

Sermon

The Secret of Our Salvation

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We hear about them constantly. They appear in the news and in politics, on radio and in television, across the internet and all over print media.

I am speaking of the label “evangelical,” and this morning I want to ask what it means. What makes someone an evangelical?

One answer comes to us from John Buckeridge, the editor of the British magazine *Christianity*. “To the unchurched and people of other faiths,” he writes, “evangelical is increasingly shorthand for right wing US politics, an arrogant loud-mouth who refuses to listen to other people’s opinions, men in grey suits who attempt to crowbar authorized version scripture verses into every situation, or ‘happy-clappy’ simpletons who gullibly swallow whatever their tub-thumping minister tells them to believe” (Fryer qtd. Buckeridge, *Reclaiming the “E” Word*, p. 13).

At first hearing, Buckeridge’s assessment sounds extremely and unnecessarily harsh. That is how I reacted at least. A closer look, however, shows something different. The definition he supplies of “evangelical” reflects what he thinks the label means to outsiders, to **non-Christians**. Buckeridge wants people who identify as evangelical to rebrand themselves, not by changing their beliefs but by changing their name. Why? Because it’s bad public-relations! How can you win souls for Christ if the term you use to describe yourself has such **negative connotations**?

Buckeridge wrote the article I’m citing back in 2006. Since then, little has changed. Christians *and* their critics still use the term. Consider the National Association of Evangelicals, an umbrella organization for hundreds of denominations and many other faith-related communities. Instead of abandoning the term, they embrace it. “Evangelicals take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord,” their website says boldly and without apologies. “The term ‘evangelical’ comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning ‘the good news’ or the ‘gospel.’ Thus, the evangelical faith focuses on the ‘good news’ of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ.”

“Now wait,” you might be thinking. “This talk about salvation and the gospel sounds a lot like what we believe as Lutheran Christians. I mean, don’t we belong to a denomination that explicitly refers to itself as the *Evangelical* Lutheran Church in America? How, then, are we any different?”

Thankfully, the NAE anticipates our need for further clarification by adding to their definition of evangelical four primary features of evangelicalism as such, that is, **four things presumably all evangelicals have in common**. The NAE bases its observations on the work of the historian David Bebbington.

In the next few minutes, I am going to offer you a **crash-course on the basics of Lutheran Christianity** by comparing it with the four aforementioned features of evangelicalism. I will then use the last of these features to solve a problem that has plagued me ever since our second reading came up in the lectionary three years ago. There, Paul tells us that if “Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Did you hear that?

How on earth, I have wondered, can we “still be in our sins” if God already forgave them when God’s Son died on the cross? After all, at least according to the Gospel of John, Jesus’ life ends with the words “it is finished” or “it is accomplished” (19:30). What else needs to be done? How (for Paul) does the cross alone fail to save us? What else is necessary?

Join me, then, as we what uncover not only more about our faith as Lutheran Christians but also the **secret of our salvation**.

The First Feature

Conversionism is the first characteristic of contemporary evangelicalism. It refers to the belief “that lives need to be transformed through a ‘born-again’ experience and a life-long process of following Jesus” (NAE). To be saved from sin and hell, in other words, we must have a *conversion* experience, one where we accept Jesus as Lord and savior after repenting of our sins.

The “Sinner’s Prayer” gives us the formula: “Dear Lord Jesus,” it says, “I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior.”

Notice the emphasis. God may free us by grace from having to earn God’s love, but **we** must respond in the affirmative. **We** must do something. Otherwise, God will send us to hell. “Choose life,” we read in Deuteronomy 30:19, “so that you and your descendants may live.” Or as James remarks, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (4:8).

A closer look at Paul's "conversion experience," however, reveals a different pattern. "I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it," he writes. "But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those where already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years did I go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days" (1:13-18).

In the Apostle's experience, as the book of Acts confirms, God acted first. God came to him. God found him. God claimed him. God opened his eyes. God changed his heart. Paul says nothing about how he confessed his sins or accepted Christ. Instead, working backward from his experience of the resurrection, Paul takes *years* to develop his understanding of sin and salvation, and this was his conclusion: "God set me apart before I was [even] born and called me through his grace" (Galatians 3:15).

Here the difference becomes clear between evangelicals, who emphasize what **we** must do in response to God (and hence, practice "believer's baptism"), and Lutherans, who emphasize what **God** has already done for us (and hence practice infant baptism). While James confirms the evangelical emphasis, John confirms the Lutheran. "You did not choose me," Jesus says to his followers, "but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 15:16; cf. 6:29 and 6:44).

Obviously, not every evangelical will deny that salvation comes exclusively from God, nor will every Lutheran reject the view that one must have a heartfelt conversion experience to be saved. There may even be ways to reconcile these differences, but as a matter of **emphasis** the difference stands.

The Other Three

Once we know the primary difference between Lutherans and evangelicals when comes to our role (or lack thereof) in salvation, the other three quickly fall into place. Because evangelicals insist upon the need for conversion as a precondition of salvation, they seek to "save the lost at any cost." They proselytize. Following Bebbington, the NAE speaks accordingly of "activism," which it defines as "the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts."

