



Around the FIRE

The Newsletter of the Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals

“E” is for Evangelical

by Wayne Mack

On a number of occasions when people have asked me whether our church (Grace Fellowship Church in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania) is part of a denomination, I have responded by telling them, “No, but we are part of an association of churches that is called “F.I.R.E.” The first question is then followed by another question, “What is “F.I.R.E.”?”

In response to that question, I explain to them that the word “F.I.R.E.” is an acronym which stands for a group of like minded churches that have banded together in an organization that we call the Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals. This answer is usually followed by other questions, “What is the Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals? What does this group of churches stand for? What do they believe? Why does F.I.R.E. exist?”

In answer to these questions, I spend some time expounding the meaning of the four major words that the letters represent in the acronym. Every word in this title is important in that each word proclaims some of the core convictions of F.I.R.E. churches as well as common purposes to which we are committed. Since the first of the three main words in the title have been explained in former newsletters, I will not at this time repeat the explanations I usually give to my questioners. However, since the meaning of the word “evangelical” was not covered in former news letters, I will seek to clarify how I understand the meaning of this word.

What does it mean to say that a person or a church or a group of churches are Evangelical? Basically, it means that they believe the Gospel which declares God saves unworthy, guilty sinners by His grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ on their behalf. It means that that they are committed to proclaiming that Gospel to the ends of the earth. The Webster’s New World Dictionary rightly states that the word evangelical is referring to “those protestant churches ... that emphasize salvation by faith in the atonement of Jesus, and reject the (saving) efficacy of the sacraments and good works alone.”



Being evangelical means that we believe that all men come into this world with three tremendous problems to which only the Gospel provides the solution. One of those problems is that we have a bad record; we have sinned and come short of the glory of God; we have engaged in evil deeds and therefore are guilty before God and deserve to be banished from the presence of a holy and righteous God in hell (Romans 3:23; Colossians 1:21). Our second great problem is that we come into this world with a bad heart; we have hearts that are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; we are alienated and hostile to God in our minds; we live according to the lusts of the flesh and are by nature children of wrath (Jeremiah 17:9; Colossians 1:21; Ephesians 2:3). Our third great problem is that we have a bad master who rules our lives; we walk according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience; we are taken captive by him to do His will and we serve his purposes (Ephesians 2:3; John 8:44; 2 Timothy 2:26).

In keeping with these verses, it’s easy to see that our situation before God is extremely grave; it’s easy to see that we need to be delivered from these three great problems. And it’s also easy to see why we are so excited about the Gospel because it is through the Gospel and the Gospel alone that we can be set free from our bad record, our bad heart and our bad master.

The main stem of the word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word “*euangellion*.” This is the word which is translated Gospel in our Bibles; a word which means good news. We revel in being evangelicals because we revel in the good news that through repentance and faith in Christ

men can be set free from our three greatest problems. We rejoice in the Gospel because through the Gospel our great need for forgiveness and for a clean heart and for a good master can be fulfilled. As evangelicals who know something of the greatness of the Gospel we boldly declare that we are not ashamed of the Gospel (the euangellion, the good news) of Jesus Christ because we believe that “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes’.” (Romans 1:16)

Being evangelical means that we believe that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:13) It means that we are Christ centered and cross centered in our message. It means that we glory in the cross of Christ by whom the world is crucified unto us and we unto the world (Galatians 6:14)

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It means we have a passion to “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:15)

Being evangelical means that our churches will have a compelling desire to reach out with the Gospel; to those who are still under the control of a bad master, a bad heart and a bad record. It means that our churches will seek to help people to appropriate the full benefits of the Gospel in their own personal lives and relationships. It means that we are committed to planting other churches who will also be committed to be actively and passionately presenting that Gospel to those who have never heard; It means that our churches will be involved in training people to live out the implications of the Gospel on a daily basis; It means that our churches will be helping people to understand that receiving the Gospel means that we should henceforth not live for ourselves, but for Him who loved us and gave Himself for us (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). It means that we who have been blessed by the Gospel will be motivated to lay down our lives for the brethren even as Christ laid down His life for us.

