australian evangelical tradition; the 'saving of souls' and the calling to repentance (see Appendix 1, Table 4). The primary means of improving society was to be found in the holiness that follows conversion.

This dualistic thinking – that the spiritual and the physical are two separate entities – has been warmly incubated through the dominant Australian culture which has had to survive on paradox. We consider Ned Kelly an icon, and nearly had *Waltzing Matilda* as our anthem, despite having little tolerance for those who steal (Fletcher 1988:65). We turn the boats back while believing in 'a fair go' for everyone; we don't like being charged with genocide, but 'discovering Australia' doesn't seem right either.

Place the evangelical missionary enterprises' dualism in an Australian love of unhealthy paradoxes, give it a splash of convict anti-authoritarianism, and it's easy to see how the almighty God of Australian evangelicals has become locked out of the everyday events; a new Australian convict, trotted out for the Sunday service 'lest any man be absent'. We become Lawson's *Christ of the never*: "…who feel not, who *know* not – but preach…"

The Biblical narrative, however, never permitted or supported a dualistic perspective. The Jewish mind could never conceive of a spiritual/physical divide. Jesus' declaration of the kingdom of God involved healing the sick, restoring the down-trodden *and* calling people to repentance. "Behold," says Jesus, "I am making *all* things new!" Unfortunately, Australian evangelical theology sees the world through dualistic eyes, and like poorly adjusted binoculars, provides two fuzzy pictures instead of one clear view, lending a splitting headache to those who attempt to see life as it really is.

At the time of writing this paper, I am in serious discussion with my co-church-facilitator on this very issue; he is cemented in a belief that what is most important for us as a church is evangelism; 'saving souls' and 'getting them to heaven.' My suggestion that the gospel was about more than just personal salvation is so untenable for him that he has declared that he 'can't lead alongside that kind of thinking;' in his mind I am adding to the gospel and making it a 'Jesus-plus' gospel. He is a godly, committed, generous and gentle individual, but is blinded by dualistic thinking. We've yet to find a way forward through this difficult impasse.

Dualism is undoubtedly a major gap in Australian evangelical theology, fostered by the unique Australian context. We turn now to a second gap; individualism.

Individualism

Because the message of Jesus was consistently focussed on *personal* salvation and *personal* morality from Marsden to Graham, individualism has readily pervaded Australian evangelicalism. The Australian context, with its isolated homesteads, vast landscape and free market liberalism, fostered this trumping of the individual; perhaps no better demonstrated than in that iconic movie of 1997, *The Castle*:

> Councilwoman: "All right, I'll state this simply. There is an iron clad agreement between Federal, State and Local governments, and the Airports Commission."
>
> Darryl: "Yeah, well where's the agreement with Darryl Kerrigan, 3 Highview Crescent, Coolaroo?"

Darryl's nailed the Australian spirit, and we howl in agreement. A glance through Australia's history and its concealed self-perception in the arts - McCubbin's *down on his luck*; Paterson's *Mountain Station*; Roberts' *Breakaway;* Lawson's *Dover's wife* - all speak of the Aussie battler; out there – somewhere – tenacious, ingenious, resourceful, for sure; but alone.

Fostered in this environment, with its emphasis on personal salvation and personal morality, Australian evangelicalism has struggled to take its eyes off the ball and realise that there's a whole footy field of players pushing and prodding and kicking the individual this way and that. Individualism has little support in the biblical witness. Historically, the people of God understood that 'the sins of the fathers [impact] on the children'; they easily understood how 'sin [could] enter the world through one man'; whole families were baptised at a time;

the Old Testament Law designed so that *everyone* had access to land, resources and justice; not just the Aussie battler with her tenacity, ingeniousness and resourcefulness.

Some might counter the argument here with that great Australian cry of 'a fair go'; Australians trumping the underdog and the supporting of Davids over Goliaths. But there's a subtle distinction here that deserves playing out; 'a fair go' sounds promising, but it has always meant that the individual has the right to *unobstructed* self-determination; not helped or assisted (per se) – but *unhindered*. Australians do love the underdog; we love a good upset, and we'll barrack for the Davids; but we're raising our glass from a safe distance while he sweats it out solo against an armoured giant.

Thus the Australian context has fostered the evangelical emphasis on personal salvation and personal morality, helping it to blossom into individualism, remaining a largely uncorrected gap in Australian evangelical theology. We turn now to examine a third gap in Australian evangelical theology relevant to this paper; materialism.

Materialism

As has already been ascertained, the historical evangelical emphasis on personal morality lent itself to some cosiness with market liberalism that the Australian context has encouraged. A land of opportunity, gold rushes and free acreage created great opportunity for the evangelical ethic of '…frugality, moderation, sobriety and hard work' to blossom under and ultimately *into* a somewhat concealed capitalism. While evangelicals at times gained the privilege of imposing personal morality on society, they largely lost the struggle to "…resist the forces of materialism, always so attractive to the majority of Australians" (Piggin 2012:24).