Here we Lutherans may have something to learn from our evangelical siblings. How might we re-energize our efforts to live out our mission, to proclaim the love of God in

Christ for every person? In what ways, either through word or deed, might we share our faith with others?

Next to activism, evangelicals also practice “biblicism,” which the NAE defines as a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority. Indeed, since the 1970s it has become difficult to distinguish their view from fundamentalist Christianity which affirms the inerrancy of Scripture in all matters of life, including science and world-history.

Lutherans in the ELCA would likewise affirm the authority of Scripture but in a more nuanced way. Consider the perspective of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an Anglican who nevertheless *sounds* Lutheran! “The Bible is not something that came dropping out of heaven, written by the hand of God,” he remarks. “It was written by human beings, so it uses human idiom and is influenced by the context in which whatever story was written. People need to be very careful. Many . . . believe in the verbal inerrancy of the Bible, [and] speak as if God dictated the Bible, when in fact God used human beings as they were, and they spoke only as they could speak at that time. There are parts of the Bible that have no permanent worth – that is nothing to be sorry about, it is just to say that it is the Word of God in the words of men and women” (*God Has a Dream*, pp. 105-106).

These differences are important to consider. The way we read the Bible has serious implications for how we live in the world, the causes we support, our affirmation or denial of science, and of course the choices we make when we vote. The most important characteristic of evangelicalism for our purposes today, however, appears in what the NAE calls “crucicentrism.”

Crucicentrism refers to the emphasis evangelicals place on the sacrifice of Jesus through his death on the cross, one that “mak[es] possible the redemption of humanity.” Of course, the cross also has a central place in the Lutheran faith. We, too, proclaim that Jesus died for our sins, not necessarily as a payment to satisfy God but as a **victory** over forces inimical to God, namely, sin and death (see Romans 5:12-17).

Yet notice what I just said. Sure, the cross saves us from sin, but how on earth can it save us from death? The short answer is that it can’t, at least according to Paul in our second reading.

We Need Something More

A little context might help.

According to Paul, those who deny the resurrection of Christ render the Christian faith meaningless. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," he writes, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Who, then, would make such a claim? Who would deny the resurrection of Christ among those who claimed to follow him? I gave the answer in my sermon last week.

It was those darn Greeks!

For the Greeks, the problem was not sin. It was death. The prospect of annihilation weighed heavily on their souls. In response, Greek philosophers affirmed the immortality of the soul. The body is a prison, something we cast off like the skin of a snake after we die.

That said, the Greeks did not deny the resurrection altogether. These were men and women who thought of themselves as "spirit-filled," which meant they already possessed the gift of eternal life (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 812). They had "been raised" in this life (see Colossians 3:1), which meant the body did not matter. It was "an unworthy inheritor of the immortal soul" (*Interpreters One-Volume Biblical Commentary*, p. 810).

But if the body has not been changed, Paul responds, then nothing has changed! The Greeks were no different than anyone else! Upon death, body *and* soul would perish. The resurrection of Christ's body, on the other, changed survival after death from a theoretical possibility to a real one (*Jerome*, p. 812). Through his resurrection, through his victory over death, Christ had opened the gate to "something more" in this life *and* in the world to come.

Christ's resurrection, in short, constitutes the foundation of our salvation. Now we have the answer to the question of why Paul states in v. 17 that, had Christ not been raised, we would remain in our sins: if God could not raise Jesus from the dead, what makes us think he could forgive us our sins on the cross?

Here we uncover the **secret of our salvation**: the resurrection validates everything we believe about the life and death of Jesus. Maybe Eastern Orthodox Christianity got it right. As Michael Molloy observes in *Experiencing the World's Religion*, "Mainstream Western Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) has focused on the death of Jesus as an atonement for sin. Some scholars have said that [this] focus indicates a more 'legal' emphasis: God is viewed as a judge, and punishment and repentance are more paramount. Eastern Christianity has put more emphasis on a mystical self-transformation that human beings can experience through contact with Christ. As a consequence, Orthodox Christian art and literature focus less on the crucifixion of Jesus and more on the resurrection" (4th ed., p. 386).

Implications for Our Faith

Once we grasp the central importance of the resurrection, how without it Jesus' ministry **ends** in tragedy, passages that have long been hiding in plain view throughout the New Testament suddenly light up on the page! In Romans 10:9, for example, Paul indicates that "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God **raised him from the dead**, you will be saved."

Notice here how the Apostle says nothing about the crucifixion. Why? Because the resurrection is what **ultimately** matters.

As another example, consider 2 Timothy 2:8 which says, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel."

While the cross certainly highlights the sacrificial nature of Christ's death as well as how God can be present to us in and through our suffering, it cannot stand on its own. We must preach Christ crucified **and** risen.

We heard the story last week: when Martin Luther's daughter died at the age of 13, it broke him to pieces. At the funeral, however, he apparently stood up and with boldness through his tears shouted, "**There will be a resurrection!**" He said nothing about the immortality of the soul (which would make the resurrection unnecessary) nor did he mention the cross. Why? Because the **resurrection** saves us from death.

"Listen," Paul proclaims, "I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed . . . then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting" (1 Corinthians 15:51-55).

This, dear friends, is the **secret of our salvation!**

Hallelujah! Christ has risen. He has risen, indeed.

Amen.