Being evangelical means, as Jerry Bridges has written, that we realize that there is never a day when we are so

good that we don’t need the Gospel and never a day when we are so bad that we are beyond the reach of the Gospel. It means that we are motivated by the Gospel to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world and to live looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11- 13). It means that we live as people who have been ransomed from our lawless deeds and who have been purified and set apart to live as a people of God’s own possession; a people who because of the Gospel are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:14) As evangelicals we recognize we have been bought with a price and that we are not our own and that it is our privilege and responsibility to glorify God in our bodies and spirits which belong to Him. (I Corinthians 6:19, 20) Because of what the euangellion (the Gospel) means to us and has done for us we love the Gospel and we dedicate our lives to carrying its message to the ends of the earth and to making disciples of all nations, baptizing those who receive it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things that our Lord has commanded.” (Matthew 28:19)

This, in brief, is what it means to be an evangelical. This, in brief, is what the Gospel does for us and to us. To us the Gospel is everything; it is at the center of our Christian life and faith. It is why we are part of a church. It is why we function as churches. It is the foundation of all our counseling and all our ministry. Because of the Gospel we are motivated to say “Forbid it Lord that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God, All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood. Were the whole realm of nature mine; that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, shall have my life, my all.”

Note it well, we are a Fellowship of Independent Reformed churches because of the Gospel. We love it; we preach it; we rejoice in it; we are motivated by it. We live because of it and for it. We delight in being known as evangelicals for all the reasons that have previously been mentioned and many more. And we say, “To God be the glory, great things He has done! So loved He the World that He gave us His Son, who yielded His life an atonement for sin, and opened the life gate that we may go in. Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice! Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the people rejoice! O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son, and give Him the glory, great things He has done.”

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Vocation or Vacation?

A Biblical View of Work Ethics

by Greg Withrow

Based upon conversations and personal observations over two decades in the pastorate, I have compiled the following list of the three primary things most people would do if they came into a fortune: pay off all their bills, quit their jobs, and go on vacation, predominantly in that order. It seems that our bills represent our need to work, our job the source of work, and vacation the escape from work. In lieu of a fortune, most will simply begin to count the years to retirement. However, after retirement most will not have an unlimited income, or enough to do to keep busy, and without knowing how long they might live, no freedom to spend what they do have. In fact, it has been my experience with retirees that the closer they get to retirement, the less sure they are that they are ready for it.

It is a sad testimony that work has come to be seen as a necessary evil, an infringement upon our freedom to do as we please, and wealth the answer to all of our work-related problems. Is it then any wonder that the state lotteries and Las Vegas have become such popular vices of hope in such hopelessness? As we utilize modern flex hours on our jobs and rush toward our Friday weekend like the consumers we are, it becomes harder and harder as Christians to not get pulled into a world view of work that sets leisure as the ultimate goal. And without a strong theological, biblical base it is even harder to know what our view should be.

The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin have served the church well in this area. They developed a healthy, proper, biblical view in their generation when questions on this issue of work were as muddled as they are today. In their time, work was divided between that which was sacred and that which was secular or common. The Roman Catholic institution had set up very separate and distinct offices of the priesthood. These offices were referred to in Latin as the *vocare*, “calling,” from which we derive the English “vocation.” These were considered above all other occupations and the only ones that were directly connected to the religious life; all other occupations were simply earth-bound, man-oriented necessities of life.

Martin Luther was the first reformer to breach this long-held view. He discovered in 1 Peter 2:9 these words to the

church at large: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” From this and other Scriptures (which we will address shortly), Luther concluded that while there are distinctions within the ordained calling, these are more about ecclesiastical position and responsibility than value or standing before

God. Luther maintained that all true believers are members of the priesthood; therefore all work done by the church (i.e., its members) has priestly value and divine calling. Sacred or secular in nature, all are vocations or callings from God.

In Luther’s view, this calling is not limited to believers only, but because God is sovereign and providential, all work has a sense of

divine calling. The difference is that the church is aware of God at work in them, whereas the world sees only themselves and their circumstances, or luck, as they prefer to call it.

Luther writes, “We pray give us our daily bread, which he does. He does so, not directly as when he gave manna to the Israelites, but through the work of farmers and bakers.”(1) Luther referred to these providential acts of God in the vocations of men as “the mask of God.” He writes, “God who pours out his generosity on the just and the unjust, believer and unbeliever alike, hides himself in the ordinary social functions and stations of life, even the most humble. God himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.” (2)

To build upon this view of Luther, let us go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:15 we read, “And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” Here in the garden, in perfection with no curse, God created man to work, for vocation, not vacation. The garden was not the ideal retirement resort, nor a haven from work built for leisure. Work is not a curse upon man; we were created to work, and not to work stands in opposition to God’s creative design for us. Genesis 2:19-20 informs us that God gave Adam the task of naming the animals, no small undertaking, and it calls Eve Adam’s helpmeet. If the



garden was about doing nothing, what was it she was meant to help him do?

