



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE EVANGELICAL?

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What do you think of when you hear the word “evangelical?” *Group Discussion.*

It’s not a new term. “Evangelical” was used already in the days of the Prussian Union to describe the new church body that the Prussian King was going to force on Lutherans and Reformed. The term also appeared in the late 1940’s as another federation of Lutheran, United, and Reformed churches.

The Old Lutherans in Germany objected to the Union compromise and Union Liturgy forced on them by the Prussian King to make Lutherans and Reformed into one Protestant church called "Evangelical." In Germany the formation of EKID (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, also abbreviated EKD) became the counterpart to the Roman Catholic Church as a body that enjoyed legal and tax rights in the land... This federative union of Evangelicals included Lutheran, United, and Reformed State Churches. The Evangelische Kirche was also known to us as the Protestant Church, a federation of the aforementioned state churches. (Professor Arnold Koelpin, email correspondence, April 22, 2016).

The term “evangelical” has been hijacked and politicized in our culture. For most, it refers to people who promote morality and oppose the ethical stance taken by the rest of the world on topics like abortion, homosexuality, and the LGBT movement. Sometimes the term is used to describe anyone who is conservative and seems to take a specific moral stand.

If someone says, “My friend is very evangelical,” we’re using it to describe their personality. It means that they are fair in their dealings with others, and work hard to take the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way.

If someone says, “My friend goes to an evangelical church,” they are usually referring to a non-denominational church, and especially Southern Baptists, who remain distinct from Catholics and Lutherans. They tend to be more political, due to the influence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

Our congregations include the word “evangelical” in our names. I serve at Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church, in Stillwater, Minnesota. Most people, when they see that word, or more often its abbreviation, “Ev.,” think that our congregation must be more like the other non-denominational churches in town.

“Evangelical” can have quite a range of meaning in modern usage. This phrase gets to the heart of what it means:

κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον

“Preach the gospel.” Every pastor in this room should recognize these three Greek words. It’s the phrase we saw every day we walked into the Seminary chapel. It served as constant reminder why we were there and what we were studying to do. Preach the “evangelion.” Break that word down into its two parts, and it means: Preach the “good” “message.” Preach the “good” “news.” That’s the root meaning of the word “evangelical.” It means “good news.” The English language translated it with the word “gospel.”

Gospel: first came into use around A.D. 950, “Middle English go (d) spell, Old English gōdspell (see [good,spell2](#)); translation of Greek euangélion good news” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gospel>).

When the church calls itself “evangelical,” it is saying that it proclaims the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ. I remember my pastor’s simple definition from confirmation class way back in the early 1980’s. He said, “Evangelical means ‘gospel preaching.’”

Let's take 2 minutes and watch a short video that portrays the word "gospel."
(<https://skitguys.com/videos/item/gospel>)

Does this summary fit with what we've seen so far? Is this message "evangelical?"

That's what "evangelical" means in its narrowest sense. It refers to the good news that so many of us memorized: "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life**" (John 3:16 NIV). There is no better message, no better "good news" that we can share with others. That sharing becomes a key component for the definition of "evangelical." Luther recognized that already in his day. Take a closer look at his explanation to the 3rd commandment:

We should fear and love God, and so we should not despise his Word and the preaching of the same, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it. (Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. (p. 342). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press)

It is important to see that preaching is a vital component in the word "evangelical." The proclamation of the Word is key in being "evangelical." If the church is not proclaiming God's Word in its truth and purity, it cannot be "evangelical."

Luther emphasized the importance of the spoken Word in the Smalcald Articles, III:IV.

"We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; ..."

He also wrote,

"The Gospel should really not be something written, but an oral Word which bring the Scripture before us, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ Himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called His teaching not Scripture but Gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth." (LW 35, 123; SL, 11, xlv translated by Dr. Becker in The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther [A paper read at The Saginaw Valley Teachers Conference, Millington, Michigan, on April 19, 1963])

"Though the oral preaching of the Word, which enters the ears and touches the heart by faith and through the holy sacraments our Lord God accomplishes all these things in Christendom." (LW 12, 170)

In both of Luther's comments, he emphasizes that the Gospel is all about proclaiming the riches of God's grace in the forgiveness of sins. The church was supposed to be the place where God's people would encounter the hidden God who revealed himself to us in his Word, and in particular, the Word made flesh.

