

What is Evangelical Churchmanship?

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To answer this question adequately would need a theological treatise rather than a short magazine article.

It will be well to consider first the Spiritual Basis of Evangelical Churchmanship and if we had to choose one text to describe it, Ephesians ii. 8 would seem to be the fittest. “By *Grace* ye are saved through faith, and that *not of yourselves*. It is the gift of God.” The Evangelical emphasis has always been placed first and foremost on the personal experience of divine grace. To put it in other words: the consciousness of “conversion” or the “New Birth” has always taken a prominent place in the Evangelical message. The need of the soul to obtain the assurance of the Divine forgiveness and pardon through the grace of God is the very heart of Evangelical Truth. This personal dealing of the soul with God was the great dynamic at the Reformation. It was Luther’s long spiritual struggle to find a “gracious God” which led to his conscious “conversion” and to the inauguration of his great spiritual movement. Bilney in England went through much the same experience and soul-struggle. He could get no peace of conscience, no assurance of salvation, through *works* of “righteousness,” through vigils, fasts, Masses and Indulgences. He had not then realized that, as Ruskin well put it, “The root of every heresy and schism is man’s desire to *earn* rather than receive his salvation.” It was only when he grasped the meaning of the truth that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” that he got peace for his troubled conscience. Calvin also had a similar spiritual struggle. Again this personal experience of the grace of God in Christ was the outstanding feature of the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century. It was when John Wesley was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans that he felt his heart “strangely warmed, I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

The need for this experience of conversion and of a new birth was due to another almost universal Evangelical spiritual experience- i.e., a very real and true sense of personal sin as against a holy God. Therefore there was the urgent need of the Divine mercy and of the assurance of divine pardon. We find this experience vividly expressed by Charles Wesley in his hymns—i.e., the wonder and marvel of the Divine grace and pardon.—

“And can it be, that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
He left His father’s throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace.
Emptied Himself of all but love
And bled for Adam’s helpless race
’Tis mercy all, immense and free
For O my God *it found out me.*”

It is this experience of personal saving grace which has always made Evangelicals powerful preachers of the Evangel. It is the testimony—“He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*”—it is the confession “Once I was blind, but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus.” It is the realization “He bore *my* sins, in His own body on the tree” which gave such power to their message. It is largely the lack of this sense of personal guilt today which is the cause of a lukewarm, tepid, ineffective, and spineless religion. It was certainly this deep sense of conviction of sin which was the conspicuous feature of all previous spiritual or evangelical revivals. For it is obvious that if men do not realize that they are sinners and are thus unfit for the presence of a holy God, they are not likely to realize their need of a Saviour. Evangelical religion has always insisted on this need of conviction of sin. The weakness of Evangelicalism to-day is largely because there is not nearly enough preaching of the doctrine of our Article IX that “man is very far gone from original righteousness.”

Undoubtedly the spiritual basis of Evangelicalism is a personal salvation through personal faith in a crucified Saviour, leading to a surrendered, purified and consecrated life. Realizing fully the “mercies of God” in Christ, Evangelicals are impelled to “present their bodies a living sacrifice,” and seek to be “transformed” characters, proving in their daily lives that “good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” For they have always rightly insisted that the pardoned life must be synonymous with the purified character. They believe that the “grace of God” must always manifest itself in the changed daily life and conversation. Or in other words that “They that are after the Spirit must ‘mind’, or be occupied in, the things of the Spirit.”

It is this fact of the power of the Gospel to change men’s lives—to save men not only from a careless or evil past but also day by day, which was so abundantly demonstrated at the time of the Reformation and in the later Evangelical Revival. It is the glory of the Evangelical message; and once Evangelicalism loses this clear definite teaching and witness, it will soon become a spent force. The most correct or orthodox Evangelical preaching is useless, unless it is followed by absolute purity and consistency of life. It was the undoubted piety of the Puritans which was the great strength of that Movement, in spite of its stem, rigid and often somewhat unlovely and exclusive asceticism.