It is true that work in the garden was a fulfilling, unencumbered act, but it was still work. In Genesis 3:17-20, which records the judgment placed upon mankind after the fall, we do not find God declaring work to be a curse in and of itself. He has left work to be a part of the created purpose for man; the curse involves the fact that work will no longer be unencumbered. It will include burden and hindrance, which Genesis 3:19 calls “the sweat of your face.” Genesis 3:17 says, “cursed is the ground,” but we do not consider this a curse upon agriculture alone, because there is no profession that is not ultimately derived from the ground. For example, we work with wood or various metals, ores, or alloys. Our medicines come from plants growing in the earth. Our animals, from which come our clothing, shoes, and a great steak dinner, survive upon it. When God curses the ground He invariably spreads the curse into every conceivable type of work man may ever do, and sweating is not about the literal act of perspiring, but about the fact that work will take something out of us. It is to be energy-depleting.

To wish for or to strive for a life free from the burden and hindrance of work is to reach for what cannot, should not, and will not be in this life. Even redemption does not remove the temporal consequences of the curse upon mankind or our own sin, but only removes the eternal consequences of it and bestows the future hope of its end in and with Christ Jesus our Lord. Work must not be viewed as evil or something to be avoided, but as a way in which we serve God in His providence and fulfill our created purpose.

Work gives us the opportunity to keep what Christ called the “second greatest” commandment, “love thy neighbor.” The Swedish theologian Gustav Wingren stated, “God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does.” (3) This is what followers of Calvin called “the cultural mandate. (4) This means that we are not individuals in our vocations but a part of the greater whole. In fact, our vocations are to function in and through our culture. Christianity is not meant to be applied topically. In our vocations we are in the mix of life, not separate or exclusive. Here we can be salt and light. Where do we most often find the Lord Jesus in the Gospels but in the mix? In the cultural mandate, Luther’s milkmaid is loving her neighbor who needs milk, and so are the delivery man who brings it and the store who sells it, even if they do it unintentionally, when it is just a job to them.

Consider John 5:17 where the Lord Jesus responds to an accusation that he has violated the Sabbath work laws (an

issue outside the scope of this article). He replies, “My father has been working until now, and I have been working.” Imagine if God should at any time retire, step out of the business of providence, and set aside His sovereign role in all that exists. How long could the world last? Colossians 1:17 states that “by him all things consist,” so we must conclude that the world would cease at the moment He stopped working. (5)

Work in the truest sense reflects our working creator and is a real part of being in His image, since when we work, we are required to be rational, moral, and creative. Work is what we were created to do. Our vocation is a divine calling by which we serve God and love our neighbor. Through it, we affect our culture and reflect in image our creator God. Yes, it is often overwhelming and burdensome, and yes, we are human to desire that it not be so, but let it move us to long for a better country to come, not escape or alter the current one. Work is necessary but not evil, and no amount of money can buy us out of it. Remember, vacation is not a vocation, and even vacation is not always that good.

Notes

1. Gene Edward Veith, “The Doctrine of Vocation: How God Hides Himself in Human Work,” *Modern Reformation*, 8, no. 3 (May/June 1999), 4.
2. Veith, 5.
3. Veith, 5.
4. W. Robert Godfrey, “Neither Individualism nor Statism,” *Modern Reformation*, 8, no.3 (May/June 1999), 22.
5. God’s rest from work noted in Genesis 2:1-3 is a rest from His work of creation, not His work of sustaining. Colossians 1:17 states “by him all things consist,” which means “to hold together,” so obviously He continued to sustain while He rested. Even on the Sabbath, when the Israelites were commanded not to work, they could do any work that was necessary to sustain life. The Lord Jesus was accused of Sabbath-breaking for this very type of work in the picking of corn (Luke 6:1-5).

Reprinted with permission from the Business Reform magazine, a bimonthly magazine published by The Business Reform Foundation (www.businessreform.com), Ashland, Ohio.

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FIRE REGIONAL CONFERENCES

- New England -- Vermont, Sept. 18-20 (Hugh Diggins)
- ARK-LA-TX, Aug. 28-30 (Chris Hough)
- Deep South, Mississippi, Nov. 10, 11, 12 (Fri, Sat, Sun: Clark Lowery)
- Midwest -- Indiana, TBA (Joe Flatt)
- Southeast -- Atlanta, Aug. 21-23 (John Crotts)
- Northwest -- Washington, TBA (Bruce Ray)
- Canada, Ontario -- Oct. 15-17, 2007

Katrina Glory Amidst the Grief

by Eddie Exposito

You've heard it said that one should be careful for what one prays. Well, I certainly find that to be more truth now than just a cliché.