This is most apparent in Luther's theology of the cross. The God who created the universe and sustains it is invisible. He remains hidden, even when he reveals himself to man. He did not appear to Abram when he called him to leave his country and travel to the Promised Land. He remained hidden, behind his Word: "**The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you'**" (Genesis 12:1 NIV). The same was true in his interaction with Isaac and Jacob. He did not appear to them directly, but hid in visions or in his spoken Word.

The LORD helped Moses understand why he was hidden. Moses had seen the LORD at the burning bush. He had witnessed the same glory of the LORD on top of Mt. Sinai. Moses thought he was ready to view the LORD as he really was. **“Now show me your glory”** (Exodus 32:18 NIV). Do you remember the LORD’s answer? He said, **“You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”** The LORD has to remain hidden. No sinner can stand his presence and survive his glory. He has to hide himself.

He knew that persons whom he once created in the image of God [imago dei] wanted in vainglory to be [sicut deus] just ‘like God’ [Genesis 3:5]. Eyes which once looked God in the face in all are now veiled by sin and no longer able to see God as he is. The great “I AM,” Javeh, is too great for us. Pious Israelites did not even dare to pronounce that holy name. (Koelpin, The Cross, God’s Mask in Human Life)

We can’t forget to look at the LORD’s answer that came before his caution that no one can see his full glory. **“And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion”** (Exodus 32:19 NIV). The hidden LORD revealed his essence to Moses through the spoken Word. He is good. He is merciful. He is compassionate! He revealed what “evangelical” meant long before John the Baptist pointed to Jesus. It’s all there in the name LORD—his covenant name, his name of faithfulness, mercy, and compassion, his SAVIOR name!

The LORD continued to hide in his Word. Moses pointed the people to the prophet who would surpass him, **“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him”** (Deuteronomy 18:15 NIV). The LORD revealed his promise to David, **“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever”** (2 Samuel 7:17 NIV). He promised that the coming Savior would be hidden in human flesh: **“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel”** (Isaiah 7:14 NIV); **“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem”** (Isaiah 53:2-3). For God to reveal himself to mankind, he could not show himself as he is.

Therefore he chooses the veil of human nature. Thus the incarnation is at one and the same time a revelation of God and a hiding of his glory. The God who is hidden, who is the invisible, eternal God, becomes for us the God revealed in Jesus Christ. But this revelation, this unveiling of God, is at the same time a veiling, a hiding.... Incarnation, then, is at one and the same time both an unveiling of God as well as a veiling or hiding of God in human nature. (Koelpin, Luther’s Theology of the Cross, 1981).

Luther taught that the hiddenness of God finds its deepest expression in the cross.

“What he quickens by his Spirit is always the same kingdom of Christ, whether it be revealed or hidden under the cross” (CA Apol. 7 / 8,10). “Hidden is the church, concealed are the saints” (WA 18,652,23). “All objects of faith are necessarily hidden” (WA 18,653). (Koelpin, Arnold. 1981. Luther’s Theology of the Cross.)

The theology of the cross is where God revealed the mystery of “preaching the gospel” to sinful mankind. The mind of God is hidden in the letters and words of the Bible. God’s gracious words of forgiveness and new life are hidden in the water of baptism. The body and blood of Jesus are hidden in the earthly elements of bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper. The gospel—the *evangelion*—is hidden in Christ and his means of grace!

We encounter the hidden God in his gospel message. Moses wanted to see his glory. The LORD gave him a tiny glimpse as he passed by, proclaiming his name. The LORD gives us a glimpse of his glory in the means of grace. We see his Son, Jesus. He is the good news we must proclaim. That is what “evangelical” means.

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). He alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all” (Isa. 53:6). Moreover, “all have sinned,” and “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood” (Rom. 3:23–25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom. 3:28), and again, “that he [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “And with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Smalcald Articles (p. 292). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

The good news, presented to us in Scripture, outlined in the Apostles’ Creed, focuses on Jesus Christ and his active and passive obedience for us. In Luther’s mind, the church was first and foremost a place for God’s people to encounter the hidden God, who hides himself in Word and sacrament. Being an “evangelical” church was not a matter of external practices, but rather a matter of preaching the Word of God.

