

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Reformation Essentials: Five Pillars of the Reformation

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In May 1989, a conference jointly sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was held at the Trinity campus in Illinois. Dubbed a consultation on Evangelical Affirmations, the meeting revealed more than it settled. In the published addresses (Zondervan, 1990), Carl F. H. Henry, the dean of American evangelicalism, sets the tone for book with his opening line: "The term 'evangelical' has taken on conflicting nuances in the twentieth century. Wittingly or unwittingly, evangelical constituencies no less than their critics have contributed to this confusion and misunderstanding." He warned that "evangelical" was being understood, not according to Scriptural teaching and "the theological 'ought,'" but according to the sociological and empirical "is." In other words, Henry was disturbed that evangelicalism is increasingly being defined by its most recent trends rather than by its normative theological identity. Author after author (presumably, speaker after speaker) echoed the same fears that before long "evangelical" will be useless as any meaningful identification.

The term itself derives from the Greek word euangelion, translated "Gospel," and it became a noun when the Protestant reformers began their work of bringing the "one holy, catholic and apostolic church" back to that message by which and for which it was created. People still used other labels, too, like "Lutheran," "Reformed," and later, "Puritans," "Pietists," and "Wesleyans." Nevertheless, the belief was that the same Gospel that had united the "evangelicals" against Rome's errors could also unite them against the creeping naturalism and secularism of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The so-called "Evangelical Awakening" in Britain coincided with America's own "Great Awakening," as Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, Tennant, and so many others centered their preaching on the atonement. Later, of course, Wesley's zeal for Arminian emphases divided the work in Britain, but the Reformation emphases were clearly and unambiguously articulated in the Great Awakening.

Out of this heritage, those today who call themselves "evangelicals" (or who are in these churches, but might not know that they are in this tradition) are heirs also to the Second Great Awakening. Radically altering the "evangel" from a concern with the object of faith, the Second Great Awakening and the revivalism that emerged from it focused on the act and experience of faith, in dependence on the proper "excitements", as Finney and others

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expressed it, to trigger the right response. In our estimation, this Second Great Awakening was the most important seismic shift in American religious history. Although the Reformation emphases of sin and grace continued to exercise some influence, they were being constantly revised to make the "Gospel" more acceptable to those who thought they could pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Only in the last decade of this century have many of the movement's mainstream leaders considered the loss of an evangelical substance. No longer is the evangel the focus of the movement's identity, but it is now known more by a sub-culture, a collection of political, moral and social causes, and an acute interest in rather exotic notions about the end-times. At a loss for words, one friend answered a man's question, "Who are the evangelicals?" with the reply, "They're people who like Billy Graham."

It is at this point that those of us who are heirs to the Reformation--which bequeathed to evangelicalism a distinct theological identity that has been since lost--call attention once more to the solas (only or alone) that framed the entire sixteenth-century debate: "Only Scripture," "Only Christ," "Only Grace," "Only Faith," and "To God Alone Be Glory."

Sola Scriptura: Our Only Foundation

Many critics of the Reformation have attempted to portray it as the invitation to individualism, as people discover for themselves from the Bible what they will and will not believe. "Never mind the church. Away with creeds and the church's teaching office! We have the Bible and that's enough." But this was not the reformers' doctrine of sola Scriptura--only Scripture. Luther said of individualistic approaches to the Bible, "That would mean that each man would go to hell in his own way."

On one side, the reformers faced the Roman Church, which believed its teaching authority to be final and absolute. The Roman Catholics said that tradition can be a form of infallible revelation even in the contemporary church; one needs an infallible Bible and an infallible interpreter of that sacred book. On the other side were the Anabaptist radicals, who believed that they not only did not need the teaching office of the church; they really didn't seem to need the Bible either, since the Holy Spirit spoke to them--or at least to their leaders--directly. Instead of one Pope, Anabaptism produced numerous "infallible" messengers who heard the voice of God. Against both positions, the Reformation insisted that the Bible was the sole final authority in determining doctrine and life. In interpreting it, the whole church must be included, including the laity, and they must be guided by the teachers in the church. Those teachers, though not infallible, should have considerable interpretive authority. The creeds were binding and the newly

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reformed Protestant communions quickly drafted confessions of faith that received the assent of the whole church, not merely the teachers.

