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What the Word “Evangelical” Really Means

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The term Evangelical appears in the title of our denomination. It also appears on a volume of Karl Barth's theology. Again, there are seminary professors in this country who claim to be evangelical and yet who deny that the Scripture is without error: they hold to a Bible that is “authoritative” but false. What does the word *Evangelical* really mean? Who is an evangelical and who is not? There follows here the conclusion of a lecture delivered by Dr. Gordon Clark at Covenant College.

Now, in conclusion, although it is less a logical conclusion than simply a last, final point, I wish to indicate the place and importance of plenary and verbal inspiration in the Protestant scheme of things.

At that time of the reformation many points of theology were matters of controversy. Luther started out by opposing the sale of indulgences. This led to examination of the doctrine of purgatory. There followed also a vigorous fight over the number and nature of the sacraments. But more important than all these, and soon receiving more emphasis, was the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This came to be known, in slightly scholastic terminology, as the material principle of the Reformation. It was the matter, the contents, the substance of the Reformation.

But in addition to this material principle, the Reformation also had a formal principle. The need of a formal principle is easily seen. Against Luther and Calvin, the Romanists asserted the authority of the Church. Perhaps the doctrine of purgatory is not mentioned in the Bible, but the Pope guarantees its existence on his own authority. Images, indulgences, and transubstantiation may not be Scriptural, but Rome has spoken and the matter is settled.

The question therefore concerns the seat of religious authority. Does the Church have the final word and decide everything? Or is the Bible alone the supreme authority in all controversies of religion?

The position of all the Reformers is clear. Let us first cite the Westminster Confession, which in 1645 at the end of the Reformation period summed up the Calvinist position: “The

supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”

The Lutheran position is not less clear. Consider Quenstedt, also a later theologian, who summed up the movement as a whole. He wrote, “The canonical Holy Scriptures in the original text are the infallible truth and are free from every error . . . no error, even the least, whether . . . they pertain to doctrine or morals, to history or chronology, to typography or nomenclature.”

Let anyone should say that these later statements misrepresent the original position of the leaders themselves, Luther and Calvin, I would like to insist that Luther said everything Quenstedt said. For example, Luther wrote, “The Scriptures have never erred.”

Calvin’s views are equally definite. In one place he says, “God is its Author. The principal proof therefore of the Scriptures is everywhere derived from the character of the Divine Speaker.” In another place he says, “God was pleased to commit his word to writing . . . Historical details were added, which are also the composition of the prophets but dictated by the Holy Spirit . . . For the Word of God is not distinguished from the word of the prophets, as though the prophet had added anything of his own.”

It would be possible also to quote the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Second Helvetic Confession and numerous other documents. You may look them up for yourselves. They all say the same thing.

Therefore my final point is that verbal and plenary inspiration, that is, the infallibility or inerrancy of the whole Bible, is an essential part and in fact the formal principle of Protestantism. One is not a Protestant or Evangelical simply because he is not a Romanist. Obviously Hindus are not Protestants. Neither are Unitarians. A Protestant or Evangelical is one who believes evangelical doctrine. Therefore no one who rejects the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture can properly and historically call himself a Protestant. Such a one may not assign ultimate authority to the Pope. Such a one may belong to a non-roman church. But such a one, locating the ultimate religious authority elsewhere than in the Scripture, is not an evangelical Christian.

The importance of this should be clear, for it is only in Scripture that we find the material principle, the doctrine of justification by faith; it is only in Scripture that we find the Atonement

and the Deity of Christ. Deny the truth of the authority of Scripture and none of these doctrines can stand. Without the Bible there is neither Christ nor Christianity. With them we have a sure salvation.