For years we have wanted to have a community outreach whereby we could meet our neighbors and bring to them the gospel of Christ but there were always a few unanswered questions such as, "What do we do?" and "How do we do it?" Don't get me wrong, we were never short on ideas (from Evangelism Explosion-type programs and random door-to-door knocking to giving out bags of veggies with church invite notes) but we were short on context. We always felt as if our efforts were contrived and manufactured and were lacking a true and real foundation upon which to build. "Hi, do you know Jesus?" just seemed to be a bit foreign and fake. We prayed for a better way.

We also prayed that the Lord would allow us to reach other denominations in the area by helping us to find a way of building friendships so that we could proclaim the high authority of the Word of God and the active gospel of Christ to a hyper-critical and tradition-laden church that is filled with more 'evangelifish' than exegetes.

God answered our prayers on August 29, 2005 by sending us Katrina.

Our entire lives were turned upside down by having the largest hurricane in American history rip through our town. We had just settled down to a sense of normalcy after over a year of intensity related to the grief of family defections and a pastoral disfellowship, just begun to establish new direction as new leaders of our church plant and had started to see our shell-shocked congregation begin to grow and recoup when unexpectedly ten thousand saw mills riding a tsunami leveled most of what we call home. Unknown to us, our outreach and gospel ministry had been launched, just not according to how we thought it would be. The situation proved Isaiah 55:8: His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways.

All twelve of our families were scattered throughout the southeast and even Canada

and it took days and weeks to find each other since communications were sketchy at best. Little by little Charles and I began to receive text messages, phone calls, and emails notifying us of everyone's status. As the news reports shot story after story and the rumors began to mount, I decided that we needed to get back to town from our evacuation and see the damage firsthand. When we got back to Slidell we found that most of the rumors were false yet the city had been devastated. Five of our church families' homes had been flooded by over three feet of

water and many had sustained wind damage. My own house had a tree on the bedroom roof and over twelve thousand dollars in additional troubles. The church building was intact and did not flood but the roof was ripped up and needed to be replaced. I bought a chainsaw and began to work.

Two Scripture verses came to mind constantly as I surveyed the wreckage – "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Romans 9:15) and "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes *it* to heart" (Ecclesiastes 7:2). Right before my eyes in vivid imagery was the gospel–judgment had come to the land (Job 36:31) and we as His people were to declare Christ as our only





hope. With the commitment of a few and no idea how to proceed we simply walked in faith and began.

I found myself living directly in the very lessons that I had taught and preached

about for over ten years--materialism, faith, trusting in Christ, provision, compassion, weeping with those who weep, helping the poor, feeding widows and orphans, clothing the sick, extending a hand to those who could not help themselves. Sovereign Grace Homeland Missions had been born. Amidst the grief I saw the glory of God as He began to show us the richness of His mercy and kindness through His people.

We have seen so many answers to prayer that I have lost count. We have been given so much that it is overwhelming. With only one fourth of our former congregation intact we've been given the opportunity to preach the gospel to more people in six months than we have in the past decade. We have been able through the

financial benevolence of the saints and the sending of many church work crews to give away thousands in groceries, help hundreds of families restore their homes and properties, and interconnect ourselves with not only our local community but also neighboring New Orleans.

Currently, we are completing the construction of a 1200 sq. ft. annex building on our property which will house our church office and permanent benevolence ministry and are prayerfully considering an indigenous community missions project called The Master's Workshop. The concept is to purchase a gutted home in our city to be used as a hub to train men who want to help in the rebuilding of homes while at the same time be disciplined for active community ministry. The concept is to create a close knit mentoring environment that incorporates the aspects of academic seminary training and study alongside the hands-on practical skills learning of a vocational school that has the heart for, and a high sense of, community evangelism. We already have one man who is highly skilled in cabinet making, basic carpentry, and dry wall work ready to join us. We believe the idea is solid but we want to make sure that we are following the Lord's lead and not creating our own.

Eddie Exposito is an elder at Sovereign Grace Fellowship in Slidell, Louisiana.

All that you need...

Praise God for His sovereignty in guiding His creation and directing all things according to His purpose. His providence is sure and steadfast to sustain His will and uphold all that He deem best. But as usual, I find myself struggling with God. As the late Ron Dunn said, most of his fights had not been with the devil, but with God. He said, "Jesus is all that you need, but you will not know it until He's all that you've got. Then when He's all that you've got, you'll know that He's all that you need."

