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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Evangelical Interpretation

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A Paper read at a Clerical Group.

EVANGELICAL Churchmen found their doctrine on the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ and they appeal in everything to the Scriptures. They do not so much inquire as to what the "Fathers" of the Church have said, but rather as to what is written in the Bible. They would quote Article VI. "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."

Evangelicals of course are one with all Churchmen in holding the Cardinal doctrines of the Christian Faith.

We do not claim a monopoly of the principles we profess or the doctrines we hold, yet we contend that our system, in its harmony and completeness, is distinctive. Evangelicals are not a corporate body in the sense of having a central office or headquarters, but we are only bound together by the things we believe and our common inheritance.

"Evangelical Churchmen trace their pedigree to the Puritans, the Reformers and the Lollards, to all within the National church who have learned to love a simple worship and a spiritual religion, but as a party their existence dates from the Great Revival of the eighteenth century" (Ball-eine). The name Evangelical was then given to those who, sharing in the blessings of that revival, did not leave but remained faithful to the historical Church.

John Wesley, the son of the rector of Epworth, and himself a priest of the Church of England until his death, had been

influenced from his birth (1703) by a saintly mother and later by Law's "Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life." William Law was perhaps the greatest of English Mystics, and outstanding as a theologian, but his faith must have been quite a simple matter. He is reported to have said to Wesley, "Religion is the most plain, simple thing in the world. It is only 'We love Him because He first loved us.'" When elected Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, Wesley formed a society for the promotion of spiritual life. From the rules and methods of life adopted by its members Wesley and his followers were stigmatized "Methodists." Failing, however, to find by rules and regulations the peace and power he sought and anxious to win peace he sailed for Georgia (1735) and there worked as a missionary among the settlers and natives. Three years later in 1738 John returned from Georgia haunted with a sense of failure.

It is one thing to admit a doctrine to be exegetically sound and quite another thing to experience it personally in the life. Through much study of the Greek New Testament he had an intellectual knowledge of Christianity yet he had no heart knowledge. On May 24th, 1738, Wesley went to a little religious meeting in Aldersgate Street. Someone was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans: and as Wesley sat and listened, for the first time he really grasped the central doctrine of Reformation theology. "I felt my heart strangely warmed," he writes, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death!"

This is rightly called his conversion, for it was the turning from Self to Christ. Hitherto in spite of his study of the writings of St. Paul, he had been trying to save himself.

"By my continued endeavour to keep His whole law, inward and outward, to the utmost of my power, I was persuaded that I should be accepted of Him." But now the centre of all things was Christ, not himself and his puny efforts; salvation was not something to be worked and striven for, but a gift to be received from God.

This acceptance by faith of Jesus as a personal Saviour, this knowledge by faith that one's sins are forgiven, which sends a warm glow through the life and heart, this *assurance* is the first and the fundamental mark of an Evangelical.

“ The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth, so is every one that is born of the Spirit ” (John iii. 8).

Wesley had to wait until he was 38 years of age before he knew that he was saved, but a child can have that same experience. Somewhere about the age of twelve feeling miserable because of sin, striving hard to be good, but failing badly and being very conscious of that failing which was as a burden borne on my shoulders, I heard while at Evening Prayer the Evangelical message of salvation by faith. The Vicar of our Parish asked all in the congregation who felt that they wanted their sins forgiven to kneel and accept as a gift that salvation which was already wrought out by Christ, when on Calvary the Lord laid on Him the sins of us all. I knelt and others knelt around me and I accepted by faith that my sins were forgiven, I accepted Christ as Saviour, I had such an assurance and joy as Wesley experienced and I have had it ever since. From that day I began to be an Evangelical.

“ But salvation includes more than deliverance from the wrath of God, due to sin. It is *the possession of a new life* which involves growth.” It is the possession of Jesus Christ Himself in the soul. At the call of faith He comes and dwells in the soul, to make the soul grow. “ As the babe is born to grow, so the regenerated soul lives to develop.” In both cases the life expands and unfolds as it is nourished within and cultured without. This process of growth or development in the spiritual life is sanctification. The secret efficacy of this process is due to the Holy Spirit’s gracious in-working by which, through the actions of our own wills, Christ is more and more formed in us.

