

**What We Mean by “Evangelical”**  
1 Corinthians 15:1-8 on January 8, 2023  
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*Please read 1 Corinthians 15:-8 before going further in this transcript.*

Today we're launching a 4-week sermon series called "What We Mean by E-Free Bemidji." Over the next 4 Sundays, we're going to zero in on 4 topics:

January 8: What We Mean by "Evangelical."

January 15: What We Mean by "Free."

January 22: What We Mean by "Church."

January 29: What We Mean by "Becoming Deeply Devoted Followers of Jesus Together."

Our goal is to do a topical, deep dive into who we are as a local church body and what it means to be part of this particular church family. By "we" I'm referring to our church as a whole, to our corporate understanding in our shared Statement of Faith, as well as our constitution and by-laws. So today, let's begin with "What We Mean by Evangelical." The word "Evangelical" is connected to the word "gospel." In fact, the "evangel" is synonymous with the "gospel," so you could think of it this way, "Evangelical = "gospelical." So Evangelical simply refers to the gospel, to the Good News about Jesus Christ. However, in our world today, there's a lot of confusion about the word "evangelical."<sup>1</sup>

**For some, "evangelical" has come to mean...**

**1. Being separatistic and elitist, but the evangel calls for humility.** Some of us evangelicals have gained a reputation for acting like we're better than everyone else. There's a tendency for some of us to be judgmental and have a more critical attitude. Like we have it all figured out, so we have nothing to learn from the rest of the world, but that's simply not the case. The evangelical message that we proclaim is a gospel of grace from first to last. We believe that all have sinned and stand equally in need of forgiveness. So we resonate with the words, "but for the grace of God, there go I."<sup>2 3</sup> That's why we sing the song "Amazing Grace" with conviction: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch, like ME." There's nothing elitist about our shared human condition, or our common need for the gospel. That said, the gospel does call us to separate ourselves from sinful attitudes and behaviors. Evangelicals should be distinctive in that we are committed to loving God by obeying God.<sup>4</sup> So we do submit ourselves to His moral standards and to His relational designs. But even as we pursue being holy as He is holy, that doesn't entitle us to an attitude of elitism. By no means

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<sup>1</sup> Check out these links if you'd like to learn more: "Defining Evangelical" by Jonathan Merritt, December 7, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/>

- January 4, 2023, on the Holy Post Podcast <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0otGzA6EOE> How to Repair American Evangelicalism with Walter Kim (President of the NAE).

- Justin Taylor, "How Politics and Polls Killed the Term 'Evangelical'" July 15, 2016.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/how-politics-and-polls-killed-the-term-evangelical/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/there\\_but\\_for\\_the\\_grace\\_of\\_God\\_go\\_I](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/there_but_for_the_grace_of_God_go_I)

<sup>3</sup> Here's a related article: <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/grace-god-go-danielle-strickland/?locale=en>

<sup>4</sup> See John 14:15.

have we fully arrived or gotten things all figured out. We are no better than any of the other sinners out there.<sup>5</sup>

**For some, “evangelical” has come to mean...**

**2. A voting bloc, but the evangel goes well beyond politics.** Unfortunately, in some ways, the word “evangelical” has been hijacked by modern-day politics. The word “evangelical” is sometimes understood as a political buzz word that carries meanings and connotations far beyond the simple gospel of Jesus Christ. So, for many people, the term “evangelical” has connotations of support for particular political views or particular political candidates. But, at E-Free Bemidji we’re very intentional about not endorsing or promoting any particular candidate or political party. Now, there are a number of us at E-Free who are involved in politics on an individual level, either through voting or serving in office or whatever else it may be, and that can be a good thing. Our Christian faith can have a great impact on our local, state, and federal governance. But as a corporate church, we chose to avoid political entanglements. It’s not that politics is bad; in fact, a lot of good can be accomplished through politics. It’s just that God didn’t put our church on this corner to be a political enterprise, He put us here to be a gospel enterprise. That said, we do pray fervently for our elected leaders, and we pray for our elections.<sup>6</sup> We also openly address topics that have political ramifications, but we strive to address those topics for the purpose of discipleship, rather than for the purpose of politics.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> That’s what we mean by the “evangel” going well beyond politics. As an evangelical church we are laser focused on discipleship, on becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together.<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> The Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji is intentionally concentrating our definition of “evangelical” on the pure, untainted, Good News of the gospel.