The question is “What is the true church?” If the answer is given, “Where you find the Word of God, there you find the true church of God,” then, as Luther well knew the papists could argue that they also had the Word of God, for they had the Scripture. Luther himself says in one place, “To be sure, a bit of light remained in the papacy such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Bible.” Therefore he says here that the true church of God is found where the Word of God is preached. He goes on to say, however, that he is not speaking of all preaching, but of that preaching which sets forth the doctrine of Christ. (The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther By Siegbert W. Becker [A paper read at The Saginaw Valley Teachers Conference, Millington, Michigan, on April 19, 1963])

Luther understood and proclaimed the hiddenness of God and the theology of the cross. His understanding helped him to stand firm against the enemies of the “evangelical” church. As he fought for the Gospel, he had to deal with the papacy and its theology of glory. The papacy taught that the Word and sacraments were tools for us to earn grace. Then, we would earn the right to stand before God in his glory. The papacy had burdened Christians for centuries, binding them not with the freedom of the gospel, but with the unyielding bonds of the law. The Roman Catholic Church had externalized the means of grace, turning them into what we must do for God. It had taken what was true and turned it into something false. Luther wrote,

The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things what they are (Heidelberg Theses, 21).

Rome promoted that earning salvation was good, and called justification by faith apart from the works of the law evil. Luther stood firm as a theologian of the cross and addressed the papacy for what it was:

Even if a thousand times as many great and holy councils, popes, and bishops had decided and decreed this; even if they glorified the name of the church and of the Holy Spirit ever so much, it is nevertheless false and the devil's invention. For their preaching and teaching is at variance with that of Christ. They point to other ways leading to heaven and invent other vocations, orders, and works, thereby nullifying Holy Baptism, the Gospel, and Christ. Yes, they are so impudent as to dare boast that they have works and vocations loftier than Baptism and that they can do much more than God has commanded. They turn God's commands into counsels intended only for perfect people, to say nothing of countless other abominations and errors. Thus the entire papacy is founded on sheer lies and on a denial of Christ. Therefore their doctrine cannot be the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; it is the doctrine of the devil himself, and it is accursed and damned. Thus St. Paul passes sentence in Gal. 1:8, saying that it is accursed even if angels from heaven were to teach it. (Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 24, p. 128). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House)

Rome wasn't Luther's only enemy. He also had to fight against the fanatics, whom he also called *schwärmerei*. It was a colloquial term for an excited, confused person. Luther called them that because they were spiritually confused in their view of the sacraments, and especially the Lord's Supper.

Thus the Lord's Supper among them is nothing other than a daily common meal at which they use bread and wine; during such a meal one can talk about Christ, read about him, praise him, thank him, and also eat spiritually, as well as in the Supper of Christ. Christ is therefore an exceedingly great fool to institute a special Supper when the world already is filled to capacity with suppers which take place daily. (Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 38: Word and Sacrament IV. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 38, pp. 298–299). Philadelphia: Fortress Press)

The *schwärmerei* were willing to change the Lord's Supper from a meal that Christ instituted to offer the forgiveness of sins into a simple remembrance. They allowed their own reason and their own words to rule over Scripture. In doing so, they had emptied the sacraments of their power and substance. Luther clearly, and sometimes brutally, pointed them back to God's Word as the only source of truth.