Today, we are faced with similar challenges even within evangelicalism. On one hand, there is the tendency to say, as Luther characterized the problem, "I go to church, hear what my priest says, and him I believe." Calvin complained to Cardinal Sadoletto that the sermons before the Reformation were part trivial pursuit, part story-telling. Today, this same process of "dumbing down" has meant that we are, in George Gallup's words, "a nation of biblical illiterates." Perhaps we have a high view of the Bible's inspiration: 80% of adult Americans believe that the Bible is the literal or inspired Word of God. But 30% of the teenagers who attend church regularly do not even know why Easter is celebrated. "The decline in Bible reading," says Gallup, "is due in part to the widely held conviction that the Bible is inaccessible, and to less emphasis on religious training in the churches." Just as Rome's infallibility rested on the belief that the Bible itself was difficult, obscure, and confusing, so today people want the "net breakdown" from the professionals: what does it mean for me and how will it help me and make me happy? But those who read the Bible for more than devotional meditations know how clear it is--at least on the main points it addresses--and how it ends up making religion less confusing and obscure. Again today, the Bible--especially in mainline Protestant churches--is a mysterious book that can only be understood by a small cadre of biblical scholars who are "in the know."

But we have the other side, too. There is a popular trend in many "evangelical" churches to emphasize direct communication with the Holy Spirit apart from the Word. In these circles, tradition and the teaching ministry of the church through the ages are not only treated as fallible (as the reformers believed), but as objects of mockery. The sentiments of Thomas Muntzer, who complained that Luther was "one of our scribes who wants to send the Holy Ghost off to college," would find a prime-time spot on the nation's leading evangelical radio and television broadcasts. Calvin said of these folks, "When the fanatics boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency is always to bury the Word of God so they may make room for their own falsehoods."

Christianity is not a spirituality, but a religion. Wade Clark Roof and other sociologists have pointed out that evangelicals today are indistinguishable from the general cultural trends, especially when it comes to preferring to think of their relationship to God more in terms of an experience than in terms of a relationship that is mediated through words. Ours is a visual or image-based society, much like the Middle Ages, and yet Christianity can only flourish through words, ideas, beliefs, announcements, arguments. There can be no communication with God apart from the written and living Word. Everything in the Christian faith depends on the spoken and written Word delivered by God to us through the prophets and apostles.

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Further, sola Scriptura meant that the Word of God was sufficient. Although Rome believed it was infallible, the official theology was shaped more by the insights of Plato and Aristotle than by Scripture. Similarly today, psychology threatens to reshape the understanding of the self, as even in the evangelical pulpit sin becomes "addiction"; the Fall as an event is replaced with one's "victim" status; salvation is increasingly communicated as mental health, peace of mind, and self-esteem, and my personal happiness and self-fulfillment are center-stage rather than God's holiness and mercy, justice and love, glory and compassion. Does the Bible define the human problem and its solution? Or when we really want facts, do we turn somewhere else, to a modern secular authority who will really carry weight in my sermon? Of course, the Bible will be cited to bolster the argument. Political ideology, sociology, marketing, and other secular "authorities" must never be allowed priority in answering questions the Bible addresses. That is, in part, what this affirmation means, and evangelicals today seem as confused on this point as was the medieval church.

Solus Christus: Our Only Mediator

In the Middle Ages, the minister was seen as having a special relationship with God, as he mediated God's grace and forgiveness through the sacraments. But there were other challenges. We often think of our own age as unique, with its pluralism and the advent of so many religions. But not too long before the Reformation, the Renaissance thinker Petrarch was calling for an Age of the Spirit in which all religions would be united. Many Renaissance minds were convinced that there was a saving revelation of God in nature and that, therefore, Christ was not the only way. The fascination with pagan philosophy encouraged the idea that natural religion offered a great deal--indeed, even salvation--to those who did not know Christ.

The Reformation was, more than anything else, an assault on faith in humanity, and a defense of the idea that God alone reveals Himself and saves us. We do not find Him; He finds us. That emphasis was the cause of the cry, "Christ alone!" Jesus was the only way of knowing what God is really like, the only way of entering into a relationship with Him as father instead of judge, and the only way of being saved from His wrath.

Today, once more, this affirmation is in trouble. According to University of Virginia sociologist James Hunter, 35% of evangelical seminarians deny that faith in Christ is absolutely necessary. According to George Barna, that is the same figure for conservative, evangelical Protestants in America: "God will save all good people when they die, regardless of whether they've trusted in Christ," they agreed.

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Eighty-five percent of American adults believe that they will stand before God to be judged. They believe in hell, but only 11% think they might go there. R.C. Sproul observed that to the degree that people think they are good enough to pass divine inspection, and are oblivious to the holiness of God, to that extent they will not see Christ as necessary. That is why over one-fourth of the "born again" evangelicals surveyed agreed with a statement that one would think might raise red flags even for those who might agree with the same thing more subtly put: "If a person is good, or does enough good things for others during life, they will earn a place in Heaven." Furthermore, when asked whether they agreed with the following statement: "Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others all pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God," two-thirds of the evangelicals didn't find that objectionable. Barna observes "how little difference there is between the responses of those who regularly attend church services and those who are unchurched." One respondent, an Independent Fundamentalist, said, "What is important in their case is that they have conformed to the law of God as they know it in their hearts."

