

What is an Evangelical?

Michael S. Horton

©1992 Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

Labels are often confusing, especially when the jar's content changes. Grape juice can become vinegar over the years in the cellar, but the label doesn't change with the changes in the substance. The same is true of the term "evangelical."

Since "The Year of the Evangelical," corresponding to our nation's Bicentennial in 1976, the term (in North America, at least) has come to identify those who highlight a particular brand of politics, a moralistic and often legalistic approach to life, and a sort of ersatz, "corny" style of evangelism. For some, the term encompasses the emotionalism they see on religious TV. For others, hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Then there are the memories many of us have who were raised evangelical: strong, caring family environments; a sense of belonging, with friends who like to talk about the "things of the Lord."

Regardless of your background, it's important to understand the meaning of the term "evangelical."

People first began using that label in the sixteenth century, as a designation for those who embraced the gospel which had been, in a very real sense, recovered by the Protestant Reformation in that century. "Evangelical" comes from "evangel," which is Greek for "gospel." Thus, the "evangelicals" were the Lutherans and Calvinists who wanted to recover the evangel and shout it from the rooftops. It was a designation employed to set Protestants in sharp contrast to Roman Catholics and "sects." But to understand why these Protestants thought they were the ones who had really recovered the true, biblical gospel, we have to understand what that gospel was.

The "Evangel"

The Reformation was a collection of "solas"--that's Latin for "only." They cheered, "Sola Scriptura!", meaning, "Scripture only." The Bible was "the only rule for faith and practice" (Westminster) for the Reformers. You see, the Church believed that the Bible was fully inspired and infallible, but the Church was the only infallible interpreter of the Bible. The Reformers agreed that tradition was important and that Christians shouldn't interpret it by themselves, but that all Christians, whether clergy or laity, should come to a common understanding and interpretation of Scripture together. The Bible ought not to be left exclusively to the "experts," but that never meant for the Reformers that every Christian should presume that he or she could come to interpretations of the Bible without the guidance and assistance of the Church.

The main point of "sola Scriptura," then, was this: The Church should not be allowed to make up rules or doctrines outside of Scripture. There are no new revelations, no popes who hear directly from God, and nothing which the Bible doesn't address should be mandated for Christians.

The second "sola" was "Sola Christus," "Christ Only." This didn't mean that the Reformers didn't believe in the Trinity--that the Father and the Holy Spirit were equally divine, but that Christ, being the God-Man and our only Mediator, is the "front man" for the Trinity. "He who has seen Me has seen the Father," Jesus said. At a time when mere humans were taking Christ's place as mediator between God and Christians, the Reformers shouted with St. Paul, "There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). I grew up in churches where we had "altar calls" and this might be the closest things we modern Christians have to the medieval "altar call"--the Mass. In our churches, the pastor would act as a mediator, acknowledging our hand "while every head is bowed and every eye closed," and we would go up front to where he was, called the "altar" and repeat a prayer after him. He would then pronounce that, having "prayed the prayer," we were now saved. I remember getting "saved" again and again. When I felt guilty after a particularly nasty Saturday night, down I'd go again to the altar. Medieval Christians were scared to death that they might die with unconfessed sin and go to hell. So, the Mass was an opportunity to "get right with God" and fill up the bathtub that had gotten a leak due to sin.

But the Reformers would tell those of us who live in anxiety over whether we're in or out of God's favor, or whether we're surrendering enough or gaining victory, "Only Christ!" It was His life, not ours, which counts for our salvation; it was His sacrificial death and victorious resurrection which secures eternal life for us. Because He "surrendered all," His merit more than covers our demerits.

That brings us to the next "sola"--"Grace Only!" Rome believed in grace; in fact, the Church insisted that without it nobody could be saved. But grace was like a sort of "magic dust" that helped a person live a better life--with God's help. The Reformers countered that grace is not a substance that God gives us to live a better life, but an attitude God has toward us which accepts us as righteous because of Christ's holiness, not our own.

That's why they issued the fourth "only," which we know as "Faith Only!" Granted that we're saved by grace alone, how do we get this grace? Rome argued that grace was distributed by the Church through the various methods the "higher-ups" had invented. Faith plus love or faith plus good works, or something like that became the formula for salvation. The Reformers, to the contrary, insisted that from beginning to end, "salvation is the Lord's doing" (Jon.2:9). "The Spirit gives life; man contributes nothing" (Jn.6:55). "It does not depend on man's decision or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom.9:16). So faith itself is a gift of God's grace and cannot be said to be the "one thing" we do in salvation: For we are "born not of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (Jn.1:13).

The minute a person looks to "Christ only" for salvation, depending on His holy life and substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, that very moment he or she is justified (set right, declared righteous, holy, perfect). Christ's own holiness is imputed (credited) to the believer's account as though he or she had lived a perfect life of obedience--even while that person still continues to fall into sin repeatedly throughout his or her life. The Christian is not someone who is looking in the spiritual mirror, gauging one's nearness to God by experience or progress in holiness, but is rather someone who is "looking to Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). In short, it's Christ's lifestyle, not yours, that meets God's requirements and that righteousness can be transferred to your account by faith (looking to Christ) alone.