This materialistic captivity was further nurtured by the notion of the 'great Aussie battler' which has allowed another great Australian paradox to flourish; the prevailing belief that we're still struggling even though in reality the average Australian income and wealth is placed above the 95th percentile globally (Global Rich List 2015; Hamilton and Denniss 2005:3f). Politicians with their arguments over who best cares for 'working mums and dads,' the double-income, heavily mortgaged, four-wheel-driving couple, evangelicals - none of us are immune to this. Like McCubbin's *Pioneer,* our struggle with the landscape

commands the attention, and it's only a closer inspection that reveals the growing picture of wealth in the background:

And so Australian evangelical theology, with its personal morality developing an ethic that fitted so well into the Australian colonial pioneer context, continues to stand transfixed and mesmerised by the great Aussie dream of personal home ownership; a 4x2 on an over-sized block in a suburb we can't afford. We battle on, with all that great Australian (now air-conditioned) tenacity; not against – but for – the mammon Jesus warned us about. We've turned our God-given role of caring and co-existing with the rest of creation into a mandate to 'subdue,' a word that has multiple cousins in the European colonial experience and its relationship with the Australian landscape; as something to be fought, broken, controlled, tamed and battled.[3] This thinking continues to be common among Australian evangelicals; in the survey I conducted, I received 113 responses to the question 'what should Australian Christians be more concerned about?' with only 6 responses relating to consumerism (Appendix 1, Table 5). We simply don't believe we're stuck on the treadmill to 'more.'

[3] The contrast between this perspective and the Australian Indigenous perception of the Australian landscape goes beyond mere opposites. I will explore this later in the paper.

The lingering perception by evangelical Australians that we are 'battlers', coupled with the evangelical work ethic has meant that Jesus' warnings against the trap of materialism goes either unheard or misapplied to 'rich people out there.' I will now begin to examine the ways in which the three gaps I have highlighted - dualism, individualism and materialism – have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty.

Gaps in Australian evangelical theology and the perpetuation of poverty

Having briefly traced the evangelical movement and highlighted three gaps in Australian evangelical theology that the particular Australian context has supported, I now turn to explore some of the ways that these theological blind spots have contributed to poverty. However, before doing so, it should be noted that in a recent survey, 88% of evangelicals disclosed their support for poverty alleviation programs (Sterland 2014c:n.p.); in the survey I conducted, the majority of people financially supported international aid and development organisations (Appendix 1, Table 7). Thus I am not suggesting here that Australian evangelicals are not concerned about poverty; my suggestion is that Australian evangelicals are not concerned *enough* about poverty, and that this inadequacy of concern has been propped up by an inadequate theology (compare Appendix 1, Tables 4 and 5).[4] I will now demonstrate how the three gaps in Australian evangelical theology outlined above have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty.

Australian evangelical dualism and poverty

In tracing the development of dualism through the evangelical presence in Australian history, it stands to reason that where dualism was present, so followed a less than desirable concern for the poor. Dualism, by its very nature of splitting the physical and divine – and giving preference to the divine - provides a proven track record for being more concerned about people's souls than their situation. Noonuccal asks us to stop this peddling of heavenly tickets, pleading:

[4] This makes the role of encouraging evangelicals to be more generous all the more difficult. When they hear 'Jesus was concerned for the poor; you should be too', the verbal response will often be 'Amen', but remain largely unmatched with a lifestyle response.

> …give us Christ, not crucifixion…
> You devout Salvation-sellers,
> Make us neighbours, not fringe-dwellers…
>
> – Ooderoo Noonuccal, *Aboriginal Charter of Rights*

We've been too busy preaching:

> …Transubstantiation, free will –
> Mouthfuls of nothing;
> Mother Church,
> When our earth cried out,
> You had nothing to say…
>
> - Geoffrey Lehmann, *Mother Church*

While some notable exceptions to this rule were outlined above (e.g. Angas and Hammond), the general trend by Australian evangelicals has been capitulation to the prevailing treatment of the marginalised rather than making a prophetic stand. It is no wonder that Indigenous Australians often saw and continue to see no difference between Australian Christianity and the darker parts of the European colonisation:

> …They brought you Bibles and disease, the liquor and the gun;
> With Christian culture such as these the white command was won.
>
> – Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *Dispossessed*

Dualistic thinking by Australian evangelicals at times recognised the plight of the Indigenous people, tripping over atrocities that 'stuck out like a foot from a shallow grave' (Stanner in Maddison 2014:32), but by and large believed that the solution was for the Indigenous people to come to an evangelical faith. The perception of William Hamilton (1807-1879) was typical of his time as he argued in a sermon:

> "Shall we not consider the condition of the aborigines of this territory… having suffered some temporal disadvantages[!] through our colonisation, possess the first claim to our charitable exertions?"

His suggested remedy, however, is indicative of the dualism embedded in his theology:

> "[is it not]…to bring them to the knowledge, love and service of God, and the hope and righteousness and everlasting life through Christ Jesus?" (in Murray 1988:173)

Time and time again through the history of Australian evangelicalism, the spiritual needs of people trumped their physical needs, almost always with negative consequences for the poor. In 1978, missionaries outnumbered relief workers sent by Australian churches ten to one (Hynd 1984:43), even though the regions the missionaries were going to were home to 80% of the world's poor at that time (Sala-i-Martin 2006).

This priority of the spiritual is echoed in a 2009 interview with notable Australian evangelical Phillip Jensen. On the question of 'should Christians be involved in social action?' his ultimate conclusion was that 'preaching is the fundamental social action that society needs' (Jensen 2009). This is reflected in statements of faiths by evangelical church groups (e.g. FECA and IFECA) and Australian evangelical publishing posts like Matthias Media:

> Social justice issues are not the core business of Matthias Media and *The Briefing*… In my view, social justice is not the gospel, but one of its fruits (Grant 2014).

