



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH: IN CELEBRATION OF MARTIN LUTHER AND 500 YEARS OF EVANGELICAL FAITH

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October 2017 is a special month. It was exactly 500 years ago, in October of 1517, that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle in Germany and launched the Protestant Reformation. At the heart of the Reformation was the recovered truth of *Justification by Faith*. That is to say, salvation comes not through the sacraments, nor through good works, but by grace through faith in the work of God through Jesus Christ on the cross.

That was truly revolutionary. That was also the beginning of the modern era of evangelical faith. Attending the truth of *Salvation by Faith* is the recognition of *Original Sin* (we cannot save ourselves) and the *Atonement* (the means by which God is reconciled to us through the cross). Luther saw this most clearly in the books of Romans and Galatians and these books became the lens which brought focus to evangelical truth. All of this was based on another accompanying truth, *Sola Scriptura*; the Bible alone is the authority in matters of faith and practice.

Europe would see a succession of reformers and groups that would tweak, adjust and develop Luther's ideas, but a common thread that would hold Protestantism together was the truth of Salvation by Faith. The covering word for this understanding of Christianity was the word *evangelical* which, in its European setting, came to mean, basically, Protestant.

Enter John Wesley. Wesley's contribution to evangelical faith was the experience of the *New Birth*. Luther was involved, of course, as was the book of Romans. It was while Wesley was reading Luther's preface to the Romans that Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed. When Methodism jumped to America after the Revolutionary War, Wesley's admonition "You have nothing to do but save souls" was understood by the first American Methodists to mean that salvation from the consequences of sin is available by faith in the blood of Jesus through the New Birth. And with the New Birth comes a changed life through the power of the Holy Spirit. This was a different twist from what anyone else in America had been preaching up to that point and it took the new nation by storm. In America, and especially in the American west where there was no prevailing religious culture to contend with, the Methodists (with some help from Baptists, Presbyterians and the newly forming Christian Church) established the religious culture: evangelicalism. As for the Methodists, while only 10% of Americans claimed church membership

after the Revolutionary War, by 1850 the percentage was nearly 40% and of that 40% Methodists would claim a full one-third.

Thus, to be Methodist was to be *evangelical*. So stated the dictionaries until recently:

EVANGELICAL: Of those Protestant churches, as the Methodist and Baptist, that emphasize the salvation by faith that is in Jesus. (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged* 1971).

EVANGELICAL: Of or having to do with the Protestant churches that emphasize Christ's atonement and salvation by faith as the most important parts of Christianity, as the Methodists and Baptists. (*Thorndike Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary* 1958).

The 20th century brought a challenge to evangelical faith by the very people who had been nurtured by that faith. Evangelical faith was often messy. It was accompanied by sectarianism and by the excesses of revivalism. Its supernaturalism seemed to many to be anti-science and anti-education. A new ideology called modernism was not happy with bloody crosses and a view of sin that was pessimistic about the goodness of human nature. The Federal Council of Churches was formed in 1908 and the first of many Social Creeds soon followed. Evangelicalism was accused of having a gospel that was privatistic and individualistic. New thinking was interested more in a social gospel that would change society with the help of education and the social sciences rather than with revivals.

The 1920s, 30s and 40s belonged to the modernists who by this time were known better simply as liberals. The folks down country roads were still basically evangelical in their practice of Christian faith, but church leaders believed the future of the world was better served by democracy, social and economic planning, moral guidance from mainline churches, and tolerance toward all. That understanding was soon to collapse. Changed societies do not come about without changed lives. It is not widely recognized that the social upheaval of the late 1960s with Woodstock, drugs, sexual promiscuousness, the Weathermen, and the Vietnam protests, and its reaction against religion was rebelling not so much against evangelical faith as much as the establishment liberal religious culture of mainline religion. It is from that period in the late 1960s that mainline liberalism began to implode. Out of the confusion of that period came, of all things, a resurgence of evangelicalism: the Jesus People, the charismatic movement, the growth of the church in Third World countries, the proliferation of para-church ministries, the introduction of new forms of Christian community, and even new music. The so-called "Silent Minority," which was how Charles Keysor, founder of the Methodist Good News movement, described Methodist's evangelical constituency, should have been called the "Silent Majority."

Today, evangelical faith is thriving in America. If not thriving, evangelical faith is at least holding its own. The recent release of the largest 100 churches in America, all of which have average attendance of over 5,000, reveals not a single congregation that could be labeled *progressive* in theology among the listings. Worldwide, most of the fast-growing Protestant churches reflect an evangelical approach to faith that reminds one of the early American Methodists. Africa, with 228 million Protestants, has more Protestant Christians than North America, South America, and Europe combined. Asia has more Protestant Christian than Europe.

Why then do we not rejoice? God is not dead, nor doth He sleep! Should it be a surprise that the great majority of United Methodists still affirm Luther's proclamations of Salvation by Faith through the cross of Jesus Christ? Should it be a surprise that most United Methodists continue to read their Bibles, teach the moral code of Christian faith, support family life, believe in personal witness, sing gospel songs, pray for the needs of a weary world, feed the hungry, pray over the sick, and basically continue the evangelical faith of their fathers and mothers? Do we really believe, as progressives would like to think,

that history is on the side of those who disdain talk about salvation and atonement and sin and moral living in favor of an ideology that appears to offer not much more "inclusiveness" and "diversity" and more government intervention into the affairs of its people?

There are different estimates of how many evangelicals are in America today. One recent poll places the percentage between 25% and 29% of the population. That seems high to many of us. If there are that many it must include persons or groups that are not voicing their true convictions and persons who might be categorized as "non-practicing" evangelicals.

Either way, the evangelical tent is broad. Evangelicals disagree about a lot of things and fuss among themselves. No wonder: included under the evangelical tent are fundamentalists, restorationists, dispensationalists, sectarians, Calvinists, Arminians, Pentecostals, mega-church folk, and most ethnic congregations. Among evangelicals are people who can't get along with other Christians and worship in their homes. There are televangelists who preach a prosperity gospel. And of course there are persons identified as the "religious right." Some are racists; some are legalists and literalists. It would include groups not easily categorized, like the Amish. But most of all, under the evangelical tent are the ordinary Christians who just follow Jesus and don't get involved with labels.

There is enough negative baggage today around the word *evangelical* that some would prefer another identifying descriptive word: *conservative*, *traditional*, *orthodox*, *Bible-believing* are offered as substitute words but there are problems with all of those terms. For one, each of them takes the emphasis off the one thing that connects evangelicals with Martin Luther and historic Protestantism: salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for the sins of the world. That is who we are. On that we stand.

October 2017. Five hundred years since Martin Luther nailed the theses on the castle door. Five hundred years of evangelical faith. We give thanks to almighty God.