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<sup>5</sup> Related to this, is the fact that, for some, “evangelical” has come to mean... A privileged class of people, but the evangel equalizes all people. The gospel is for all peoples equally: red and yellow, black and white, we are all precious in His sight. We are committed to this both inside these church walls, as well as outside, in our Bemidji community as well as around the world. When John 3:16 declares that “God so loved the world,” it means every people and tribe, every nation and language. The gospel is also for both men and women equally (See Galatians 3:26-29). Both women and men are of equal value, equal dignity, and equal worth to God. So evangelicals should be on the forefront of advocating for mutual love and respect between men and women, and for honoring one another above ourselves. The gospel is also for all income levels equally; rich and poor and middle-class alike. There’s no financial entry fee. Our level of affluence, or lack thereof, makes absolutely no difference AT ALL in God’s economy or in this church. So the evangel welcomes all people equally, from any and every background, warmly, kindly, and enthusiastically!

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Timothy 2:1-4 and Romans 13:1-7.

<sup>7</sup> Consider 2 Timothy 2:4.

<sup>8</sup> By the way, this is not an effort to be “politically correct,” far from it. Our goal isn’t political correctness; our goal is to avoid unnecessary political entanglements.

<sup>9</sup> Clearly there are times where the Bible’s teaching will inform how we vote, but in a complicated, pluralistic society, we leave that discernment up to each believer. Being part of the E-Free Bemidji church family does not mean that anyone is expected to adhere to any particular political agenda. Our church continues to be intentional about not being unnecessarily tethered to any political movements or action groups.

<sup>10</sup> To be more specific, multiple political perspectives are welcome here: Republicans, Democrats, Independents, or otherwise. Even those of us who chose to remain politically neutral and not get involved in politics at all. Everyone is welcome to worship here and there’s no pressure that you have to vote a certain way. It’s interesting to consider that “in 1976, the term [Evangelical] went mainstream when a peanut farmer named Jimmy Carter won the Democratic primary and then the general election. He became the first U.S. President to call himself a ‘born again’ evangelical Christian.”

“Defining Evangelical” by Jonathan Merritt, December 7, 2015,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/>

**For some, “evangelical” has come to mean...**

### **3. A narrow view of secondary issues, but the evangel majors on the majors.**

When some people hear the word “evangelical” they think of a very narrow-minded and highly opinionated group. Sometimes the word “evangelical” carries a connotation of being theologically close-minded. Some people view “evangelicals” as unwilling to even consider the contributions and questions that come from the fields of science, psychology, archaeology, and so on. If you haven’t already learned this about E-Free Bemidji, we do our best to major on the majors, and minor on the minors.<sup>11 12</sup> So we make every effort to have well-informed and robust discussions about debates about things like creation and evolution, and Calvinism and Arminianism, and even over our response to Covid-19, or whatever other issue comes at us. We try to be very careful not to allow these secondary issues to divide us. We are united in our primary gospel convictions, and we are committed to an open and robust dialogue about everything else. So these three examples illustrate why the word “evangelical” can be such a confusing word to understand, and they explain how the term “evangelical” has come to mean different things to different people.

But what about E-Free Bemidji, what do WE mean by “evangelical”? Well, I thought you’d never ask! To put it simply and succinctly: **The Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji is committed to the evangel<sup>13</sup>, to a laser focus on the unmoving, unshakable gospel core.**<sup>14</sup> The gospel is the good news about Jesus! God has provided us with salvation through faith in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.<sup>15 16</sup> The reason we need to remind ourselves of our gospel core is that we humans have a tendency to corrupt it, by adding to it or changing it in some way.<sup>17</sup> But the gospel doesn’t need any help from us; WE need help from it. That’s why it’s so important for us to remember passages like 1 Corinthians 15. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 Paul tells the church in Corinth, “Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you

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<sup>11</sup> This has also been called the “significance of silence,” which reflects “our strong concern for Evangelical unity in the gospel.” Spiritual Heritage Committee, *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, pp. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> However, this does not mean that we won’t discuss and debate secondary issues, “but simply that we will not divide over them.” Spiritual Heritage Committee, *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, footnote #18 on p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> “e VAN jul”

<sup>14</sup> “Gospel” in the original Greek is εὐαγγέλιον, “God’s good news to humans, good news as proclamation.” William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 402.

