

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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What is an Evangelical?

PHILIP SCHAFF'S great work, "The Creeds of Christendom," consists of three large volumes—of which the first deals with the *History of Creeds*, the second with the *Greek and Latin Creeds*, the third with the *Evangelical Creeds*. An examination of the second and third volumes shows that the former deals with the creeds of the Greek and Roman Catholic churches and the latter with the creeds of the Protestant churches, other than those of the Unitarian type, that appeared before the publication of the volumes in 1877. This means that the designation, "Evangelical," as employed by Dr. SCHAFF was for the most part synonymous with the designation, "Protestant."

If now we keep in mind the fact that Dr. SCHAFF employed the word in its generally accepted sense, we will not be greatly at a loss to understand how it has come about that the word as used today seems to have no definite meaning. As long as the vast majority of the members of the Protestant churches held to what was common in that system of thought and mode of life that found expression in the creeds of the Protestant churches — Lutheran, Reformed and Arminian—no great confusion resulted from identifying the Evangelicals with the members of these churches. It has come about, however, that an increasing number of the members, and particularly of the Ministers of these churches, do not hold to that system of thought and life. The word, however, still continues to be used to designate the members of these churches. Hence the varied and confused senses in which the word "evangelical" is

employed today. Hence the fact that men with all kinds of beliefs, or lack of beliefs, are designated "Evangelicals." If everybody that is called an Evangelical today is really an Evangelical, then it means nothing to call a man an Evangelical. A word applied indiscriminately to everybody ends by designating nobody. We would not imply that the word "Evangelical" has become a word without meaning but it does seem to us that if it is to be saved from that fate—and it seems to us too good a word to be allowed to die—there must be an insistence on the part of many that the word be used in its proper historical meaning.

When we call ourselves "Evangelicals" in the proper historical meaning of the word we mean, first of all, that we are not Roman Catholics. The primary protest of LUTHER and CALVIN was against the

sacerdotalism of Rome, i.e., its interposition of the church with its priesthood, as a means of grace, between the soul and God. As a result, their primary affirmation was on the immediacy of the soul's relation to God. An Evangelical is, therefore, first of all, one who holds that God saves men by acting immediately on their souls not through the medium of the church and its ordinances established by Him for that purpose. We are not to suppose, however, that a man is an Evangelical merely because he insists on the immediacy of the soul's relation to God. If that were the case Unitarians would have a perfectly good right to call themselves "Evangelicals." It is imperative to point out, therefore, that a man is not an Evangelical in the historical meaning of the word unless he also affirms that the soul is dependent on God and on God alone for salvation, that nothing that we are and nothing that we do enters into the ground of our salvation—that it is all of God, nothing of ourselves. The opposition of the Evangelicals to the sacerdotalism of Rome was not in the interest of making man his own saviour. Not at all. Rather it was in the interest of directing men's attention to JESUS CHRIST Himself as the one and only Saviour from the guilt and power of sin. The Evangelical is even more strongly opposed to any and all representations that makes man his own saviour than he is to the sacerdotalism of Rome. An Evangelical is ever one in whose soul there echoes a hearty "amen" when he reads PAUL'S words: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God;

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not of works lest any man should boast." He alone is a true Evangelical, therefore, who makes the double confession (1) that salvation is of God and not of man and (2) that God in saving men acts directly upon their souls not through human instrumentalities that He has established for that purpose.