A survey of evangelical Christians in 1994 might offer some hope, indicating that 53% of attenders feel that evangelism and social action should be 'held in tension'; with a slight majority preferring an emphasis on evangelism (Kaldor et al. 1994:61).[5] Yet when given an open question, evangelism seems to take a significant lead (Appendix 1, Table 5), and it is a rare Australian church that gives even roughly as much to the poor as they do to church-planting, evangelising and missionary efforts.

The political realm is no different, with dualism leading evangelicals by the nose. The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) is the self-proclaimed political voice of the evangelical church who '…consult constantly with Australia's church leaders.' But the ACL failed to ask any questions about the aid budget cuts *or* the refugee situation in a 2015 survey of the two major political parties; the two primary concerns reflected in the questions being freedom of speech for the Church and personal morality (ACL 2015). Perhaps the ACL has misheard what Australia's church leaders are saying, but in personal conversations and emails with the ACL, I have been told that social issues are on the periphery of Australian evangelical concern. Unfortunately dualism, and priority to the spiritual, has meant that the Australian

[5] The survey itself has an underlying dualistic assumption; the very question asked betrays a belief by the surveyor that life can be split into 'spiritual efforts' and 'social action'.

evangelical church has often given an insufficient response to matters important to the poor (Gondarra 1986:19f; Maddison 2014:36f).

There can be no doubt that the pervasiveness of dualistic theology among Australian evangelicals has contributed to the perpetuation of poverty both in Australia and abroad. We turn now to consider the impact on poverty that individualism has sponsored through Australian evangelical theology.

Australian evangelical individualism and poverty

Australian evangelicalism's individualism was warmly fostered by the spirit of the Aussie battler and the market liberalism that was synonymous with European colonisation. This contextually flavoured individualism has contributed to the plight of the poor.

In the first instance, the emphasis on personal morality lends itself to a perspective, among many evangelical Christians, that poverty is largely caused by moral failure in the person suffering poverty. This perception is evident in the issues that the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) and the Australian Christian political party speak up about; almost exclusively issues of personal morality, very rarely – if ever - about the need for structural change or concern for the marginalised. We need to *stop* abortion rather than walk alongside worried pregnant mothers; the heart of the issue is *her* personal morality; what we need is better laws to make her act in more moral ways.

The cosiness with market liberalism that the Australian evangelical ethic developed while it sought to distance itself from the socialism of the early 1900s has also had implications for the poor. The evangelical church was essentially found snoring during the 'heady' days of the Whitlam Government, where significant social changes became possible (Nichols 1982:143). Just last year, 81% of Australian evangelicals believed that spending $29.3 billion on defence was reasonable (Pepper et al. 2015) while remaining relatively silent on big reductions to Australia's comparatively small foreign aid budget (DFAT 2015), despite two-thirds believing that church goers should campaign for global poverty and justice issues (NCL 2011).[6] Where are these people? The message in the silence is that we need to look after ourselves before we can help the poor; an ugly echo of the Coalition government's

[6] It should be noted that considerable effort has been made by many evangelical Christians to raise awareness about the federal budget cuts to foreign aid; but in my perception, it has been a small minority in the evangelical church.

argument that our "desperately needed infrastructure projects" are more urgent than the plight of the poor (Hockey and Robb 2013).

The Australian evangelical individualistic tendency is simply biblically untenable. The over-emphasis on personal holiness has seen the Australian evangelical church at times place almost all the blame on the marginalised for their situation, and call for laws to enforce individual morality while remaining virtually silent on issues of justice that require structural change. Further, the emphasis on the individual has allowed selfishness rather than generosity to dictate our response to poverty.

We turn lastly now to examine the way that the materialistic tendency in Australian evangelical theology has impacted the poor.

Australian evangelical materialism and poverty

As stated earlier, Australian evangelicals have largely struggled to distance themselves from the materialism that is deeply embedded in the Australian psyche. The evangelical work ethic, so closely aligned to the qualities required of an Aussie battler, has seen Australian evangelicals pursue personal wealth with the best of them. This materialism is not only theologically untenable; it has also had consequences for the poor.

While it is not difficult to see how a theology that fosters materialism would contribute to the perpetuation of poverty, it is much harder to demonstrate this in the Australian context other than anecdotally. The only two sources for surveys of evangelical Australians that I could find (*Winds of change* by Kaldor et al. (1994) and www.ncls.org.au) appear to have not once surveyed Australian Christians on what we spend our money on in actual dollar terms as a percentage of income, which is striking considering how much of Jesus' warned against the dangers of chasing money. On a personal level, all attempts that my wife and I have made to be mutually accountable for our financial decisions have only ever resulted in uncomfortable squirms and silences in the people present, even among the intentional urban community we are a part of. Australian Christians are quick to declare that they financially support helping the marginalised (21 out of 26 in the survey I conducted), but any enquiry into what that looks like in comparison to spending on entertainment (for example), appears to be strictly off limits. Recently in my church I have been grilled on the nuances of my soteriology, but I have never once been asked to give account for my financial decisions

or my practical support for the poor, even though elders should be screened for greed and being 'lovers of money' (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7). The fact that I live in a very nice house, in a very nice suburb waves no red flags in the Australian evangelical church. More often than not, I'm congratulated for it.

These anecdotal accounts are indicative of the dualism and individualism that have allowed materialism to quietly flourish in the undisclosed bank accounts of Australian evangelicals, the return on investment improved by lashings of self-deprecating Aussie battlerism. The consequences for the poor can only follow; if finances are left out of my theology, and if it really is *my* money; if I believe I'm 'doing it tough' and that no-one deserves a peek at my balance sheet; then what we have is not just materialism, but materialism unchecked, which never favours the poor, and always feeds the over-sized bellies of the rich. It matters little that the rich are convinced they are not rich.