Finally, the Reformers said that all of this means that God gets all the credit. "Soli Deo Gloria" was their way of putting it--our last "sola," which means, "To God Only Be Glory!" An evangelical, therefore, was God-centered; someone who was convinced that God had done it all and that there was nothing left for man to claim as his own except sin. This radically transformed not only the devotional life of believers who embraced it, but the social fabric as well. In an old seventeenth century tavern in Heidelberg, Germany, there reads at the top, "Soli Deo Gloria!" J.S. Bach, the famous composer, signed all of his compositions with that Reformation slogan. Likewise, another composer, Handel, declared, "What a privilege to be a member of the evangelical church, to know your sins are forgiven. If we were to be left to ourselves, my God, what would become of us?" Great and noble lives require great and noble thoughts and the sovereignty and grace of God are, if anything, great and noble thoughts. The Reformers told Rome what J. B. Philipps, the English Bible translator, told the contemporary Church: "Your God Is Too Small."

The Reformation, which produced the term "evangelical," also recovered the biblical doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" and the scriptural notions of calling and vocation. The Church had divided Christians into first-class (those who would enter "full-time Christian ministry") and second-class (those who were employed in "secular" jobs). The Reformers countered that all Christians are priests and are, therefore, ministers of God regardless of whether they are sweeping a room to God's glory, shaping a piece of pottery, defending a client in court, curing a patient, milking a cow, or leading a congregation in worship. There is no "secular" and "sacred"--God created the whole world and made life in that world inseparable from our very humanity.

How Do We Square Today?

The question, of course, is whether "evangelical" means today what it has meant for almost five hundred years.

First, many of today's evangelicals have a lower view of Scripture than the Church of Rome had in the sixteenth century. Leading evangelical institutions doubt the Bible's trustworthiness and infallibility--unless, of course, it happens to agree with what they've already decided to be true. Others believe the Bible is inerrant, but add new rules or

revelations to the canon. "The Bible is enough," the Reformers would counsel us. Sermons are very often "pop/inspirational" pep-talks on "How To Raise Positive Kids" or "How To Have Self-Esteem" rather than serious expositions of Scripture. According to Gallup, "America is a nation of biblical illiterates," even though 60 million of them call themselves "evangelicals."

Second, many evangelicals today do not believe that Christ is enough, either. Sometimes even very good and noble persons replace Christ as our only mediator, such as the Holy Spirit. While we worship the Spirit along with the Father and the Son, the Son has the unique role as our only Advocate and Mediator. We must not look to the Spirit's work in our hearts, but to Christ's work on the cross. Sometimes, we have human mediators other than the God-Man Christ. We need other go-betweens, like the role of the pastor in the "altar call" to which I referred. Not long ago I saw a leading televangelist pick up the receiver of his phone (a prop) and inform his viewers that, "This is your connection to God." Evidently, I'm not alone--a secular band, "Depeche Mode," sings of "Your Own Personal Jesus" who can be reached by picking up a phone and calling in your confession. As long as we're on the subject, we might as well point out that it was John Tetzel's selling of "indulgences" (time off in purgatory for sums of money) which inspired Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses," sparking the Reformation. "When the coin in the coffer rings," the choir sang, "a soul from purgatory springs." Is this really different from the selling of salvation we have seen on Christian TV, radio, and even in many churches? Money and salvation have become intertwined among many of us. "They sell you salvation," sings Ray Stevens, "while they sing 'Amazing Grace.'"

And as for "Grace Alone," most evangelicals today believe that something--free will, a decision, a prayer, a walk down an aisle, a second blessing, something we do for God that will give us the confidence that we are in His favor. Doctrines like election, justification, and regeneration are hardly ever discussed because they paint the picture of a humanity that is helpless and that cannot even cooperate with God in the matter of salvation. If we are to be saved, it is God and God alone who must do it.

How about "Faith Alone"? Many evangelicals believe that faith isn't enough. If one believes in Christ, but then goes out and blows it, is faith enough? If Christ comes back to find a believer in the arms of a prostitute, will He take that person home with Him? Some insist that faith plus surrender or faith plus obedience or faith plus a sincere desire to serve the Lord will serve as the formula. The fact that evangelicals struggle today with these questions indicates that we have not heard the "certain sound" of "faith alone" in our churches. Faith is enough because Christ is enough.

How do today's evangelicals compare with their predecessors on the matter of "To God Only Be Glory"? Self-esteem, self-glorification, self-centeredness seems to dominate the preaching, teaching, and popular literature of the evangelical world. Today's evangelicals know little of the great God of the Reformers--a God who "does as He pleases with the heavens and the peoples of the earth" and "who works everything after the plan and purpose of His own will" (Dan. 4; Eph. 1:11). Evangelicals today, reflecting their broader culture and society, are intimidated by a God who is God. But what other God can be

trusted? In short, what other God exists? To worship the god of personal experience or the god of personal preference is to worship an idol. The Reformers took that seriously and those who would be "evangelicals" in more than name only must as well.

Conclusion

Many people wonder why "Reformation" folks appear angry. Nobody wants to be around angry people--and I certainly don't want to be known as an "angry" person. But we must face the fact that these are especially unfaithful times for God's people. We have been given a rich faith, with Christ at the center. But we have traded in our rich diet for a bag of popcorn and are malnourished to show for it. If evangelicals are going to have the same spiritual health which they have had in past ages, they will have to return to the truths which make "evangelicals" "evangelical." The Bible--our only foundation; Christ--our only hope; Grace--our only gospel; Faith--our only instrument; God's glory--our only goal; the priesthood of all believers--our only ministry. This original evangelicalism is still enough to make even our slightest gains enormous.

Dr. Michael Horton is the vice chairman of the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and is associate professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. Dr. Horton is a graduate of Biola University (B.A.), Westminster Theological Seminary in California (M.A.R.) and Wycliffe Hall, Oxford (Ph.D.). Some of the books he has written or edited include *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace*, *Beyond Culture Wars*, *Power Religion*, *In the Face of God*, and most recently, *We Believe*.