<sup>15</sup> See notes in *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p 1653 footnote on Mark 1:1.

<sup>16</sup> “The term evangelical derives from the Greek word euangelion meaning “gospel” or “good news.” Technically speaking, evangelical refers to a person, church, or organization that is committed to the Christian gospel message that Jesus Christ is the savior of humanity. The Greek root word is used in the New Testament and was popularized in the first centuries A.D. to distinguish the love-centric movement of Jesus followers from the violent Roman Empire that often made its own “good news” announcements to celebrate military victories.” “Defining Evangelical” by Jonathan Merritt, December 7, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/evangelical-christian/418236/>

<sup>17</sup> We see this, for example, in the Galatian church where they try to mix legalism in with the gospel of grace. See Galatians 1:6-7 and 2:21-3:3.

have believed in vain.” The fact that he’s reminding them, means that he’s told them this before; nonetheless, he tells them again!<sup>18</sup> Keeping a clear understanding of the pure, unadulterated gospel takes continuous effort. Maintaining gospel clarity requires continuing gospel reminders. Paul addresses them as his brothers and sisters in Christ. These are his fellow Christ-followers and he wants to make sure that they not only remember the gospel, but also that they have a clear understanding of it. After all, they’ve taken their stand on it, so it’s vital that their footing is on nothing less than solid gospel ground!

He continues in verses 3-4, “For what I received<sup>19</sup> I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” That’s the gospel in a nutshell: Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. This is “the fundamental Christian confession that Paul passes on to the churches he [planted].”<sup>20</sup> Paul clarifies that this gospel truth is “of first importance!”<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> My *NIV Study Bible* summarizes this well: “[Verses 3-4 are] the heart of the gospel: that Christ died for OUR sins (not for His own sins), that he was buried [which confirms that He really did die] and that he was raised from the dead” on the third day, which confirms that God accepted His payment for our sins.<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> Verses 3-4 should be the foundational gospel belief for any church that calls itself a church. This is not secondary, this is not a sidenote, this is the absolute, essential, non-negotiable gospel core, upon which our entire Christian faith is established and sustained. Nothing else comes even close to the importance of the evangel!

Paul is careful to note that all of this happened “according to the Scriptures.” He says it twice, in verse 3, and then again in verse 4.<sup>25</sup> In His goodness, God gave us not only the Old Testament which foretold the gospel, but also the New Testament which records and further explains it. The fact is, Scripture has a lot more to say about the gospel than just this core summary in 1 Corinthians 15. A more comprehensive and complete understanding of the gospel is available to us when we read all of Genesis

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<sup>18</sup> Paul has a tendency to repeat himself, and he does so without apology. In [Philippians 3:1](#) Paul says, “...It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.”

<sup>19</sup> Paul received his gospel teaching from the other apostles, but he also received it directly from the Lord Jesus Himself. See Galatians 1:11-12 and Ephesians 3:2-6.

<sup>20</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2353 footnote on 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

<sup>21</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 23. In 1 Corinthians 2:2 Paul declares, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:14 declares, “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Later on, in verse 17 he adds, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”

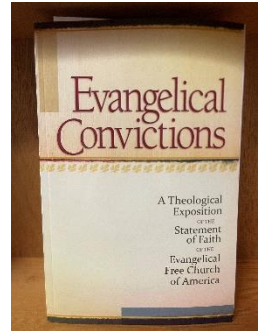
<sup>23</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1944 footnote on 1 Corinthians 15:3.