August 29, 2005 was one of those days you wonder about, you pray and then wonder some more. Hurricane Katrina roared ashore devastating our area and changing our lives forever. So many people relocated, so many places now reside only in our memories, so much landscape altered from the beauty that it was to a tangled mess. It all seems like such a terrible mistake or a providence gone awry. But God has demonstrated His greatness again on a level that devastates the comprehension and stretches our faith to make us ashamed of our limited understanding of God.

The blessings that have poured out of this experience have been beyond anything we could have imagined. What charity, what communication, what friendship established, what open doors of ministry opportunities. Our small congregation has truly witnessed the wonders of God, both on a personal level and on a congregational level.

We have houses remodeled, a church roof replaced, and a counseling center established. We have been adopted by Tom Pennington and Countryside Bible Church in Dallas, we were given scholarship to the Shepherd's Conference with airfare and hotel furnished by John MacArthur as well as financial assistance for our church, we have met new friends from all over the U.S. calling to pray with us and offer assistance, we have been loved and held closely by our FIRE fellowship through phone calls, visits, monetary donations, and prayers.

We have been catapulted forward with the love of God through His people on a level we could not have imagined before. Yes, Katrina was devastating to all that we knew as normal, and yes, Katrina has been one of the greatest blessings we have ever known. Our faith has been stretched, our confidence deepened, and our praise to God raised to new heights. Praise God for His sovereignty in guiding His creation and directing all things according to His purpose.

Clark E. Lowery, Pastor
Cross Roads Baptist Church
Wiggins, Mississippi

Dear Friends:

What a blessing it is to share with you how our Lord used both Hurricane Katrina and you in our lives. Literally, less than forty-eight hours after celebrating our 25th anniversary as a church, God sent Katrina our way on Monday morning, August 29, 2005, at approximately 8:00 am. The next ten hours were simply unforgettable. They were marked with a minimum of hurricane force winds (75 miles an hour or higher) for that duration, with five of those hours having sustained winds of 110 miles an hour, including periodic gusts of 145-165 miles an hour.

As you can imagine, our town was devastated. Many of our characteristic trees (pine and oak) in the area were snapped like pretzels and uprooted, causing our beautiful town's landscape to be radically altered. As a result, many homes and businesses were destroyed and severely damaged by falling trees, heavy rain, and that awesome wind. We were all deeply humbled by this experience, and soberly reminded of God's absolute control over His creation and all of our lives. Psalm 135:6-7 affirms this truth: "Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses."

In God's mercy, this frowning providence taught us also that everything could have been a lot worse. In fact, we know our God ordained that both good and evil would

come about through this lesson about His omnipotence. Job 37:13 says God always has a great end in such events "whether for correction...or for love, he causes it to happen." One of God's many smiling providences that He



lavished upon us during this time of testing was your participation in our suffering and healing. Some our families were without running water for up to five days; many of us were without electricity for up to twelve days. Many of our homes and properties received great damage. Many of our members' businesses and places of employment were heavily affected. A number of our dear brethren have lost regular income, some significantly so. But through your faithful prayers, generous giving, and physical assistance, our needs have not

only been well cared for, but many who lost income have been greatly helped and continue to be amazed by God's ongoing provision through you.

We praise God for you, His Body, that has so encouraged us during these past seven months of recuperation and reconstruction! We thank God for how He has so blessed FIRE in its youth, and anticipate many happy years of Gospel proclamation with you!

With love in Christ,
Pastor Jerry Marcellino, on behalf of
the leadership and brethren of
Audubon Drive Bible Church,
Laurel, Mississippi

Some words of thanksgiving from a few of our members here at ADBC:

"Thank you so much for your loving and considerate generosity toward us. What an encouragement!"
– Steve and Debbie Armour

"The money received from the FIRE churches blessed us, helping us to restore what was lost...your sacrificial

kindness melted our hearts and encouraged us to persevere in Christ." – Scott and Beth Wiggins

"We praise God for the FIRE churches with their willing, servant hearts and their generous, giving spirits every time we hear the acronym FIRE. May God bless them abundantly in every way." – Chris and Theresa Hughes



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About FIRE

FIRE seeks to assist local churches in projects and activities such as:

- sending full-time missionaries
- short-term missions projects
- church planting
- caring for the needs of the poor
- publishing books, pamphlets, tapes and educational materials
- family camps and conferences
- pulpit exchanges
- regional and national conferences

To request an application form or for more information, call 1-800-405-3788 or visit us online at www.firefellowship.org.