*Luther's answer to the fanatics was firm and unyielding. HE scores them for abandoning the **external Word** or any outward manifestation of God in their quest for spiritual union with him. By **dividing** flesh from Spirit, they were, in effect, separating the Word and earthly elements from God's Spirit and ascribing salvation alone to the latter. In that case, all that remains of the Word is **merely an external** witness which comes to a person's heart and finds the Spirit already existing there. Contrariwise, should the Word not find the Spirit in an unbelieving heart, then the Word is no longer the Word of God. (Koelpin, Arnold. DEALING WITH RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS-- Dr. Luther Battles Fanatics p.5; Weimar Edition: Table Talk 3868).*

But should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit they do not refer you to the outward Gospel but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in self-abstraction where I am now and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God Himself will speak to you...With all his mouthing of the words, 'Spirit, Spirit, Spirit,' he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit. (LW 40, 147)

They want to teach the people orally and in writing, though they still boast that each one must hear the voice of God for himself; yet they ridicule us who teach the Word of God orally and in written form, which they claim is of no value. They have a much higher and more precious office than the Apostles and Prophets and Christ Himself. Those all taught the Word of God orally or in writing and said nothing about the heavenly voice of God which we are supposed to hear ... we recognize and

judge this spirit as having as his purpose the invalidating of the Scriptures and the oral Word of God, and doing away with the sacrament of the altar and of baptism. (LW 40, 55 107)

The battle lines were clearly drawn: the theology of the cross and the hiddenness of God in that cross vs. the theology of glory that put man's wisdom and works ahead of God's saving power and grace.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the battle lines are still drawn, and the struggle to be "evangelical" continues. What do we mean when we say we are "evangelical"? I'd like you to take the next 3 minutes and with your best (or worst) group artistic abilities, draw a picture of what it means to be an "evangelical" church. After the 3 minutes are up, be ready to explain what you drew and why.

I will guess that most of you drew a picture of the Bible and the sacraments. What does it mean that we are "evangelical?" It means that we proclaim the gospel of Christ in Word and Sacrament.

The "evangelical" church is under fire today, just as it was in Luther's day. List your top 3 challenges that we face as we continue to preach Christ crucified, and faith in him alone.

The same opponents Luther faced are still alive and well today. The papacy still promotes itself in place of God's Word, in effect, trying to remove the hiddenness of God in Christ by becoming the visible God for the church here on earth. Despite Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis' attempts to portray a kinder, gentler papacy, the enemy of the "evangelical" church is still active. Indulgences—the springboard for Luther's 95 Theses—are still part of the Roman Catholic church's arsenal of satisfaction for sins.

X. INDULGENCES

1471 The doctrine and practice of indulgences in the Church are closely linked to the effects of the sacrament of Penance.

What is an indulgence?

"An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints."

"An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin." The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.

Obtaining indulgence from God through the Church

1478 An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for their sins. Thus the Church does not want simply to come to the aid of these Christians, but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance, and charity.

1479 Since the faithful departed now being purified are also members of the same communion of saints, one way we can help them is to obtain indulgences for them, so that the temporal punishments due for their sins may be remitted. (Catechism of the Catholic Church;

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4G.HTM#-1QB)

The descendants of the schwärmerei are still alive and well in "evangelical" churches—referring to churches that call themselves "biblically based." They still focus on God's inspired, inerrant Word as the foundation for their lives. Here's the Southern Baptist Convention's current statement on the Scriptures:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth,

without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation. (Southern Baptist Convention Basic Beliefs; <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp>)

God's Word is their foundation, and we praise the Lord for that! However, they are not sacramental. They continue to treat baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs and symbols of God's love and forgiveness, practiced by us as an act of obedience, but not of any real value. Here is their statement on the sacraments:

Baptism & the Lord's Supper

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water. ...It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus.

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members ... memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming. (Southern Baptist Convention Basic Beliefs; <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp>)

It was probably pretty easy to identify those two as opponents of the word "evangelical", but do we include ourselves?

The real enemy of the gospel is not mankind's formal ability to know, nor the content of his knowledge gathered by scientific experience. The real enemy of the gospel is the human heart—alienated from God through and through, hostile to God, unspiritual, fleshly. The human heart exalts itself over everything called God and over the worship of God, and it sees its salvation in sensual desire. Pride and sensuality are the two great evils, or if a person wishes, the one great evil of the human race. These are the real enemies which we have to overcome if we want to make Christians and keep them firm in faith.

To express it individually and graphically: we have to deal on the one hand with the Pharisee, and on the other hand with the tax collector and the prostitute. Behind every instance of godlessness is hidden either one or the other. But actually both are always present: it is only, that sometimes the former, sometimes the latter gains predominance in the heart. And we know that with respect to the gospel, pride is the worse of the two evils (Matthew 21:31, Matthew 23, and other places). (Pieper, August. What Must our Present Day Preaching Emphasize More Than Anything if it is to Complete its Assignment?)