We come next to the Doctrinal position of the Evangelical Churchman. With his spiritual basis in the personal experience of divine grace, it naturally follows that he should emphasize *the free access of the individual soul to God* through the grace of Christ. We might call this truth the great rediscovery of the Reformation. It was of course due directly to the translation and free circulation of the Scriptures amongst the people. The “humble seeking soul” by studying the Word of God in his mother-tongue, soon found that God spoke through it directly to him—the message of pardon and peace. He needed no mediation or intervention of Church, priest or sacrament. Through the truths of Scripture he was brought directly into touch with the “one Mediator between God and Man,” and “being justified by faith in Christ, he found peace with God! This was the truth which brought deliverance to Luther, Latimer, Calvin, and numberless others; and therefore they put in the forefront of their theological teaching the Pauline doctrine of Justification by Faith only. Evangelical Churchmen have therefore always emphasized Article XI—that “we are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith and not for our own works or deservings,” or as our Homily puts it—“If we stick fast to Christ’s promise and apply His merits unto ourselves, we need no other sacrifice, no sacrificing priest, no mass.” This insistence by our Evangelical Fathers on justification by faith and on its corollary—the priesthood of all believers—dealt the death blow to sacerdotal pretensions and to the need of

Confession and priestly Absolution and the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass; and the Evangelical Churchman today will forfeit the right to his name, if he gives any quarter in this direction.

Another vital doctrinal, or perhaps we should call it ecclesiastical, principle of Evangelical Churchmanship is its fundamental *appeal to the Holy Scriptures*. The supremacy and final doctrinal and moral authority of Holy Scripture is the foundation principle of Evangelical Truth. It is also the hallmark of its Reformed Catholicism, for it was by this constant appeal to Scripture that the Reformers restored the early purity of the Catholic Faith. In so doing, they returned to the uniform position and teaching of the Early Fathers on the subject. It was no new doctrine. Moreover, it was also on account of this appeal to the Word of God that they earned the name of "Protestant." We should therefore always remember that the Protestant is the true Catholic, and, as Evangelical Churchmen, we must never surrender the title "Catholic" either to Tractarians or to Romanists. This appeal to the final authority and supremacy of Scripture in matters of faith, was the common ground of all the Evangelical Reformers, and we are well aware that this appeal to Scripture runs, like a sweet refrain, all through our Articles. Their dogmatic assertions are all brought to the touchstone of the Word of God. Again this final authority of Scripture was the great and sharp "divide" between the medieval and the Reformed Churchmen, and if Evangelical Churchmen ever belittle this appeal, or depart from it in any direction they will soon have no sure standing ground left. If once a co-ordinate and indeterminate authority like "Tradition" or "Church Teaching" is allowed to interpret and thus practically override Scripture, then the door is immediately opened to corrupt, superstitious and false teaching, such as prevailed in the Medieval Church. But, on the other hand, a Christianity based on the Bible as its supreme standard will withstand the test of storms and revolutionary upheavals, when a merely traditional "Church Teaching" Gospel will go under, as we can see it has done in Russia, and also largely in France, and as it seems to be now doing in Spain.

It may be well to refer here to the gibe often made against this outstanding Evangelical principle. We are frequently met with the taunt that all that the Reformation did was to exchange belief in an "infallible Church for belief in an infallible Bible." And the usual inference is that the one is nearly as dangerous as the other. It is a very superficial and "cheap" criticism. For it is obvious that Christianity, if it is to mean anything real to us, must rest on some reliable and accessible historical basis. In other words, unless we are to follow "cunningly devised fables" and build up our spiritual experiences on our own private fancies, dreams, or hallucinations, *in the end* they must be tested by some trustworthy historical standard of appeal. In this connection it is certainly true, as Canon Storr puts it, that "the Bible makes a religious and spiritual appeal to mind, will and conscience" (*Spiritual Liberty*, p. 54). But surely it does this, simply because its revelation is trustworthy and historical? Otherwise we might be deceiving ourselves by relying on a mere individual subjective experience? Canon Storr implies this, when he declares that "Christianity is based on certain happenings which have in the past been interpreted as proof of specific divine activity in history" (p. 139).