<sup>24</sup> Paul then goes on in verses 5-8 to list multiple eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection: including the 12 apostles, more than 500 other believers, as well as to Jesus’ brother James, and last of all... to Paul himself, “as to one abnormally born.” (*By this Paul means that He saw Jesus a few years after His resurrection, while most of the others saw Jesus during the 40 days leading up to His ascension.*) There are multiple resurrection appearances listed here and the Gospels tell of even more. Jesus’ resurrection had hundreds of eyewitnesses, many of whom died for this belief after decades of faithful service in Jesus’ name.

<sup>25</sup> So Paul and these other eyewitnesses saw the fulfillment of God’s gospel rescue plan that had been put in motion long ago.

through Revelation. (So let me put a plug in here for Bible reading. We've got Bibles for sale and Bible reading plans available. Simply call the church and we can put one in the mail.) If we really want a better understanding of the gospel and what it means to be evangelical, then we need to continue reading and studying God's Word. In addition to the Sunday morning sermons, we can also do this during our daily quiet times, as well as in our various small group Bible studies.

Another great way to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the gospel is to read the book, "Evangelical Convictions." (It could be just as accurately titled "Gospel Convictions." We have copies of this book for sale at the church.)<sup>26</sup> This little book is great because it unpacks the gospel in very practical and helpful ways. It's particularly helpful in terms of today's sermon, "What We Mean by Evangelical," because this book gives a thorough and comprehensive overview of "the evangel." Most importantly, it's rooted deeply in the Scriptures, which is why I'd venture to say that it's one of the best resources on the planet for helping us to better understand the gospel and "What We Mean by Evangelical."



Our church's Statement of Faith unpacks the gospel core for us, one piece at a time; let me show you what I mean:<sup>27</sup>

**Article 1: God.** The gospel "originates in and expresses the wondrous perfections of the eternal, triune God." In other words, the more we come to understand the gospel, the more we come to understand and appreciate how wonderful our God is. As we deepen in our understanding of the gospel's ultimate source, the more our worship of God will deepen. So this isn't just about intellectual doctrine, this is about better understanding the God we worship and adore.

**Article 2: The Bible.** The gospel "is authoritatively revealed in the Scriptures." As Paul has stated in 1 Corinthians 15, the gospel is "according to the Scriptures." God has lovingly spoken forth His gospel in the Bible; it's all been faithfully written down and recorded for us.<sup>28</sup>

**Article 3: The Human Condition.** Only the gospel can meet our deepest human need. So the dignity and worth of human beings is displayed, not only by God making us in His image, but also by God then rescuing us from this broken world, and offering us a way back into close fellowship with Him.

**Article 4: Jesus Christ.** The gospel "is made known... in the Person of Jesus Christ." Jesus is fully God and fully human. He took on flesh and walked among us. He fully understands us and empathizes with our weakness because He was tempted just as we are. He lived a perfectly holy life, and as the Living Word, He taught us God's gospel truth.

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<sup>26</sup> In 2022 the EFCA came out with an updated 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of this book. One significant change to our Statement of Faith is the broadening from Jesus' "premillennial" return to His "glorious" return.

<sup>27</sup> These 10 articles and their gospel connections are based on pp. ix-xv of the Spiritual Heritage Committee, *Evangelical Convictions, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> I might also mention that God has lovingly provided us with the Bible in our own language, through the faithfulness of the translators that He has raised up. Praise God for our global partners who work in Bible translation!

**Article 5: The Work of Christ.** The gospel was “accomplished through the work of Christ.” Here, right in the middle of our Statement of Faith, point 5 of 10, we find the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is what we mean by His work. We’re not talking about His work as a carpenter, we’re talking about His work on the cross. We’re talking about His shed blood, His once for all, all-sufficient sacrifice for sins. Jesus’ work culminated in His victorious resurrection from the dead!

**Article 6: The Holy Spirit.** The gospel “is applied by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, and then does His work of conversion and regeneration within us when we put our faith in Jesus. He baptizes us into union with Christ and adopts us into God’s family. And then, as if this wasn’t already enough, He indwells us and guides us and empowers us for gospel living.