Do we know the gospel? Are we "evangelical"? We know it—the called workers here today have studied it throughout their college and seminary years. We use it every day and put in hours and hours focusing on the Word. We preach and teach it every week. The laymen here today come to worship and Bible study regularly. They grow in God's Word as they listen to it and study it. All of us are just as prone to being as "unevangelical" as anyone else. It may not show up in our sermons and Bible studies, or in our worship on Sunday morning, but it certainly shows up in our attitudes. All too often, we proudly tell ourselves that we are "evangelical" because we are The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Being the member of a denomination doesn't make us "evangelical," or "unevangelical." Proclaiming the gospel of Christ in Word and sacrament makes us "evangelical." When we tell ourselves that doing the "right thing, the right way," is the most important thing, haven't we fallen into Rome's error and taken on the schwärmerei's attitude? Haven't we fallen prey to Satan's lies? Being "evangelical" is not a matter of outward form. It's a matter of the heart! Being "evangelical" means that we are focused on Christ first. We proclaim Christ crucified, and administers the sacraments as Christ instituted them—we proclaim the gospel!

Luther emphasized that in a sermon he wrote on Luke 2:1-14.

Behold God's glory and God's honor are the light in the gospel which comes from heaven and shines around us through the apostles and their successors who preach the gospel.... For this reason the gospel is unable to permit any other teaching in addition to it. For man's teaching is this earth's light and is man's glory. It raises up man's glory and praise and makes souls arrogantly rely on their own works, whereas the gospel teaches them to rely on Christ and on God's mercy and kindness, to glory and to be bold in Christ. (Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 52: Sermons II. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 52, pp. 18–30). Philadelphia: Fortress Press).

There are also individuals out there, not part of our fellowship, who are “evangelical.” I remember the story one of my fellow pastors told me while I served in Texas. He had become friends with a local priest, and the two would regularly go out for lunch. At one of their lunch meetings, the priest received a call that one of his parishioners was in the emergency room and needed last rites. The two of them went, and the pastor waited in the ER while the priest went in to minister to the person. When the priest came out, the pastor said, “I have to ask you: what did you tell him?” The priest answered, “I told him that Jesus Christ died for his sins and to trust in him and his forgiveness alone.” A Catholic priest, “evangelical?” Yes!

Can a Baptist be “evangelical?” A lady visited our church in Houston for a few weeks, and then asked if she could learn more. We began going through our Bible information class together. When we came to the lesson on conversion, I asked her how she came to faith. She said, “I accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior.” That sounds very “unevangelical,” right? It’s not the proclamation of the gospel. I asked her a follow-up question: “What do you mean when you say you accepted Jesus?” She answered, “The Holy Spirit created faith in my heart, and I believed.” I’d say that’s a pretty “evangelical” answer, wouldn’t you?

Sometimes we are not “evangelical,” thanks to our sinful attitude and heart, while others are much more “evangelical.” What do we need to remember as we continue forward as an “evangelical” church?

Let’s not turn being “evangelical” into a new Mt. Sinai. It is so easy to fall into pride’s trap and say, “We’re doing it the right way, so that makes us right!” Picture this: You are heading out to a new mission. You are a representative of the Wisconsin “Evangelical” Lutheran Synod. As you begin to canvass the area, you find out that a majority of the people you meet are Catholic. Most are non-practicing—they’ll go at Christmas and Easter, but other than that they’re dissatisfied with the church. They accept your invitation to come to a Bible study that you are teaching. What’s the first thing you do? Do you start your conversation with “Did you realize that the Pope is the Antichrist?” That wouldn’t be very “evangelical” because it would put up a roadblock to the gospel.