But this cultural influence toward relativism is not only apparent in the masses; it is self-consciously asserted by some of evangelicalism's own teachers. Clark Pinnock states, "The Bible does not teach that one must confess the name of Jesus Christ to be saved. The issue God cares about is the direction of the heart, not the content of their theology." For those of us who have some inkling of the direction of their heart (see Jer 17:9), that might not be as comforting as Pinnock assumes.

To say solus Christus does not mean that we do not believe in the Father or the Spirit, but it does insist that Christ is the only incarnate self-revelation of God and redeemer of humanity. The Holy Spirit does not draw attention to himself, but leads us to Christ, in whom we find our peace with God.

Sola Gratia: Our Only Method

The reason we must stay with the Scriptures is because it is the only place where we are told that we are saved by the unprovoked and undeserved acceptance of God. In "The Sound of Music," Maria (Julie Andrews), bewildered by the captain's sudden attraction to her, rhapsodizes, "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could. So somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good." Deep down, human nature is convinced that there is a way for us to save ourselves. We may indeed require divine assistance. Perhaps God will have to show us the way, or even send a messenger to lead us back, but we can actually follow the plan and pull it off.

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The Law is in us by nature. We were born with a conscience that tells us that we are condemned by that Law, but our reason concludes immediately that the answer to that self-condemnation is to do better next time. But the Gospel is not in nature. It is not lodged somewhere in our heart, our mind, our will, or our emotions. It is an announcement that comes to us as foolishness and our first response, like that of Sarah, is to laugh. The story is told of a man who fell off a cliff, but on his way down managed to grab a branch. He broke his fall and saved his life, but before long he realized that he could not pull himself back up onto the ledge. Finally, he called out, "Is there anyone up there who can help me?" To his surprise, a voice boomed back, "I am here and I can help you, but first you're going to have to let go of that branch." Thinking for a moment about his options, the man looked back up and shot back, "Is there anyone else up there who can help me?" We are looking for someone to save us by helping us save ourselves. But the Law tells us that even our best works are like filthy rags; the Gospel tells us that it is something in God and his character (kindness, goodness, mercy, compassion) and not something in us (a good will, a decision, an act, an open heart, etc.) that saves us.

Many in the medieval church believed that God saved by grace, but they also believed that their own free will and cooperation with grace was "their part" in salvation. The popular medieval phrase was, "God will not deny his grace to those who do what they can." Today's version, of course, is, "God helps those who help themselves." Over half the evangelicals surveyed thought this was a direct biblical quotation and 84% thought that it was a biblical idea, that percentage rising with church attendance at evangelical churches.

On the eve of the Reformation a number of church leaders, including bishops and archbishops, had been complaining of creeping Pelagianism (a heresy that denies original sin and the absolute need for grace). Nevertheless, that heresy was never tolerated in its full expression. However, today it is tolerated and even promoted in liberal Protestantism generally, and even in many evangelical circles.

In Pelagianism, Adam's sin is not imputed to us, nor is Christ's righteousness. Adam is a bad example, not the representative in whom we stand guilty. Similarly, Christ is a good example, not the representative in whom we stand righteous. How much of our preaching centers on following Christ--as important as that is--rather than on his person and work? How often do we hear about his work in us compared to his work for us?

Charles Finney, the revivalist of the last century, is a patron saint for most evangelicals. And yet, he denied original sin, the substitutionary atonement, justification, and the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit. In short, Finney was a Pelagian. This belief in human nature, so prominent in the Enlightenment, wrecked the evangelical doctrine of grace

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among the older evangelical Protestant denominations (now called "mainline"), and we see where that has taken them. And yet, conservative evangelicals are heading down the same path and have had this human-centered, works-centered emphasis for some time.

The statistics bear us out here, unfortunately, and again the leaders help substantiate the error. Norman Geisler writes, "God would save all men if he could. He will save the greatest number actually achievable without violating their free will."

Sola Fide: Our Only Means

The reformers said that it is not enough to say that we are saved by grace alone, for even many medieval scholars held that view, including Luther's own mentor. Rome viewed grace more as a substance than as an attitude of favor on God's part. In other words, grace was like water poured into the soul. It assisted the believer in his growth toward salvation. The purpose of grace was to transform a sinner into a saint, a bad person into a good person, a rebel into an obedient son or daughter.

The reformers searched the Scriptures and found a missing ingredient in the medieval notion of grace. To be sure, there were many passages that spoke of grace transforming us and conforming us to the image of Christ. But there were other passages, too, that used a Greek word that meant "to declare righteous," not "to make righteous." The problem was, the Latin Bible everyone was using mistranslated the former and combined the two Greek words into one. Erasmus and other Renaissance humanists "laid the egg that Luther hatched" by cleaning up the translation mistakes.