Thus the evidence for the impact of Australian evangelical materialism on the poor is primarily seen in the silence and vacuums of the Australian evangelical scene; the lack of surveys on financial spending among Australian Christians; the relative silence by Australian evangelicals on federal budgets that disproportionally favour the rich; the severe uncomfortableness that we have with showing one other our budgets and bank statements. As long as this continues, the poor will have to be content with the scraps thrown from the individual Australian evangelical table; calculations based entirely on what I individually believe they deserve and I individually believe I can afford.

Having identified three theological gaps in Australian evangelical theology, and demonstrated the consequences of those gaps for the poor, we turn now to identifying a possible way forward.

The Indigenous gap in Australian evangelical theology as a way forward

The Indigenous voice in Australian evangelical theology is disquietingly absent, the result of a significant contextual blunder or a quiet attempt at theological genocide, I don't know. For example, two prominent books on Australian contextual theology, *Discovering an Australian theology* (1988) and its sequel *Developing an Australian theology* (1999), contain only two articles by indigenous authors out of a total of 29 articles. There is a terrible irony

here; an attempt at Australian theology without Australia's great-grandparents, the underlying arrogance and supremacy lamented by Indigenous theologians (Rosendale et al. 1997:62). It is my suggestion that hearing the Australian indigenous voice would not only provide Australian evangelicals with a contextual theology that's more reflective of the Australian environment, but the strengths of an Australian indigenous evangelical theology have the potential to almost entirely fill the gaps in current Australian evangelical theology outlined above, with positive outcomes for the poor. I will examine three broad strengths of Indigenous contextual theology relevant to this paper: a holistic perspective, an emphasis on community, and a low value on property.[7]

Holistic perspective

Indigenous Australian evangelical theologians cannot conceive of a separation of the physical and the spiritual. They note the significance of land through the OId Testament, and the way that the revelation of God often occurred at particular locations (Gondarra 1986:29f). With a spirituality so intricately interwoven into the land, God is revealed, encountered and worshipped through the landscape and the day-to-day events (Gondarra 1986:32; Rosendale et al. 1997:30). The contrast between Lawson's *How the land was won* and the indigenous perspective goes beyond mere opposites; The land is a place of sustenance and life rather than a place where "*…two failed by the dry creek bed and one went on alone"*; it is a place of fellowship rather than "…*the loneliest land in the wild world…"*; teaching and guiding us instead of needing to be "…*toiled and fought… and won…"* (Dodson 1988:83ff; Pike 2013:4; Havea 2014:12f; Rosendale et al. 1997:35f). Separation of the spiritual and the physical is simply unimaginable in the indigenous mind:

> We never said that God's up that way and that heaven's over that way or that hell's down that way because we were *in* heaven… This is my heaven – Aboriginal land, the creation is heaven. Hell comes into it when you get greed and oppression and ego… (Gilbert 1996:56).

Indigenous Australian theology has no room for dualism, and the outworking of their holistic perspective, coupled with their experiences of the past 200 years is a deep desire for justice. Allowing the indigenous voice to shape Australian evangelical theology will not only fill the

[7] I want to acknowledge that there is significant diversity among Indigenous Australian theologians, and that to speak of 'Australian Indigenous theology' can be problematic. I believe however, that the three aspects I am looking at are general enough to capture a majority perspective.

dualistic gap, but will widen the evangelical perspective of what the gospel is; for the good news of Jesus permeates all situations and aspects of life (Harris 1996:70). If hell is 'greed and oppression and ego', then heaven is justice, peace, equality and dignity for all in the here and now. Australian Indigenous Christians understand that in ways that Australian evangelicals don't.

Emphasis on community

In stark contrast to the individuality that Australian evangelical theology supports, indigenous theology is deeply communal. Indigenous identity is wrapped up in complex social structures that "…essentially allows all persons to be related to one another as quasi-kin, so that strangers may soon find a place in it" (Shaw 1981:186). Responsibilities and reciprocities for the individual are assigned accordingly, so that in the event of an early death, for example, children will automatically become the responsibility of someone else (University of Sydney 2014; see for example Shaw 1981:33,51). In this context, the community, togetherness and sharing, take priority over the rights of the individual.

This thoroughly communal perspective of life reflects the biblical metaphor of the Church functioning as a body; inter-related and mutually interdependent. If the indigenous Australian voice was permitted to shape Australian evangelical theology, it is likely that the current individualistic gap would be reduced, deepening a concern for the poor as they are increasingly seen and understood as our brothers and sisters who we both serve and rely on.[8]

Low value on property

Lastly, Indigenous Australian theologians have highlighted the way in which Australian Christians of western descent have been caught up in materialism (Rosendale et al. 1997:44). Conversely, the nomadic lifestyle and spirituality of Indigenous Australians meant that they have traditionally had few possessions, and most of them communal; not only is it difficult to carry a large number of possessions from camp to camp to serve community life, but treading lightly was part of interaction with the divine:

[8] Reciprocity with the poor is another issue, perhaps best left for another paper; too often we see money as the ultimate gift, when the poor have a whole host of unique gifts to give and teach us.

> God guided our people to take just enough food for our daily needs and promised [that] if we were not greedy, but shared what we found, there would always be enough for tomorrow (Rosendale et al. 1997:19).