What if you are sent to start a new mission in a suburb of Any City, USA? The first time people meet together in your home, what will it look like? *Discussion Groups*

Where are you at personally? Does being “evangelical” mean that you need to do the right thing? What are some of those “right things” that you struggle with? *Discussion Groups*

Have you become a slave to the law, cowering at the frightening visage of God hidden behind fire and storm? If being “evangelical” means doing everything the right way, whether it’s at a worship service, or a Bible study, or a council meeting, a teen group function, with your family, or anywhere else, doesn’t that fill your heart with dread and doubt? What if I forgot to use the Creed? What if I sang the wrong word in the hymn? What if I preached the wrong sentence and proclaimed false doctrine? What if I was more concerned with order in that meeting than the gospel? What if I...what if I...what if I...? If that’s our

attitude, then we are following the same path as those who have strayed from the real focus of the “evangelical” church? We accuse Rome of working to gain God’s favor. We accuse the schwärmerei of focusing too much on self. What do we do? We end up doing the same thing! How can we be “evangelical?”

The writer to the Hebrews points us in the right direction.

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Hebrews 12:18–24 (NIV)

We need to leave Sinai behind along with the fire, the darkness, and the storm. We don’t need to be afraid. We have come to Mount Zion, to the place where God lives, and we see him. Christ, the Word of God Incarnate has revealed himself to us. We have seen him in a manger; preaching on the shores of Galilee; performing miracles of healing; enduring attack and ridicule; brutally murdered; and raised from the dead. Christ is the focus of the word “evangelical”—gospel preaching.

Thanks to Christ, we dare not be slaves to outward forms, but rather, servants of the gospel!

The trumpet blast that crumbled the walls behind which the papal hierarchy had entrenched itself simultaneously summoned Christians to a new evangelical understanding of church and ministry. The confessors avoided the temptation to canonize or re-pristiniate the forms of the ancient church. The marvelous freedom with which they handled the reform demonstrated a sensitivity to keeping past and present forms that served the gospel. But as slaves of the righteousness that comes by faith (Ro 6:18), they felt bound alone to those distinct gospel mandates which the church's Lord left behind at his ascension. "In, with, under" and "through" these mandates Christ remained really present in the church and keeps on ruling the church with his abiding presence. (Augsburg Confession, III and V Trig. 45; Tappert, 29-31). (Koelpin, Ministry in the Minds and Lives of the Confessors [presented to the WELS Ministry Symposium at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, December 29-30, 1992).

In order for us to be “evangelical,” Christ must shine brightly in our worship, in our preaching, and in our teaching. As I read essay after essay by brothers in the ministry about preaching the gospel, that message came through loud and clear again, and again, and again.

I have often said that anyone who wants to study the Holy Scripture should always be careful to stay with the simple words, wherever he can, and never depart from them unless he is compelled by an article of the creed to understand it otherwise than the words read. For we must be certain of this that there has been no simpler speech on earth than that which has been spoken by God. (SL 3, 20f., quoted in The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther By Siegbert W. Becker [A paper read at The Saginaw Valley Teachers Conference, Millington, Michigan, on April 19, 1963])

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not an ugly lean-to tacked on to the beautiful structure of our sermon where it doesn’t belong. It is the foundation beneath the text on which our sermon is based.

(Westendorf, James. Lutheran Preaching in a Contemporary World [Manitowoc and Fox River Valley Joint Pastoral Conference, Rowley's Bay, Door County, January 24-25, 1994])

As I see it, the greatest danger facing the Christian Church today are not the liberal preachers who rip Christianity to shreds. Just as bad are conservative preachers whose sermons are dull, boring, totally unrelated to the life people live seven days a week. Dorothy Sayers has remarked: "The church today has succeeded in doing what the apostles and even the enemies of Christ never succeeded in doing: it has made him appear dull." (COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL MORE EFFECTIVELY JOHN C. JESKE, (1998). Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 79, 9–22)

My brothers, **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."** (Matthew 13:44 NIV). That gospel treasure is ours to have, to hold, and to proclaim. If you have lost the joy, it's time to find it again. It's time to restart personal time in the Word. I know the struggle. I was there, and some days I'm still there. A few years ago, I received some good advice about examining my life physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Physically, I wasn't doing very well. I realized that I wasn't very healthy, because I was getting little to no exercise. My eating and drinking habits were bad. I was using food and alcohol to self-medicate and make it through the day. It wasn't a lot, but enough to try and escape stress instead of identifying it and using God's Word to help me deal with it.

