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## Why I No Longer Call Myself an Evangelical

I no longer call myself an “evangelical.” My denomination (Grace Communion International) is a part of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and I’m fine with that, but I personally no longer use that word to describe myself.

In a way I regret “losing” the word. It’s perfectly Biblical, coming from the New Testament Greek word for the good news of Jesus (the gospel, or the “evangel” in Greek.) And theologically the word has traditionally referred to those who emphasize this good news of Jesus, so much so that ministers as varied as Thomas Torrance and Billy Graham could all call themselves, in some sense, “evangelical.” But for sociological and theological reasons unique to American culture in the 21st century, I have decided to stop identifying myself with the evangelical movement.

First, the sociology: the word “evangelical” is now almost synonymous with the word “Republican” in our culture. This isn’t fair or accurate, but unfortunately it is an association that is firmly rooted in the psyche of the American public. *The Adopted Life* is not a political publication, so I won’t be discussing the good or the bad that I see in Republican party politics. The issue for me is not whether I am Republican, Democrat, or other - politically speaking. The issue is that I don’t want non-believers to assume something about my political outlook when they hear me identify myself with a particular theological position - in this case “evangelical.”

Voters who self-identify with the label “evangelical” have overwhelmingly supported the Republican party for almost two generations now in American politics. The media has taken notice of this fact and commented on it *ad nauseam*. The result is that if you tell people that you are an “evangelical” there is a good chance that they will also assume you vote Republican. If you assume that the Father, Son, and Spirit are Republican then this association is no big deal. If, on the other hand, you assume that the Father, Son, and Spirit have a healthy skepticism towards all human politicking, then this association is very disturbing. Since I don’t think God is a Republican, I don’t want my theology associated so closely with the Republican party.

Second, and more importantly, I have theological reasons for abandoning the word “evangelical.” Once again there is something unfair and inaccurate that has happened in our culture: the word “evangelical” has come to be associated with a number of very specific theological positions that don’t really reflect the broad use of the term “evangelical” in the history of the Church. In other words, there are a lot of ideas associated in our culture with the word “evangelical” that may represent what most, but not all, evangelicals believe. This leaves people like me either saying “I’m an evangelical, but not *that* kind of evangelical!” or simply abandoning the use of the word all together. I’ve decided it’s easier to just abandon the word all together.

Here, briefly, are some of the theological ideas that are associated with the word “evangelical” in our culture that I have a problem with:

*An evangelical is someone who thinks that God wants to burn people up in hell for not believing the right things.* Not everyone who calls himself an evangelical believes this, but there are plenty who do and that majority - if it is a majority - has defined the word in this way. I believe in hell, but I don't think it

exists as a place for an angry God to get revenge on law breakers. I think hell is the misery we experience when we don't believe the truth that we are the adopted children of the Father in Jesus. I think we can leave hell anytime we want to. (See "Why I Believe in a Purgative Hell," *The Adopted Life*, July, 2009.)

*An evangelical is someone who wants to convert you to his religion in order to make you acceptable to God.* Now, it's true, I would like for everyone to believe what I believe about the Father, Son, and Spirit because I think what I believe is true. But I also think that humanity is acceptable - and accepted - by the Father because of Jesus, not because of any change in our own thinking. In 21st century American culture, evangelicals sound like a group of people who are saying "God doesn't like you but you can get him to like you if you'll do what we tell you to do." That's not the Trinity I believe in.

*An evangelical is someone who wants to force everyone to follow his moral code even though he doesn't follow that code himself.* I've concluded that most Biblical morality is impossible apart from knowing yourself as the beloved and adopted child of the Father in Jesus. Everything the Bible says about homosexuality, adultery, taking care of the poor, being honest, and loving other people, it says in the context of who Jesus is as our older brother who has made humanity into the Father's children. So, I think society is going to have whatever morality it chooses to have - partly inspired by the Bible and partly not. For example, American society in the 1920s at least made a pretense of embracing the Biblical morality of avoiding sex outside of marriage while at the same time deeply embracing the very un-Biblical morality of racism and segregation. Today, as then, our society embraces a moral code that both reflects and contradicts the Bible. I don't think these problems will be solved by lectures on morality. I think society needs the fearless declaration of the good news of their adoption in Jesus Christ. Since evangelicals are closely associated in the popular imagination with morality lectures, I no longer want to be associated with evangelicals.

None of this means that I don't like evangelicals or regard them as my brothers and sisters in the Church. I do. It just means that I've got to find a new way of describing myself in my Christian belief. For now I've decided to go with "Trinitarian." Maybe it'll catch on.

~ Jonathan Stepp