The indigenous holistic perspective coupled with an identity found in community and the land means that Indigenous people are taught to tend the land and care for it, sharing its produce rather than see the landscape as a means to personal wealth. Greed, as Gilbert suggested earlier, would turn the place into hell. If Australian evangelical theologians allowed the influence of their Indigenous counterparts, perhaps the materialism of Australian evangelicals will begin to erode. An Indigenous theological perspective on possessions would deepen the evangelical heart for the poor as we begin to realise that we were given this environment to nurture, not for personal gain, but for the tending of our broad, global family.

Conclusion

While the exact perimeter of Australian evangelical theology is difficult to map, there are at least four significant historical situations that have helped to shape Australian evangelical theology into its current form. Dualism, individualism and materialism are three particular gaps that have emerged or gone unchecked in Australian evangelical theology as it developed in those historical situations, contributing to the perpetuation of poverty. However, an Australian contextual theology that gives proper weight to the Indigenous perspective may well be the filling that those gaps require. Indigenous Christians have a holistic perspective, an emphasis on community and a low value on possessions which offers the balance needed to correct the gaps in Australian evangelical theology highlighted in this paper. Most evangelicals do care about the poor, but that concern is softened and blunted by the deeply bedded, well hidden dualistic, individualistic and materialistic flavours of our Australian theology. Perhaps we don't need more teaching on Jesus' concern for the poor as much as more yarning with and listening to the indigenous members of our family. Perhaps then we can enjoy a clearer, better rounded Australian theology that finds the Indigenous, the no-longer-marginalised and the European invader sharing a meal at the generous table of Jesus.

I'd drink to that.

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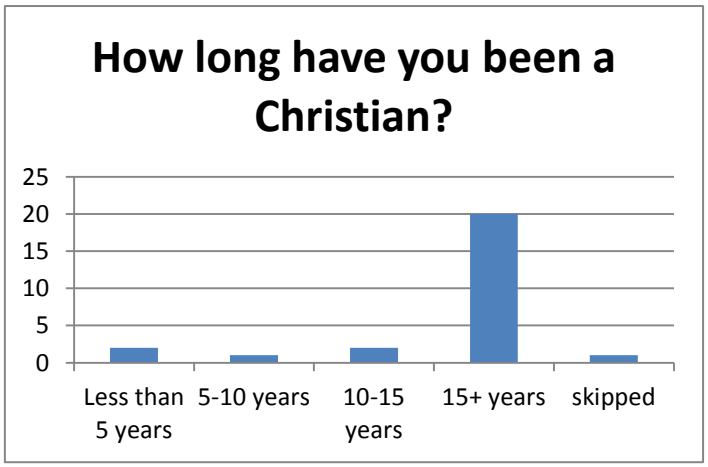
Appendix 1, Survey: What do Australian Christians care about?

Realising that it would be difficult to find current data on Australian evangelical theology and practice, I decided to undertake a small online survey that would provide an understanding of what some current evangelicals understood the gospel to be both theologically and practically. A total of 26 people responded, mostly friends and family, who I would describe as dominant culture Australians. I would estimate that at least a third of respondents are members of my church, which is above average in its concern for social issues. I asked open-ended questions around their perception of what the gospel means theologically, and what current issues Australian Christians should be more concerned about. The survey results seem to be consistent with the observations made in this paper.

Table 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate that the respondents have been Christians for a significant period of time, are established in the Australian context, and are confident in their understanding of Christianity.

Table 1



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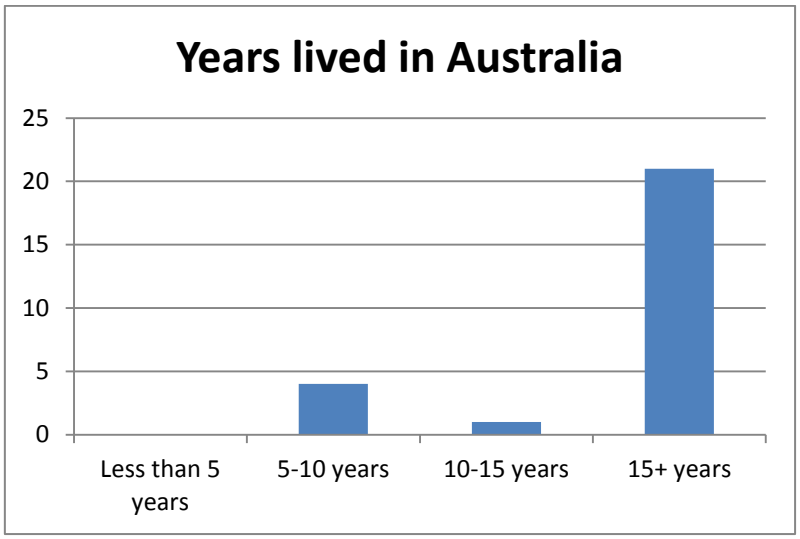