Emotionally, I wasn't being honest with myself, my wife, my children, or my congregation. I was trying to be perfect in every aspect of my life, instead of recognizing I couldn't be perfect. I was lying to myself, and believing the lies. I needed to admit my imperfection. I had to go back to God's Words about my sin and my forgiveness and align myself with what he say. Finally, I have learned to be okay with imperfect me, because I know who I am in Christ.

Spiritually, my relationship with Jesus was far from "evangelical." It was all about me and my work—I'm writing my sermon; I'm teaching Bible studies; I pray when people ask me to pray; I'm working hard to be a good husband and father. I needed an overhaul, and my "evangelical," gospel-preaching friends pointed me away from myself and back to Jesus. Jesus' words about my body being the Holy Spirit's temple were the motivation I needed to eat better and exercise more often. Jesus' words about working through conflict with his forgiveness and love have breathed new life into my relationships. I started to take more time with Jesus' words personally, for just 15 minutes every morning. Listening to Jesus' voice has done more to restore "evangelical" joy than anything else. The path to being "evangelical" starts with the Holy Spirit preaching the good news of the crucified and risen Savior to us!

Don't forget about the power of the sacraments. In baptism, we have what we need every day! Thanks again to Martin Luther for that reminder!

What does such baptizing with water signify?

Answer: It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence.

Where is this written?

Answer: In Romans 6:4, St. Paul wrote, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. (p. 349). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press).

The Lord's Supper is there, too. The Lord Jesus renews and strengthens our connection to him every time we receive him, hidden in bread and wine!

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?

Answer: We are told in the words “for you” and “for the forgiveness of sin.” By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation. (Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. (p. 352). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press).

The sacraments are our treasure, handed down to us by our Savior so that we can see him, experience him, and have the confidence of forgiveness and eternal life.

We live as “evangelical” Christians who not only know Christ, but we need to help others see and hear him. How? By sharing our joy with them as we proclaim the wonders he has done.

A religion that appears to have given you a headache can hardly be expected to cure the ills of the world. Don’t forget how your faith looks to that stranger in your service, to that family who’s just moved into your neighborhood and on whom you’ll be calling tomorrow evening. What appeals to the outsider is probably not your sensitized conscience or even your orthodox sermon, but more likely your joy in Christ, the obvious evidence that Jesus Christ has put a song in your heart. Itzhak Perlman, world-famous Israeli violinist, has stated: “People only half listen when you play. The other half is watching.” (COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL MORE EFFECTIVELY JOHN C. JESKE, (1998). Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 79, 9–22)

There are plenty of souls out there watching...and maybe even waiting...for the message that the “evangelical” church has for them. I came across a powerful blog post a few weeks ago. The title of the article was *I Went to a Strip Club* by Anna McCarthy (<https://justajesusfollower.com/2016/05/09/i-went-to-a-strip-club/>). She wrote about a group of Christian women who wanted to share Jesus with women who made their living in strip clubs. At first, they just visited with the women and found out that they had many similarities—families, children, and getting back into shape after pregnancy. As time went on, the visitors asked if they could leave a prayer request box at the club. The requests that came in at first were silly, but as relationships grew, so did the seriousness of the requests. One of the women who worked at the club thanked the visitors for coming. She said she was glad that these women came to visit, because they weren’t like the other churches out there—the churches who sent them hate mail all the time. Later on, a pastor began holding Bible studies for the women who were interested. “*Women were set free. And many went on to lead healthy, restored lives.*” The goal—to lead people to see Christ and to hear the news of sins forgiven, life restored.

Sometimes we forget that the church is “evangelical,” and we are the church. Jesus himself told us to be “evangelical.” He said,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20 NIV).

We need to preach the good news, to share the gospel wherever we are, and whatever we are doing. We need to communicate it clearly, in all its truth and purity, and use the sacraments as Jesus instituted them. We need to share that truth and radiate the love of Christ to the people who are listening to us (Ephesians 4:15). Lord, help us always to be “evangelical!”

To God alone the glory!

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