But the inward process has necessarily *an outward expression*, so that sanctification is also the inward Christ more and more manifesting Himself in and through our mortal bodies. Thus sanctification which springs from regeneration and involves justification—the state of perfect acceptance in which we are accounted righteous before God, because of the merits of Christ—issues in service by the consecration of all life’s powers to God. (Denton Thompson : *Central Churchmanship*.)

Those who in the eighteenth century were nicknamed Evangelicals were so named because they had an Evangel, *a glorious message to give*. . . . Unlike the Methodists who in their spiritual zeal and devotion came to disregard all ecclesiastical law and order, the Evangelicals remained in the Church of England and revived it.

As Green in his *History of the English People*, says, "A religious revival burst forth which changed in a few years the whole temper of English Society. The Church was restored to life and activity. Religion carried to the hearts of the poor a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education."

Because these men knew, in the joy of being saved, the love of God, they loved others: they not only said, "We love because He first loved us," but they were full of zeal not only in all philanthropic working but in making known to others this love of God. This salvation, they themselves received from Him, and self denial and sacrifice was their watchword. One Society after another was founded in rapid succession, as the years rolled on, for the conversion of the world to Christ.

In 1799 the Church Missionary Society at a time when the S.P.G. would not be stirred, The Bible Society in 1804, The Jews' Society in 1809 undertook the task of trying to win the whole Jewish race at home and abroad; and the Colonial and Continental to provide for our people overseas.

In 1780 Raikes started the first Sunday Schools in Gloucester, Wilberforce was converted in 1785 and gave his life in attacking the slave trade which was abolished in 1807.

Later, when the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and the Industrial Revolution brought degradation and crime into terrible prominence, a Royal Commission in 1835 emphasized the need for churches and ministers in the large towns and centres of population. Immediately the Evangelicals founded the Church Pastoral Aid Society (1836) for the staffing of parishes, so that the Gospel could be taken to "everyman's door." It is necessary to give these bits of history to show the Evangelicals' stand for Evangelism and the value in God's sight of lost souls which they hold.

Evangelicals further emphasize *the liberty of man's access to God* through Jesus Christ. This access is free and unfettered. It is not confined to time or place. It is not conditioned by the priest, nor is it limited to the Sacraments. At all times and in all places, all may draw nigh to God and hold fellowship with Him, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We exclude from our minds, as we cannot find it in our Bible, any thought of necessary intervention or mediation by others, e.g., angels or saints, or priests, "Come unto Me" said Jesus. A constant and abiding communion with God is the Christian ideal, and like all true ideals, it is one which is increasingly realizable.

This free and unrestricted liberty of the soul's access to God through Jesus Christ is related to the *ministry*. We do not ignore the sanctity of the ministerial calling nor despise the dignity of its office, but regard the ministry as a divinely-ordered institution. The ministers of the Church in the New Testament are called by many names but the word *ιερευς* is never used. The priesthood is not a sacerdotal order, the Christian ministry is not in any sense a succession of the Temple priesthood.

The word *ιερευς* is not even found in the Christian writings before the close of the second century. There is but one English word for two Greek words *ιερευς* and *πρεσβυτερος* i.e. Priest. Priest is simply the abbreviated form of "Presbyter" or "Elder." The Priest is appointed to act for and with the priesthood of the whole Church. Every layman who belongs to Jesus Christ is a Priest of Christ. "The Priest" is he who is appointed to represent the priesthood of the Church.

We cannot, therefore, regard the clergy as being necessary for the soul's approach to Christ nor as indispensable for forgiveness of sins or fellowship with God. The normal method by which the sinner obtains pardon and peace is by direct and immediate confession to the Lord and by receiving from Him, directly and immediately, forgiveness and absolution.