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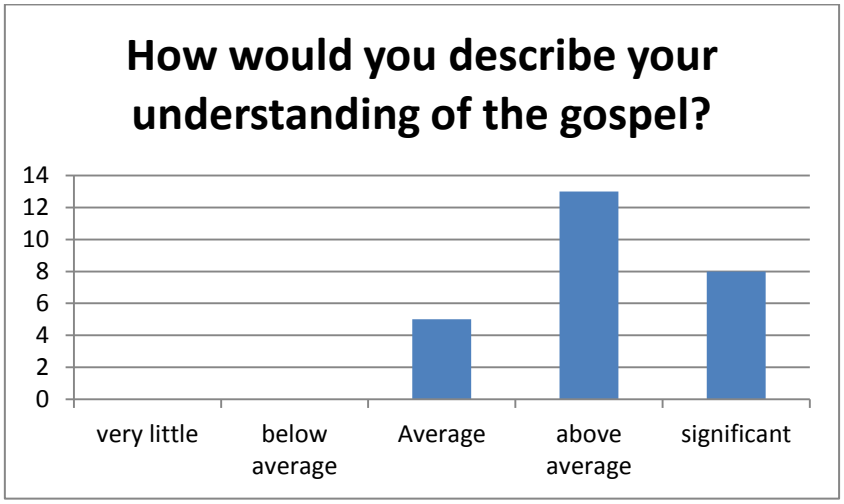

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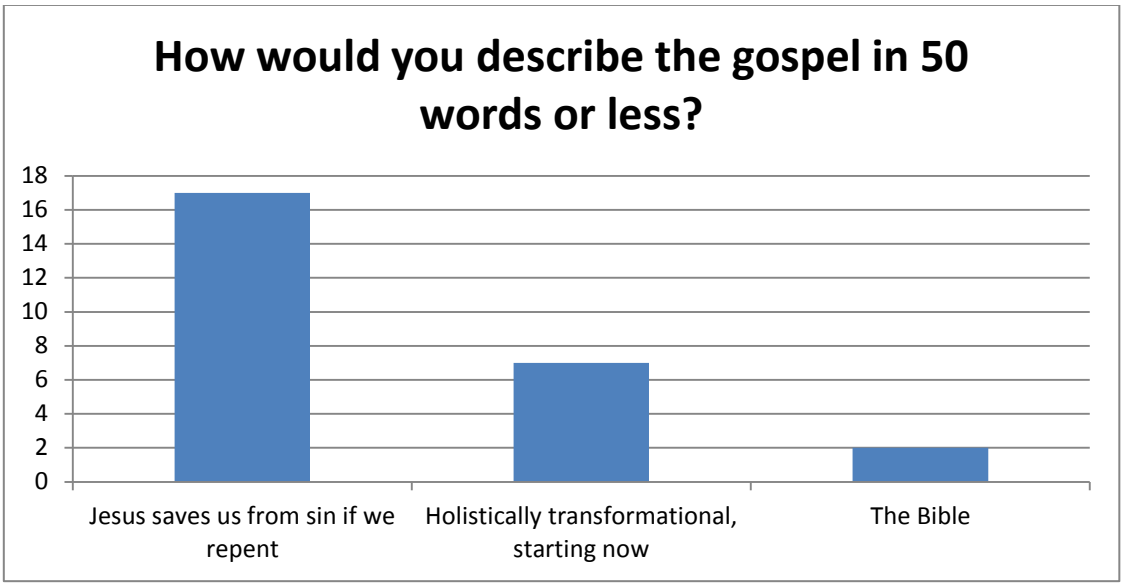

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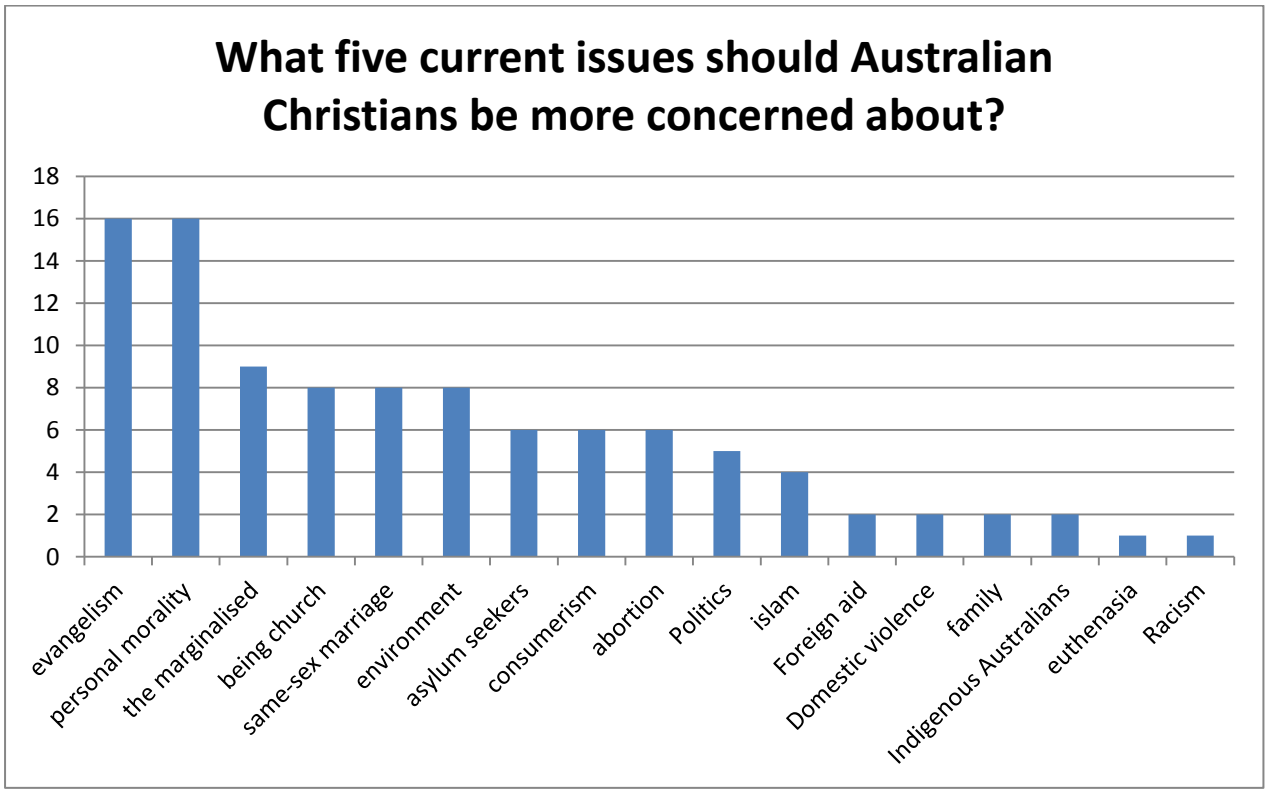

