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LUTHERAN WITNESS

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WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

A Lutheran Look at the 'Evangelicals'

We read their best-selling authors. We look with envy at their rapid growth. But there are differences between evangelicals and Lutherans that run to the heart of the Gospel itself.

by Harold L. Senkbeil

"Hey, pastor!" Fred beamed. "You should see the church I was at last Sunday. The place was packed. And the music—wow!—it knocked your socks off. All those singers up there with their mikes and all. Really impressive! Do you suppose we could learn something from them?"

The Evangelical Challenge

These days, America has a lot of churches like the one Fred visited—rapidly growing megachurches with exciting, entertainment-oriented worship services. And increasingly, we have more and more "Fred's" in our Lutheran congregations—people whose fascination with "evangelical" churches, as they call themselves, has grown into outright admiration. Fred's question isn't going to go away. In fact, it's a good one for all of us in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to ponder: Can't we learn something from our evangelical neighbors?

Certainly we need to learn all we can about the culture we live in. But when it comes to the Christian Gospel that our culture so desperately needs, Lutherans have some very important things to teach our evangelical friends about what it means to be truly evangelical.

What Does "Evangelical" Mean?

First, let's define what we mean by "evangelical." Since Reformation times, this word has simply meant "people of the Gospel." In fact, most of our Lutheran congregations have an "Ev." somewhere in their official title. But something new happened to this old-fashioned word in the middle of 20th-century America. As it's now used, "evangelical" usually describes a Christianity colored heavily by Protestant fundamentalism.

Consequently, the term "evangelical" today includes some decidedly unbiblical teachings: a spotlight on the human will, for example, and a healthy dose of skepticism as to the power of the Sacraments. These teachings are widespread throughout the Christian media in teachers as diverse as Jerry Falwell and Chuck Swindoll. But I submit that Lutherans, rather than simply criticizing evangelicals, can help define a truly evangelical Gospel for our troubled world through the close of the 20th century.

Does It Really Matter?

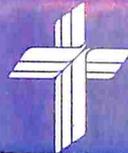
At first glance, these things don't seem all that serious. And when you consider the enthusiasm for Jesus among evangelicals, and their zeal for winning the lost, such doctrinal concerns appear to be rather nitpicking.

Evangelicals, after all, have a very high view of the power and authority of the Holy Scriptures. They have always been very good at preaching about Jesus and His cross. So what's the problem?



Christian bookstores are filled with the works of evangelical authors such as Chuck Swindoll, James Dobson and Jerry Falwell.

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