According to Scripture, God declares a person righteous before that person actually begins to become righteous. Therefore, the declaration is not in response to any spiritual or moral advances within the individual, but is an imputation of the perfect righteousness that God immediately requires of everyone who is united to Christ by faith alone. When a person trusts Christ, that very moment he or she is clothed in his perfect holiness, so that even though the believer is still sinful, he or she is judged by God as blameless.

This apostolic doctrine, proclaimed to Abraham and his offspring, has fallen on hard times again in church history. Not only do most Christians today not hear about the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, many cannot even define it. Although justification is the doctrine by which, according to the evangelical reformers "the church stands or falls," it has been challenged. Finney openly declared, "The doctrine of an imputed righteousness is another gospel. For sinners to be forensically pronounced just is impossible and absurd. The doctrine of an imputed righteousness is founded on a

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most false and nonsensical assumption, representing the atonement, rather than the sinner's own obedience, as the ground of his justification, which has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many."

In our own time, Clark Pinnock wonders why we cannot even embrace the notion of purgatory:

I cannot deny that most believers end their earthly lives imperfectly sanctified and far from complete. [Most? How about all!] I cannot deny the wisdom in possibly giving them an opportunity to close the gap and grow to maturity after death. Obviously, evangelicals have not thought this question out. [We have: It was called The Reformation.] It seems to me that we already have the possibility of a doctrine of purgatory. Our Wesleyan and Arminian thinking may need to be extended in this direction. Is a doctrine of purgatory not required by our doctrine of holiness?

Russell Spittler, a Pentecostal theologian at Fuller Seminary, reflects on Luther's phrase concerning justification: *simul iustus et peccator*, (simultaneously just and sinner): "But can it really be true—saint and sinner simultaneously? I wish it were so. Is this correct: 'I don't need to work at becoming. I'm already declared to be holy.' No sweat needed? It looks wrong to me. I hear moral demands in Scripture. *Simul iustus et peccator*? I hope it's true! I simply fear it's not."

The Wesleyan emphasis has always been a challenge to the evangelical faith on this point, although in his best moments Wesley insisted on this heart of the Gospel. To the extent that the consensus-builders and institutional abbots of the evangelical monasteries have attempted to incorporate Arminianism under the label "evangelical," to that extent, it seems to me, it ceases to be evangelical indeed.

Soli Deo Gloria: Our Only Ambition

The world is full of ambitious people. But Paul said, "It has always been my ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known." (Rom 15:20). Since God has spoken so clearly and saved so finally, the believer is free to worship, serve, and glorify God and to enjoy him forever, beginning now. What is the ambition of the evangelical movement? Is it to please God or to please men?

Is our happiness and joy found in God or in someone or something else? Is our worship entertainment or worship? Is God's glory or our self-fulfillment the goal of our lives? Do

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we see God's grace as the only basis for our salvation, or are we still seeking some of the credit for ourselves? These questions reveal a glaring human-centeredness in the evangelical churches and the general witness of our day.

Robert Schuller actually says that the Reformation "erred because it was God-centered rather than man-centered," and Yale's George Lindbeck observes how quickly evangelical theology accepted this new gospel: "In the fifties, it took liberals to accept Norman Vincent Peale, but as the case of Robert Schuller indicates, today professed conservatives eat it up."

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Many historians look back to the Reformation and wonder at its far-reaching influences in transforming culture. The work ethic, public education, civic and economic betterment, a revival of music, the arts, and a sense of all life being related somehow to God and his glory: These effects cause historians to observe with a sense of irony how a theology of sin and grace, the sovereignty of God over the helplessness of human beings, and an emphasis on salvation by grace apart from works, could be the catalyst for such energetic moral transformation. The reformers did not set out to launch a political or moral campaign, but they proved that when we put the Gospel first and give voice to the Word, the effects inevitably follow.

How can we expect the world to take God and his glory seriously if the church does not? The Reformation slogan *Soli Deo Gloria* was carved into the organ at Bach's church in Leipzig and the composer signed his works with its initials. It's inscribed over taverns and music halls in old sections of Heidelberg and Amsterdam, a lasting tribute to a time when the fragrance of God's goodness seemed to fill the air. It was not a golden age, but it was an amazing recovery of God-centered faith and practice. Columbia University professor Eugene Rice offers a fitting conclusion:

All the more, the Reformation's views of God and humanity measure the gulf between the secular imagination of the twentieth century and the sixteenth century's intoxication with the majesty of God. We can exercise only historical sympathy to try to understand how it was that the most brilliant intelligences of an entire epoch found a total, a supreme liberty in abandoning human weakness to the omnipotence of God.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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