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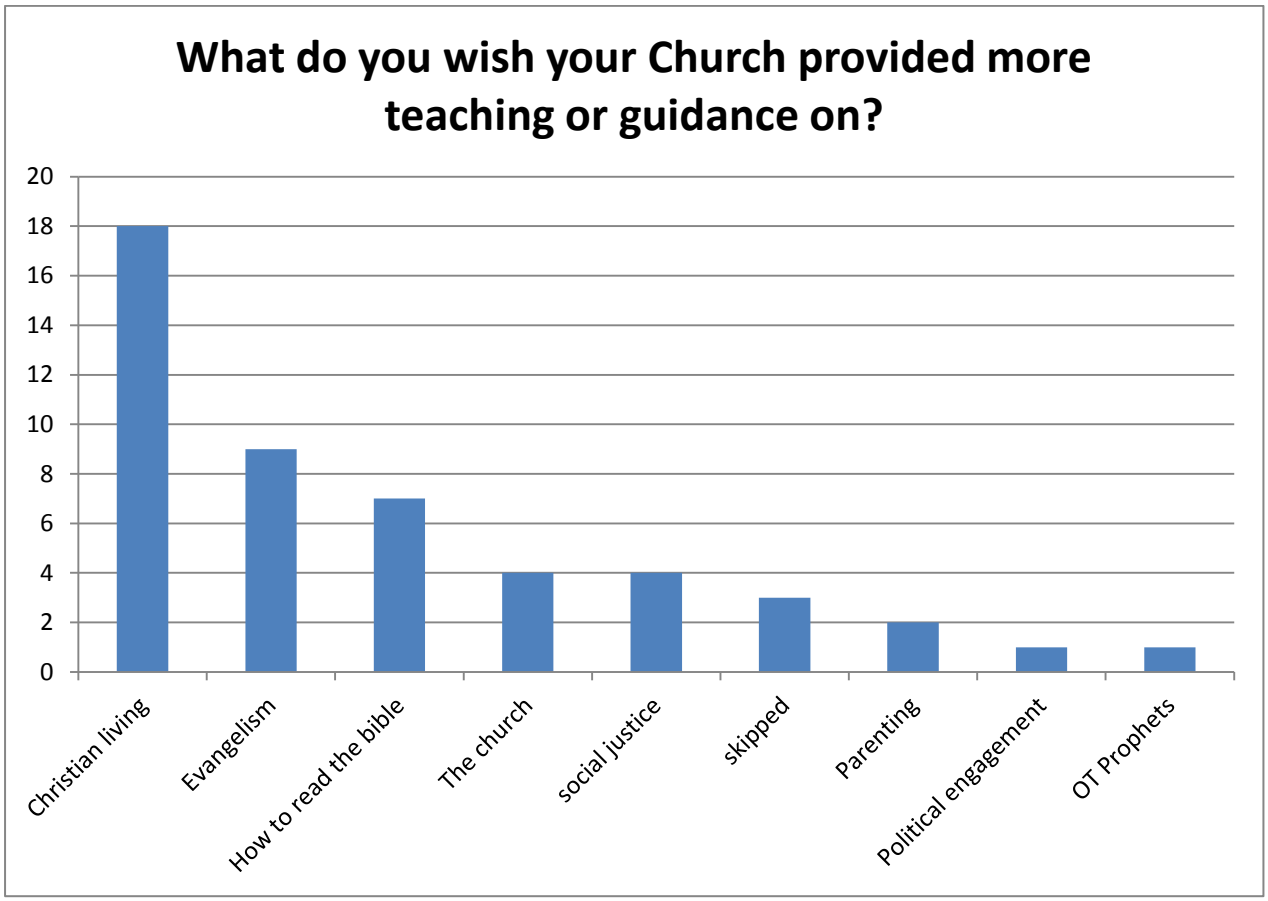

