

# Evangelical and Free

Brian L. Olson, 2000

This was written in response to a discussion that the terms 'Evangelical' and 'Free' are confusing and possibly intimidating to the unchurched and to those who are unfamiliar with the denominational name.

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I recognize that the name is a mouthful and that there are those who may be unfamiliar with the term Evangelical, but I must ask, "Is this enough to warrant dropping the name that distinguishes our heritage?" Allow me to expound on the terms "Evangelical" and "Free", as used by the Evangelical Free Church of America, for those who may not realize their substantial meaning.

For the sake of flow, I will invert the order by starting with the word "Free". Today the term Free is founded in the very essence of our country, but sadly the meaning has been lost. As a people who have never been under a monarchy or a dictator, we have lost the essence of the Freedom we have. The Random House College Dictionary defines the word Free as one enjoying personal rights or liberty, as one not in slavery; or one exempt from external authority, interference, restriction, etc. In the same way that we must begin to understand what it means to be Free as a people in this nation, so we must understand what it means to be Free as a people of faith in our church. These two definitions most clearly demonstrate what Free means for us as a Church.

If you are unfamiliar with the History of the Evangelical Free Church, I implore you to take some time and study it. "In his autobiography, early EFCA President E.A. Halleen quoted from Burke: 'People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.' Then he added an observation of his own 'Each generation embodies some of the gifts and characteristics of previous generations. To some degree we possess the accumulative wisdom of the past ages. Every one among us has inherited something outstanding from his forebearers.'" It is imperative that we know our heritage. I recommend to you the book "What it Means to be Free" by Calvin Hanson, published by Free Church Publications, 1990. To summarize, in the late 1800's there were various groups within the Scandinavian Lutheran Churches, both in this country and in Scandinavia, that began to grow weary of the hierarchy, apparent deadness, and lax attitudes towards faith found in many of the church. In Scandinavia, it was the state run church and in this country it was the carry over of that system. They were not looking to break from the church, but to simply have a meeting of genuine believers within the church. These people desired to have a place of fellowship with believers only where their faith could grow. They were eventually forced out of their churches so they needed to begin their own fellowships. In 1884, in Boone, IA, the Swedish Evangelical Free Church was born from many of these groups. (Also developed from these groups were the Evangelical Covenant Church and the Baptist General Conference [formerly the Swedish Baptist]). In 1950, the Swedish Evangelical Free Church and the Danish-Norwegian Evangelical Free Church merged to form the Evangelical Free Church of America. Today you can travel around the world and find Evangelical Free Churches (or Free Evangelical Churches in some countries) many of which developed independently of each other, by the same movement of God to bring them to similar places today.

Having said that, the question is then again asked, "what does it mean to be Free?" In many countries "Free" refers to the independence from the state church. No longer were they bound by the politics of such a system, no longer was the church a place equally full of believers and unbelievers just going through actions. In this country, "Free" refers to the independence from hierarchical systems. No longer

was it just a community meeting place where people got together (originally for the purpose of a common language and customs). Now the church was a place where people got together for their common faith in Christ. They no longer received their instruction from the outside, rather each church was independent and had the right to govern itself.

But there is still more meaning to the term “Free”. “Believers only but all believers.” This phrase stood and stands as the motto of the Evangelical Free Church. Hanson states in his book, “What it Means to be Free” “BELIEVERS ONLY BUT ALL BELIEVERS” very sufficiently captures one of the overriding distinctive of the Evangelical Free Church of America: The conviction that the church is to be composed of individuals who FREELY and sincerely confess personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and that none who meets this basic criterion is to be excluded. This concept, “as old as the church itself,” aptly identifies the bedrock of what it means to be Free.”

This is the Freedom that we find in Christ. What does scripture say we need to be saved? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. That is it, We are Free from the law, we are not bound to systems of rituals for our salvation. We are not forced to be involved in a church. “We are composed of people who freely and sincerely confess personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” Beyond this, within our Faith in Jesus Christ, we are Free to hold differing views. We as a people and as a Church are truly Free.

Next is that mysterious and perhaps mis-understood word “Evangelical”. Evangelical is a word that has its very basis in scripture itself. Its origins are the same as the more common word evangelize. It is the derivation of the Greek word euanglion. Eu is a prefix meaning “good” and anglion is a form of the word angelos from where we get the word angel. Angelos translates messenger and anglion translates message. So the word euanglion means good message or the more common term “gospel”. E-u-a-n-g-l-I-o-n has become e-v-a-n-g-e-l-I-c. Just as to evangelize is to share the “good news” an evangelical is one who believes the “good news”. The good news is that we can have eternal life by accepting the free gift of salvation that has been made possible through Christ sacrifice on the cross.

This brings us back to the concept of “believers only, but all believers”. The Evangelical Free church holds as its only standard for membership, that you believe and accept this free gift. Unlike many “churches” today, this is the key. We do not require any sort of rituals or practices to be a member. We do not open our membership so as to allow non-Christians into membership. We do not add to the gospel message things that must be believed for membership. We are evangelical, we accept and believe the “good news”.

This also is key to our heritage. It was accepted practice that all members of the community were members of the church whether they really believed or not. In the countries where it was the state church all were members of the church by default as citizens of the country. Thus the church was filled with many members who did not believe, they only attended for political reasons. In the days before the movement which became the Evangelical Free Church of America, all those who came from the Scandinavian countries joined the church to be around like people. That is to say that the Swedish people joined the Swedish Lutheran Church because there would be other Swedes there. It was not done for reasons of belief, but for social reason. Thus, while there were true believers in the church, the church was also filled with many members who did not believe the gospel. Those who began the EFCA were originally only seeking a place where believers could join together. When they were forced out of their Churches they chose to take the name “Evangelical” to make their stance on scripture and the gospel clear to others.

Now I realize that today many have come to view the word “evangelical “ with the same disdain that they view the word “fundamentalist”. Does this make either term a bad thing, because people have a flawed perception? Let’s look at the origin of this flawed perception. What exactly is it that people do not like about this. They recognize that those who identify themselves as evangelical hold a commitment to what they believe. A commitment from which they are unwilling to waiver. This is then used as a scape goat by some to claim that evangelicals (and fundamentalist) are judgmental. But the flaw in their perception is the same as the artist who paints in the dark, As long as the lights are off he is a brilliant artist, but when the lights come on you can see how bad he really is. He then blames the light as the source of the problem and not himself. So it is for the person who blames the truth (or the person committed to the truth) for the problems in their life and fails to recognize their own sinfulness as the source.

We are evangelical and we are free. We are committed to maintaining the gospel. We are not bound by systems and politics. Evangelical and Free are key to our identity and our a solid connection to our heritage. I believe that to keep this identity is important to maintaining who we were, who we are and who we will become.

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This of course is only an introductory review of the concept and led to a later Sunday School series and a Sunday morning sermon, by request, on what it means to be Evangelical.