

LUTHERANS AND EVANGELICALS THEN AND NOW

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What is the relationship between Lutheran and Evangelical or, putting the question in another way, what is the relationship between Evangelicals and Lutherans? The issue becomes more complicated when we realize that to give a thorough treatment to our topic we must also answer the questions, “What is the relationship between Evangelicals and Evangelicals?” and “What is the relationship between Evangelicals and Reformed?”

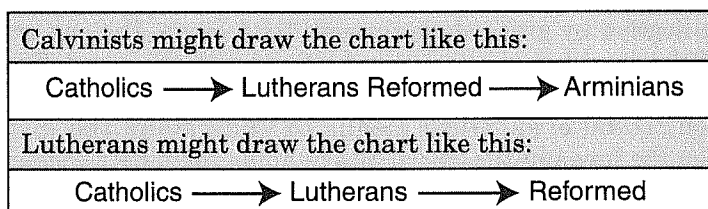
At the first level, the terms Lutheran and Evangelical seem to be almost interchangeable. We confessional Lutherans regularly use “evangelical” as part of our label—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church. To us “evangelical” means focused on the gospel. To us “Lutheran” also means focused on the gospel. The doctrine on which the church stands or falls is the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. The one great mission of the church is to share this message with the world. Everything else in the church, including the preaching of the law, serves this one mission. To be evangelical means to understand the distinction between the law and the gospel and to apply them both correctly, with the law serving the gospel. That is why we call ourselves “evangelical.” To be Lutheran and to be Evangelical is one and the same thing.

But it is at the next level that things begin to get a little more complicated. The movement that we today call Evangelicalism was founded in the mid-20th century to fill a niche between liberalism and fundamentalism. Evangelicals wanted to stand apart from the doctrinal liberalism of the mainline Protestant churches, so Evangelicalism resembled Fundamentalism in its loyalty to a basic core of biblical doctrine, but Evangelicalism also wanted to distance itself from the separatism of Fundamentalism and from what it regarded as Fundamentalism’s legalistic rules about life style (no alcohol, no dancing, etc.). Evangelicalism wanted to cultivate a more mainstream image and to gain greater intellectual respect from society. To do so it sought to retain much of the substance of Fundamentalism without the Fundamentalist style.

Evangelicals were at first relatively united, and it was relatively easy to identify an Evangelical, but in the half-century or so since its founding, Evangelicalism has become more diverse and more frag-

mented. The differences between Evangelicals are no longer confined to differences about what they considered to be relatively unimportant, non-fundamental doctrines such as the sacraments or the millennium. Now there are major differences on such core doctrines as the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the nature of God, and the purpose and meaning of Christ's death. The definition of Evangelical has been stretched, and there is no longer agreement even among Evangelicals about what it takes to qualify as an Evangelical.

Until the mid-twentieth century evangelical Lutherans would not have treated our topic as a comparison of Lutherans and Evangelicals, but as a comparison of Lutherans and Reformed. Lutherans generally used the term "Reformed" as a cover-all for nearly all non-Lutheran Protestants whether Zwinglian, Arminian, Calvinist, or Reformed. This was often confusing to other Protestants, since among them the term Reformed was usually limited to churches of a Calvinist tradition. It was especially the Reformed in the narrow sense, that is, the Calvinists, that saw the wide use of "Reformed" as misleading or confusing. Whereas Lutherans saw Zwinglians and Calvinists as pretty close cousins, confessional Calvinists often saw themselves as closer kin to Lutherans than to Zwinglians.



The reason for this was that the issue that precipitated the separation between Lutherans and the Reformed was the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and Lutherans saw little difference other than terminology between the doctrine of the Lord's Supper of the Zwinglians and that of the Calvinists. They believed that these two groups were essentially the same. There were other factors that led Lutherans to place the Zwinglian/Arminians and Calvinists in a single category "Reformed."

This viewpoint is articulated in the article by August Pieper which follows, "What is that different spirit of which Luther accused the Zwinglians?" An alternate title for this article could be "Lutherans and Evangelicals: 1529-1929." In this article Pieper argues the case that the distinction between Luther and Zwingli in 1529 was pretty much the same as the distinction between Lutherans and Reformed (aka Evangelicals) 500 years later. Though now nearly 80 years old, this article offers interesting insights into the view of this

Lutheran/Evangelical relationship which Lutherans held for 500 years, and it invites us to ask the question whether anything has changed in the eighty years since the article was published.

Interesting sidelights of the article are its relatively blunt criticisms of Luther for the manner in which he conducted the confrontations with the Reformed and Catholics and Pieper's observations about what he saw as the most dangerous "Reformed influences" on the Lutheran church in America. He is quite critical of certain methods of education and societies in the church which are widely accepted in Lutheran circles today. We hope that thoughtfully considering Pieper's opinions will lead readers to make their own observations about the distinctions between Lutherans and Evangelicals today. What is the relationship of style to substance? What is the same and what has changed? Are there some things in Pieper's observations that sound very contemporary and up-to-date? Do some concerns seem antiquated?

The two review articles which follow present observations from within the Evangelical community on the widening divisions between Evangelicals. Do the widening gaps in Evangelicalism mean that the distance of Evangelical from Evangelical may be as wide as the gap between Lutheran and Evangelical? These are questions worthy of thoughtful consideration and discussion, and we hope these three articles will stimulate this discussion.