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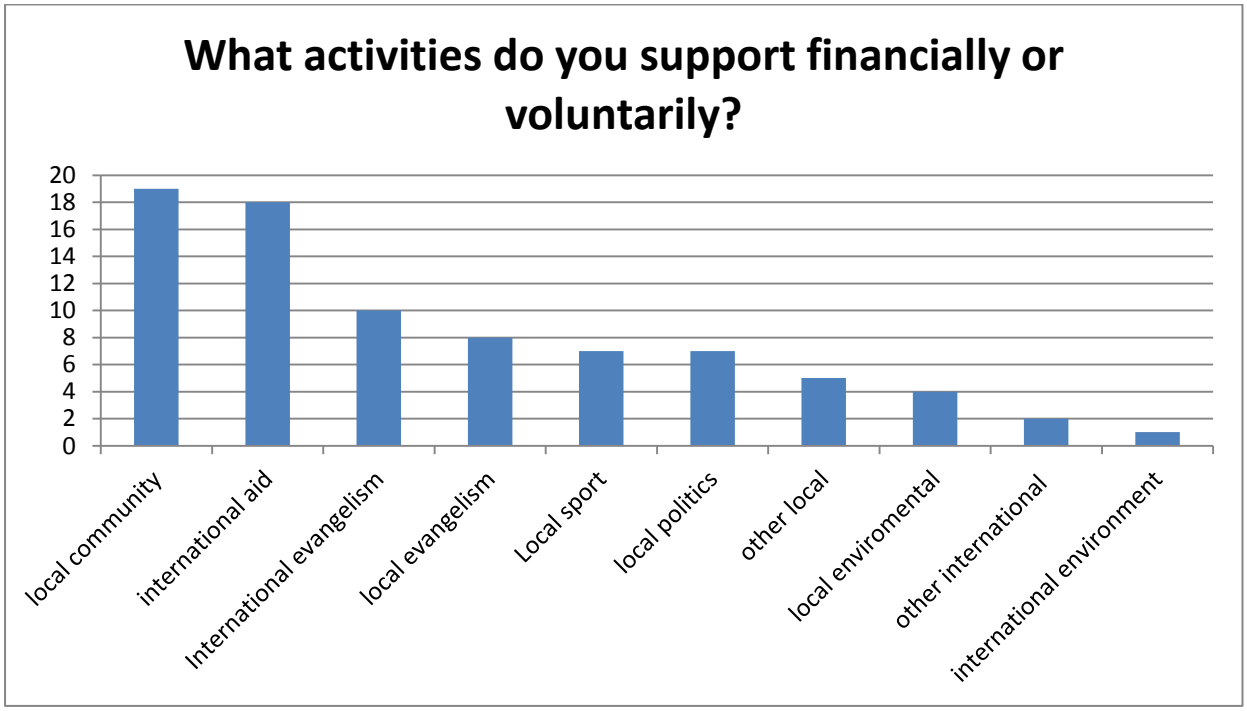

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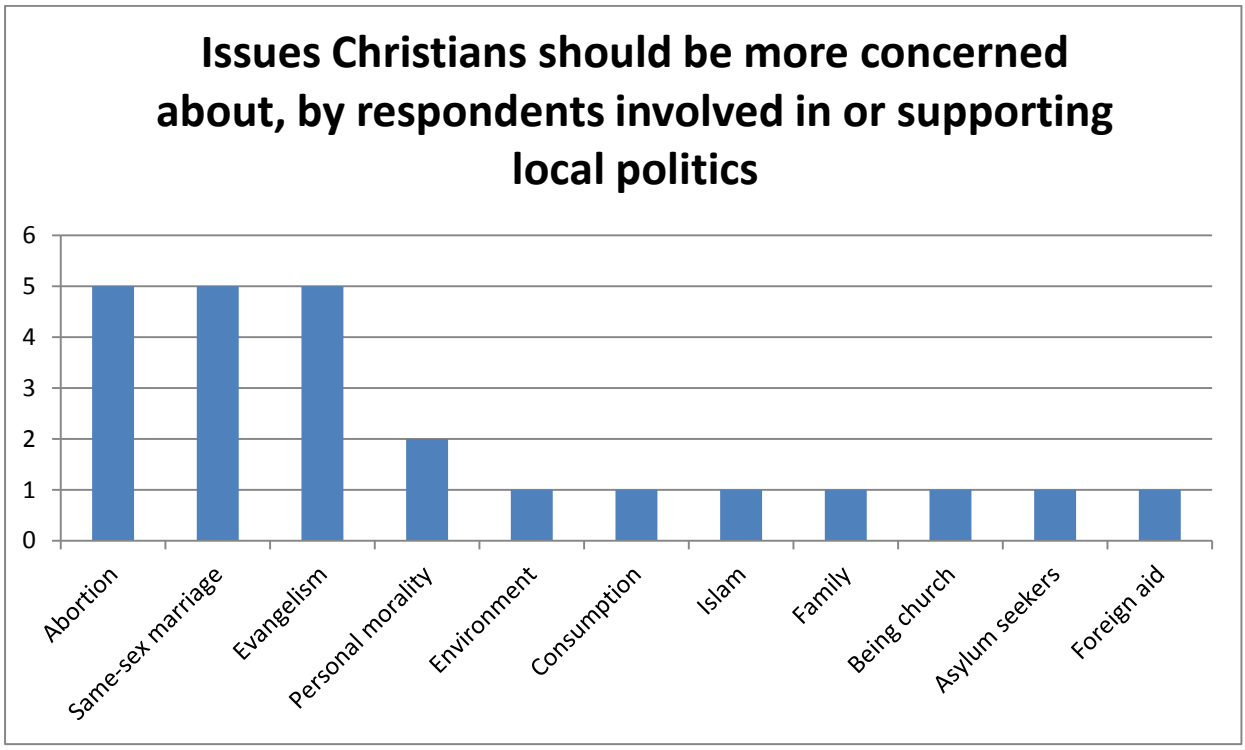
Issues Christians should be more concerned about, by respondents involved in or supporting local politics
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
Abortion
Same-sex marriage
Evangelism
Personal morality
Environment
Consumption
Islam
Family
Being church
Asylum seekers
Foreign aid