Evangelical Churchmen emphasize, probably more than do their brethren, the *Covenant aspect of the Sacrament of Baptism*. While recognizing the reality of the regenerating grace on the divine side, we lay becoming stress on the necessity for the co-operating will on the human side. God

will always give, if man will only receive, but for the possession of any gift reception is necessary. It must be remembered that the administration of the Sacraments presupposes faith on the part of the recipients. They are intended for Christian believers only. Although we believe that the Lord "for His part will most surely keep and perform" the promises made and sealed to us, we must see to it that the corresponding conditions on our side of the Covenant are duly observed.

Where those baptized in infancy exhibit no signs of renewal, Evangelicals appeal to them to come to the Saviour. He is already theirs, and they were in fact given to him in Baptism, but they must claim the cleansing which was then covenanted to them: for although signed and sealed by His authority on their behalf they have hitherto failed through lack of faith to possess the promises.

Such beliefs explain *the ritual of the Evangelicals*. We desire to exalt Christ, not ourselves. Evangelicals generally take the North end when administering the Holy Communion, which emphasizes the right of each person to have direct access to God through Jesus Christ alone as mediator.

Evangelicals believe in the "Real Presence" at Holy Communion but not in or under the bread and wine, which still remain bread and wine, but Christ is present in the hearts of those who truly seek Him in that Sacrament. We have Evening Communion. We do not emphasize fasting communion for Christ is not received in the stomach but in the heart, and our Lord instituted the Lord's supper after an evening meal. Only those who receive the Holy Communion rightly, with right desire, receive Jesus Christ. We emphasize the federal or covenant aspect of both of the Sacraments of the Gospel.

There is no mention in our Church of England formularies of *Prayers for the dead*. The Roman Catholic Church teaches and practises Prayers for the dead, but only for those who have died in the faith of the Church, apparently a prayer for their perfecting. Evangelicals look upon Prayers for the dead with grave suspicion. They minimize the need for repentance and faith now; and the solemnity of Judgment after death without further opportunity (Luke xvi. 19-31).

In spite of this, at such times as the present, when hundreds are daily being killed, there is liable to be as in the

last war a revival of this practice. Twice in the forms issued for the day of National Prayer there is such prayer, but there is not a single prayer for all these young conscripts that they may accept the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and enter into that assurance that if they die they shall ever be with the Lord. Such indiscriminate prayers for the dead are an insult to the Saviour who died on the Cross to offer living men full and perfect salvation. "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation" (Heb. ii. 3). To do little or nothing to win men to Christ while they are alive and to emphasize prayers for their souls after they are dead is un-Scriptural and so untrue to the Church of England.

As to *our attitude to Christian people* who are not members of the Church of England, we claim kindred with all who are children of God having a like faith in Jesus Christ with us. They may be called Roman Catholics or Anglo-Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, or other Free Churchmen, Salvation Army or any other society, the essential to us is that Christ lives in them and they in Christ. All are one in Christ Jesus. Bishop Crotty writes, "It was on the rock, surely of the plain man, shot through with sin and weakness, as Peter certainly was, and yet redeemed and dedicated—on the foundation simply of the ordinary man, and his confession to God, that Christ chose to build His Church. And that must have shocked a Jewish audience. It is of course, the only rock on which Christ ever could have built his earthly Church. On such as ourselves He builds the only Church He can ever have among us; that it is to such that He alone can look for the earthly building of a better world."

The true Church consists then of the "Peters," justified and sanctified by the grace of God, and consecrated to His service regardless of the body to which they outwardly belong.

That devout churchman, Lord Hugh Cecil, once said, "The glory of Evangelicals lies in their vivid sense of the reality of the relation between man and God, in their strong faith in the Divine mercy, in their passionate devotion to the person of our Lord, in the abundant love of others they display—in short, in the vital character of their Christianity—a good Evangelical deserves the sincere reverence of Christian people. He ranks high among saints."