It cannot be said too clearly or too frequently that fundamentally there are but two doctrines of salvation. According to the one, man saves himself; according to the other God saves him. The Romanist as well as the Evangelical holds the second of these doctrines. Both give the same answer to the question, Does man save himself or does God save him? Their difference does not appear until we consider the question, Does God save men by acting directly on their souls or through the medium of the church and its ordinances? In stressing the Evangelical's opposition to the positing of any intermediaries between the soul and God, let us not forget his even profounder opposition to that doctrine of salvation that makes man his own saviour. There is nothing against which the true Evangelical sets himself more firmly than the doctrine that man saves himself. He regards that as the most fatal of all heresies. This is why he realizes that he has less in common with most Modernists than he has with Roman Catholics. We need not forget that the Roman Catholic agrees with the Evangelical as over against Unitarians, Modernists and all such like in maintaining that salvation is from God and that this salvation was wrought by the GOD-MAN through His sacrificial death. The limits of our space forbid us to deal with the presuppositions and implications of the evangelical doctrine of salvation; but obviously they include such doctrines as the sinner's inability to save himself, the deity and atoning death of CHRIST, justification by faith alone, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion and sanctification of the sinner.

Special significance attaches to the question, What is an Evangelical?, by reason of the fact that the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America claims to represent the common interests of the evangelical churches that constitute its membership. It is true that only those churches that have evangelical creeds, or their equivalents, are eligible to member-

ship, but it seems to us only too clear that those who dominate the policy of this organization are "evangelical" only in the sense that they are members of evangelical churches. No doubt they share the evangelical's conviction relative to the immediacy of our relations with God, but their public utterances do not indicate that they share his sense of dependence on God and God alone for their salvation. It seems to us, therefore, that this organization misrepresents rather than represents the true "Evangelicals" of these churches. As a result we would like to see the Presbyterian churches sever their connection with it.

The Rights and Duties of Commissioners

THE Commission which each commissioner must produce from his (or her) presbytery before he can be enrolled as a member of a General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church distinctly specifies his rights and duties, to wit: "To consult, vote, and determine, on all things that may come before that body, according to the principles and constitution of this Church and the Word of God." This means that it is not only a privilege but a solemn responsibility to be a commissioner to a General Assembly. It is obvious that only an informed commissioner can properly discharge his responsibility. This means not only that he should read the "Blue Book" with care, but that whatever question may come before the Assembly (whether dealt with in the "Blue Book" or not) he should at least insist on sufficient information and discussion to enable him to "vote and determine" all things according to the principles set forth in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church and the Word of God.

We mention this matter because the disposition to discourage open discussion has been one of the outstanding characteristics of some recent Assemblies. We are confident that many Ministers and elders have gone to former Assemblies supposing they had some important function to perform, only to find that they were expected to sign on the dotted line, as it were, the recommendations of the "platform." Conclusions arrived at in small committees, or in small conferences of so-called

leaders, have been presented and adopted practically without discussion, with the result that the rank and file of the commissioners—those who most truly represent the Church—have played the part of mere rubber stamps, approving the recommendations presented without any real knowledge of their merits or demerits. A method frequently adopted to get a proposal adopted is first to move that a certain fixed period be set aside for its consideration. Then the chairman of the committee that makes the proposal is allowed to present the matter with no time limit fixed. It is not unknown for the chairman to use half, or more than half, of the allotted time, after which some one moves that discussion from the floor be limited to five or ten minute speeches—as though it were possible to say anything adequate on an involved subject in so short a time. We have seen matters of grave significance adopted with practically no discussion and with most of the commissioners obviously ignorant of their significance. Instances are not even lacking where commissioners who exercised their unquestioned right to discuss matters before the Assembly have been treated as those who were wasting the time of the Assembly or even as disturbers of the peace and unity of the Church.

We hope that the commissioners to the 143rd General Assembly will insist on their rights and perform their duties as indicated in their Commissions. What is the use of having a General Assembly unless this is done? This may require some of the secretaries, executives, "distinguished guests and fraternal delegates," and others, to shorten their speeches, but we are sure it would further the well-being of the Church. These speeches will soon be forgotten but the decisions reached by the commissioners to the next Assembly may profoundly affect the future of the Presbyterian Church for years to come.

The Moderator

EVERY commissioner to the 143rd General Assembly is a potential Moderator of that body. We do not mean to imply that every commissioner is equally competent to occupy that chair or equally deserving of that honor; but we are confident that the commissioners will