

Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic?

By

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December 2006

Recently a letter was sent by a number of pastors asking for a return to the three-fold cord.¹ From the references in the letter referencing the three-fold cord, it is clear the series, “Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic” is descriptive of the following phrases: “Lutherans who love the Lord and each other,” or “nature of our life together in this Association.” In this usage, these words in series appear to be coordinated adjectives, because they appear to belong to the same class. Thus these adjectives should be descriptively independent of the others. But are they really? What happens if you change the order of the adjectives in the series? You will note that the meaning changes in ways both distinct and subtle. “Charismatic, Evangelical, Orthodox” means something different than “Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic.” Thus Orthodox limits Evangelical, and “Orthodox Evangelical” limits Charismatic. So although at first glance these terms appear to belong to the same class, in reality they do not. This is a special case: non-coordinated adjectives punctuated as though they were coordinated adjectives. All the words in the series are therefore limiter adjectives, in that they each limit or restrict the meaning of the following adjectives and the noun that follows.

The meaning of the phrase “Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic” is grammatically precise. First, we are Orthodox. Second, we are those Orthodox who are also Evangelical. Third, we are those Orthodox Evangelicals who are also Charismatic. The phrase means, necessarily, that we are all Charismatic, but that understanding is limited by the preceding qualifiers. Ultimately, this comes down to the definition of a Charismatic---which should be defined by the scriptures and our Statement on the Holy Spirit and His Gifts. As we have defined our pneumatology in a manner we can all agree to, we could say we are all charismatic without being Charismatic. But that would be incorrect, as the original and scriptural meaning of the word has recently been transformed.

In the 21st century, the word Charismatic has a very specific and historically unique meaning. The term has been adopted by people and movements who have twisted it inside out and dramatically altered its meaning. Originally the word referred to the free gift of God, the substance of Grace. (Gift, *χαρισμα*, *charisma*, *khar'-is-mah*; Rom 1:11; 6:23; 11:29; 12:6: from Grace, *χαρις*, *charis*, *khar'-ese*; Rom 1:5, 7; 3:24; 4:4, 16; 5:2, 15, 17,20-21; 6:1, 14-15; 11:5-6; 12:3, 6; 15:15; 16:20, 24.) Today, if you knowingly and intentionally use that word as a descriptor, you mean by it something very different than God’s free gift of justification by grace through faith in Christ. Today, the primary use of the term is to describe a third article Christianity. The use of the word charismatic in theological treatises is therefore always limited and precise. Its use is fully and carefully qualified, thus making sure that no one can misunderstand the meaning. But in the 21st century, orthodox and evangelical theologians generally prefer other theological terms instead. But of course if you *are* Charismatic, if you actually *subscribe* to a third article Christianity, then of course you will use the word in a free and unqualified manner.

Given the scriptural definition of the term Charismatic, it is clear that it has reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus the term Evangelical refers to a people who are identified with an unqualified adherence to the Evangel, to the Gospel message. The term Charismatic refers to the substance of that message. Thus using the term Evangelical as a modifier for the term Charismatic is redundant, for the Evangel (Gospel) is the good news of the free gift (charisma) poured out upon us through His grace (charis).

This description of what “Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic” means is not the common understanding within The AALC. The three-fold description of “Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic” is commonly referred to as the three-fold cord. These are supposedly three theological strands that have been woven together to form The AALC. Depending on how it is described, these could represent three emphases, three groups, or three parties. But that is clearly not the plain, grammatical meaning of the phrase. Thus the three-fold cord as a descriptor of The AALC is wrong, because it clearly can not be a synonym for the phrase “Orthodox, Evangelical, Charismatic”.

The phrase is wrong theologically, it is wrong grammatically, and it is wrong historically. The historic phrase was “Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical.” The removal of the word “Catholic” indicates that whatever the three-fold cord claimed to be, it was something new, and not part of that which is true in every place and in every time. The change in the phrase, the rejection of the catholicity of the faith, indicates a love of and longing for theological innovation, for something new, fresh, and different, for an abandonment of history, of tradition, of apostolicity.

If we are truly as orthodox as we claim to be, if we are truly part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, we should be deeply suspicious and troubled by theological innovation, by departures from historic categories and terms with their well-defined meaning, and by the use of theological terms in fresh, new, and ill-defined ways. St. Basil the Great wrote in the fourth century, "All those whose soundness of character leads them to hold the dignity of antiquity to be more honourable than mere new-fangled novelty...have preserved the tradition of their fathers unadulterated...It is, on the contrary, they who are surfeited with the familiar and the customary, and arrogantly assail the old as stale, who welcome innovation, just as in dress your lovers of display always prefer some utter novelty to what is generally worn" (St. Basil the Great, *De Spiritu Sanctu*, VII.16). Thus St. Basil says that it is the arrogant and the lovers of display who prefer theological innovation to tradition. (This passage referred to theological innovation specifically, by the way.)

We Lutherans are second article Christians. Our justification and sanctification are won by the cross. It is a free gift (charisma) of God's Grace (charis). By means of that free gift we die to sin daily and are raised daily in the waters of baptism. It is the cross that provides us the power for living. Christianity is based on the objective acts and promises of God, made apart from us, and made effective by means entirely independent of us. As Dr. Senkbeil says: the more objective the basis of my salvation, the more effective my subjective experience of that salvation. Thus, while we acknowledge that the Spirit may move when and where He wills, we do not seek after signs and wonders. As our Lord himself said, “A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign” (Mark 16:4). Nor do we seek not after the Spirit. Rather, like the Greeks, “We would see Jesus” (John 12:21). Faith can never get enough of Jesus, for like the Samaritan cleansed of

leprosy, faith always wants more. And not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, we receive Jesus through the marks of the church: in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments. In these, too, the Holy Spirit is at work calling, enlightening, sanctifying, and preserving us, always pointing us to the cross of Christ.

Sir, we would see Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ The so-called three-fold cord (Orthodox, Evangelical, and Charismatic) was never an official description of The AALC. It was, however, an unofficial description of the position of the leadership of The AALC at that time. This unofficial description even became part of the Colloquy process. Colloquy Question #17, found in the AALC's 2005 Manual for Policies and Procedures, reads as follows: "Describe your understanding and attitude regarding Charismatic, Evangelical and Orthodox positions in The AALC." [*Emphasis in the original*]