

# THE FAITH OF OUR CHURCH

## WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

The Evangelical Congregational Church is a family of persons, churches, and institutions with a history reaching back two hundred years. This is a study of the religious views which have shaped that fellowship, a synopsis of the roots and branches of our family tree. Unless we understand the roots of our Christian life as evangelicals we will not know the meaning of our place in the present development of American religious history.

Each of us has a story to tell. Many do not know their own place in the history of their church or even their family. Their history has vanished without a trace, leaving no memory. They have become virtually like pilgrims on a Journey without a point of reference. Not knowing where they have been, they do not know what brought them to the present place. The ideas and habits from their past which inevitably are influencing their present Journey are unrecognized, even unknown.

Is our life determined by ourselves or someone/something else? Since our minds are not empty, who has filled them? Parents, teachers, pastors, the media? Why are we called Christians? Or, Evangelicals? Wesleyan/Arminian? Believers? Only our history can fill in the living outlines which sum up our lives.

These questions lead us to inquire about our religious identity. We are Christians who follow Jesus of Nazareth, but there are many varieties. Some think the great differences among Christians reflect on our witness, while others contend that we need these distinctions in order to maintain all that Jesus taught us to be.

It is important to observe first, that Evangelicals believe in the central core of teachings which Christians have always cherished. Concepts of faith like the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the resurrection of the body, the second coming of Christ, and the Church as the gift of Christ through the Holy Spirit are themes which have achieved overwhelming consensus for twenty centuries. Despite attempts to undermine these positions of faith, the core endures.

Further, those who are called “Evangelicals” particularly stress the complete authority of the Scriptures and their power (being the power of the Holy Spirit) to renew our sinful natures, making us a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The Scriptures are sometimes easily understood by the simple, and sometimes too difficult for the scholar. However, the inner testimony of the Spirit to the truth of Scripture opens up even the most difficult insight to God’s people. Some truths of Scripture are like gold panned from shallow streams and others may only be acquired by driving deep shafts into the depths of the Word. God gave scholars, teachers, pastors, (Ephesians 4) some of these tasks, but God gives every believer the burden of searching humbly for all truth. And that search will occupy each of us, all of our lives.

In the Evangelical Congregational Church, we are also described as “Wesleyan” and “Arminian” in our religious beliefs. What this means is discovered by examining our family tree, or seeking out our roots. First, however, we confess an allegiance to Christ which Christians hold universally. From that foundation of our faith, we build on the religious teaching of James Arminius (1560-1609) and John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles (1707-1788), the great hymn writer.

Arminius was a follower of Christ who in his earlier years held to the views of the reformer John Calvin (1509-63). Calvin possessed a very logical mind. He started his whole approach by stressing that God is sovereign. Everything that happens in my life, except sin, is by God’s plan. Salvation is by God’s not man’s, design! God is the author and giver of salvation! Again, God, not

Man! If someone is saved, it is because God alone decided to save. If unsaved, then God chose not to select that person. The Bible says *“Whosoever will, may come.”* (He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9; See also John 3:16) Since, according to Calvin, God alone chooses to save, then why are some unsaved? Not by their simple “No”, but because God has rejected them. They cannot come to repentance. He chooses some and passes by others!

Calvin further argued that those whom God has chosen will assuredly be saved. Frail human beings cannot resist the grace of God. Christ’s death is sufficient to save every one but grace takes effect only in those who are elected by God. And finally if it is God who chooses us, and overcomes all our resistance, then God will keep us from ever falling from grace. The saved can never be lost!

James Arminius, and later John Wesley, departed from Calvin’s views, but both insisted upon the sovereign work of God in salvation. Whereas Calvin stressed God’s choice of some to become electing, these two leaders insisted that God does not elect particular individuals for salvation. Rather, the Lord God, who alone has the power of salvation, has determined the human means of receiving God’s favor. From the beginning, before creation (Ephesians 1:4), God has declared that salvation will not be by our good works, but by faith in His grace.

Consider Romans, chapters nine and ten as an illustration of the way Calvin, on the one hand, and Arminius and Wesley, on the other, explain the way of salvation. Why did God choose Jacob instead of Esau? What is meant by the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart? Or, how do we explain the vessels in the potter’s shop, the one used for gracious purposes, the other thrown out on the trash heap?

John Calvin saw this as a perfect illustration of the wisdom of God’s decree. Recognizing the horror of the divine rejection of some people (he called it a “horrible decree”), he, nonetheless, insisted that this is God’s way. These illustrations from Romans 9 demonstrate the election of some and the damnation of others. And who are we to ask the Sovereign Lord why he does this or that (see Romans 9:20 *“But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?”*)?

The Wesleyan-Arminian position is that God indeed is Lord of all. As Lord, He has determined that those who trust him are saved, but that those who try to be saved by works will be condemned. By God’s active grace which **precedes** all human participation, we are **enabled** to respond in faith to the call of Christ. Faith comes by hearing the Word (Romans 10:8-13) and **God’s grace** makes it possible for us to say “Yes” in faith.