**Article 7: The Church.** The gospel’s beauty and wisdom are displayed in the gathered body of believers. The church is made up of people who have believed the gospel. (*The church isn’t just a building or attendance at an event, it’s a gathering of those who believe the gospel and have been transformed by it.*) And that gospel is continually renewing and transforming us into greater Christlikeness. This displays God’s beauty and wisdom, as we learn to love one another, and to love the broken world around us. In addition to all of this, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are word pictures of the gospel message.

**Article 8: Christian Living.** The gospel compels us toward godly living and witness in the world. The gospel teaches us to say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions, while at the same time it fills us with spiritual fervor to serve the Lord.<sup>29</sup> Knowing Jesus loves us enough to die for us, compels us to live fully for Him. We desire God above all of the things of this world, and we’re eager to do the good works that God has prepared for us to do.<sup>30</sup> Our witness flows from our distinctive gospel living, as well as from the words of our gospel witness as we share with family, friends, and neighbors.

**Article 9: Christ’s return.** The gospel will reach its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus comes back for us. Jesus’ glorious return is our blessed hope!<sup>31</sup> This keeps us in a state of constant expectancy and reminds us to be watchful and pray. Only God knows when this return will be, but we have full assurance that one day Christ will return for us. This motivates us toward the kind of gospel living we just talked about. It also offers us encouragement to hold fast and to not lose hope, because Jesus is coming soon!

**Article 10: Response and eternal destiny.** The gospel bids us to come to Jesus because this life has eternal consequences. Our response to God’s gospel invitation must be either “yes” or “no;” there is no middle ground. The gospel invites, but it also warns everyone to turn to God in repentance before it’s too late. Our eternal destiny will be determined at God’s final judgment. Rejecting the gospel will result in condemnation and eternal punishment. Accepting the gospel will result in eternal joy with the Lord in the new heaven and earth.

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<sup>29</sup> See Titus 2:11-14 and Romans 12:11.

<sup>30</sup> See Ephesians 2:8-10.

<sup>31</sup> Our recent change from “premillennial” to “glorious” in article 9 illustrates our willingness to adjust our views as our understanding of the gospel majors continues to develop.

The gospel declares that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Heavenly Father, except through Him. THIS is what we mean by the “evangel.” These 10 points are a more thorough explanation of “What We Mean by Evangelical.” To be clear, these aren’t just religious ideas or ideological statements, these are evangelical convictions, gospel convictions. As Evangelicals, we hold these truths near and dear to our hearts because the evangel, the gospel, is so very dear to us. It’s our entire life!<sup>32</sup>

In 1 Timothy 1:10-11 Paul highlights the necessity of “...sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.” Brother or Sister in Christ, in the same way, this very gospel has now been entrusted to you and me. The gospel message is our most distinctive attribute as a church. At least, it should be! With this in mind, let’s make sure that we do our part to properly understand the gospel and then to make it clearly known in our sphere of influence.<sup>33</sup> We also want to make sure that we protect the gospel so that we can pass it along to future generations. The group that put together the *Evangelical Convictions* book is called the Spiritual Heritage Committee. I appreciate their summary statement: “Each generation has the responsibility not only to receive what has been passed on, but to own it for ourselves BEFORE delivering it to our children. ... ‘The doctrinal heritage of the past is thus both a gift and a task, an inheritance and a responsibility. What our forebears in the Christian faith passed down to us must be appropriated, in order that we may wrestle with it within our own situation, before passing it on to those whose day has yet to dawn.’ As Paul instructs Timothy, ‘What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us’ (2 Timothy 1:13-14).”<sup>34 35</sup>

**>>> E-Free Bemidji, let’s make sure that we do this!**

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<sup>32</sup> See John 6:68-69.

<sup>33</sup> That’s why, in February, we’re launching a sermon series on the book of Romans, which explains the gospel fully and urges us not to be ashamed of it but rather share it!

<sup>34</sup> Spiritual Heritage Committee, *Evangelical Convictions*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Former EFCA President Bill Hamel says it this way, “[we recognize] the need for every generation to review and possibly revise our Statement of Faith, thus ensuring that the next generation, standing unshakably upon the same inerrant Scripture, may address the new issues of their day.” Spiritual Heritage Committee, *Evangelical Convictions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2022, p. xxiii.