Again, we are told now sometimes that our final authority must be not Scripture but "the Mind of Christ." But we ask, "How are we to discover the "Mind of Christ" except through the Scriptures which record His teaching and interpret and apply it? If therefore we are not satisfied with "Tradition" or "Church Teaching" we have no safe or satisfactory standard except Holy Scripture, which, as our Article assures us, "containeth all things necessary to salvation." In any case, the Evangelical Churchman in insisting on this final authority of

Scripture is, we should remember, maintaining the only authorized Church of England position. When her clergy are ordained to the priesthood, they declare that this standard is to be the touchstone of their teaching and ministry. They are asked: “Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and are you determined . . . to teach nothing as of necessity for eternal salvation but that which *you* shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scripture?”

In the interpretation of Holy Scripture the Holy Spirit is to be our teacher and guide, and we believe that He will progressively unfold Christ’s Will and teaching to us and enable us to interpret and apply it to the altered conditions and problems of a newer age with its fuller scientific knowledge and its changed outlook on life. But it will be by taking of “the things of Christ” as revealed to us by holy men who spake and recorded as they were moved and guided by the Holy Ghost, in the Divine revelation enshrined in Scripture. The Holy Spirit, through the truths of Scripture will reveal and interpret to us in a fuller way and in a clearer light God’s Will and purposes for mankind today. Evangelicals, like John Robinson of Leyden, are fully persuaded that “God hath much more light and truth to break forth from His holy Word.” As Canon Storr says, “The revelation recorded in the New Testament is final, for there will not be a second Christ.”

Evangelicals have always emphasized the inward work of the Holy Spirit on the life of the believer, but they hold that this divine enlightenment must always be in accordance with Scripture and not destructive of, or in addition, or contrary to, Scriptural truth.

There is much, very much more which could be said about the content, form and purpose of Evangelical religion, but the foregoing principles are the heart and core of it. The absolute authority of God’s Word written, the sin and corruption of man, his justification through the free grace of God, by faith alone in Christ and his sanctification by the Holy Spirit: this is indeed a Gospel of redemption.

We remember and rejoice in the fact that the Church of England itself is Evangelical. Its Reformed position, its official teaching, its formularies and worship are all thoroughly Evangelical; because they were compiled and given to us by convinced Evangelical men. The Reformers were outstandingly Evangelical in their doctrinal position—marvellously so—considering the age in which they lived and the environment in which they had been reared. As long therefore as our Formularies remain intact, Evangelicals are the truest Churchmen. We need never apologize for Evangelicalism. It is true churchmanship. Its teaching is to be found in our Articles and Prayer Book and, be it carefully observed, in that order of priority. That teaching is a most precious heritage. It should be jealously guarded and no “Ahab” must be suffered to despoil us of the “inheritance of our fathers.”

The Evangelical witness for a spiritual as opposed to a sacerdotal or mere “ecclesiastical” religion, is as needed today as it was in the first century or the sixteenth century that the truth of the Gospel may continue with us.

There is a very large and hopeful “open door” for the Christian message today. People generally realize that there is something terribly wrong with the world, but they know not how to remedy it. A distracted, distressed and disillusioned world is “wearying itself” in vainly trying to find some “door” of hope and deliverance. But we know that it is only the eternal message of the Gospel of God’s free grace—the Gospel of peace and goodwill

through Christ's one great Sacrifice on the Cross—which is the real “door” of salvation and hope.

Here then is our present opportunity. What is mainly responsible for the exceedingly dangerous inflammable International situation today is the sin of greed and selfishness, both of individuals and of nations. And the Gospel of Christ is the only real cure for this disease. For it calls us to follow Him who pleased not Himself, but went about doing good and became “the servant of all.” It tells us also that He alone can get rid of the root cause of our troubles because “once in the end of the world hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

Let us then preach this grand message of deliverance “in season and out of season” as our Evangelical Fathers did in former days of spiritual revival. We can then expect that, through the work of the Divine Spirit, there will be a “shaking of dry bones” and that the Gospel faithfully preached, in these latter days also, will show its wondrous power to turn men from sin, and bring them to the feet of God

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