Those who will not say “Yes” (even though they are **enabled**) choose to respond in unbelief, or by asserting their own way of salvation by works. In other words, they reject Jesus and affirm salvation by self-effort.

Romans nine and ten teach that God has entered into a covenant with his people. Israel (9:1-5). The covenant confirms that He will save whoever believes (9:30-33; 10:10-18). Israel chose the way of works, not faith (9:32, 10:1-3), but the Gentiles who obtained salvation chose the way of faith (9:30). The illustrations of Jacob, Pharaoh, or the vessels, are used by St. Paul to show that the Sovereign Lord does impose specific standards for salvation. He chooses to save everyone who believes.

Wesley and Arminius, from whose teaching of Christian doctrine the entire Methodist family has emerged, teach that God “has a right to fix the terms [conditions] on which He will show mercy...”. He has the same right to reject “those who will not accept the blessings on His own terms.” (Wesley’s *Notes on the New Testament* (Romans 9:14 and 17).

To sum up: the Sovereign Lord is the only source of salvation. Calvin views sovereignty as God’s way of saving those He wills to save. It is limited to those He elects, upon whom He moves irresistibly. The Wesleyan-Arminian view is that He wills the salvation of all, but that salvation is limited to those who, in the freedom He gives them, accept Him in faith. By the misuse of that freedom, others reject him. That is why they are condemned. And, further, the acceptance of salvation by a free, enabled choice is not irrevocable. By the misuse of our freedom we may also resist our Lord and his will and consequently, may be condemned and lost unless we experience repentance.

Those who use the logic of “once a child always a child” drawing upon a human parental relationship, are not using the logic of Scripture (See, for example 2 Peter, Chapter 2). But God’s preserving grace is stronger than any human deficiency. We need not fear falling out of His hand (John 10) but we must fear the carelessness which leads to moral weakness and even to apostasy (falling from grace).

One more theme is central to the Wesleyan-Arminian conception of Christian faith, that of Christian Perfection. Wesley saw this biblical teaching as an extension of the doctrines of the Protestant Reformation. But what does it mean?

It is clearly a biblical concept. “*Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.*” (Matthew 5:48). And it must be defined biblically, not by the customary misuse of that term as “something without any limitations whatever.” Even God has self-limitations which, e.g., prevent him from evil or injustice. To be perfect, as Jesus defined it, is to be “like the Father”: loving our enemies and declining to retaliate when slapped in the face. Those who claim that only Jesus could do this fall into the old Gnostic error that Jesus was not truly and fully human.

Given the definition above, i.e., perfection means “to be like the Father,” how is this realized? Is it by struggle or aspiration or a score of good works? Never! We are made like God by placing our trust in Him. We shall never find Christ by ascending to heaven or descending to hell (Romans 10), but by the simple reception of God’s love. Not what is done to please Him, but what He has done for me! As believers, born of God, we know Christ is alive in us! We also know that our sense of self-will is alive. Until we were born again, we understood our lack of spirituality only remotely. Now, living in the Spirit which God has given, we are aware, acutely and increasingly, that we are “like God” in a very childish way. We need to put away childish things by giving ourselves to God in a faithfulness which our new life in Christ makes far clearer. As a sinner, totally **un-like** God, we knew nothing of this profound sense of obligation to be “perfect”, i.e., like the Father. All things now are new, including the sense of adoption into God’s family and the need to be like Him in a way we are not. Not yet! But we may be: By opening our inner life, our “interior castle” (Teresa of Avila) to God’s life. By welcoming the Holy Spirit, poured out on us in the new birth (Titus 3:5-6), into the fullness of our life! That welcome is normally a self-conscious pledge of love which is characterized by a life-long dedication. Like the betrothal of marriage, it expresses the realization that “this is the One for me” and I the one for Him. Serious Christians through the centuries have understood their relationship to Christ in just this manner (St. Paul uses this illustration in Ephesians 5:21-33). With all of life open to God’s Spirit, we are purified from sin, and continuously being purified, are given power over the control of sin. We are enabled not to sin. When we do, we have a counselor who represents us to God. (1 John 2:1). We are able not to sin, that is, to avoid sin as a normal practice. God-likeness becomes our normal lifestyle. We are free from the compulsion to disobey God, free to follow Him, however limited our efforts. We have no need to rationalize our sinfulness since our nature is now Spirit-controlled and we live righteously, not sinfully. We do not need to pretend to some personal exaltation. Our nature experiences the nurturing flow of the Father’s life. Like our Father, we will love, we will hate, we will be jealous, we will possess self-awareness, we will feel desire, and experience pain. And when we fail, when we sin, that is, distort or misuse these characteristics, we will learn obedience by what we suffer. Jesus did the same in his human strivings but he never sinned (Hebrews 5:7-10; 12:5-11). By Jesus’ obedience “He was made perfect” and that is the pattern for our perfection, our becoming children who are like God.

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