
The True Meaning of *Evangelical*: Lessons from Winston Persaud

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In the past three years, in my work with the Commission for a Renewed Lutheran Church, we had many conversations about the word *evangelical*, and the name “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” There are strong feelings about both, with plenty of people feeling like the ELCA should change its name and ditch *evangelical* altogether.

We heard from many people that the word *evangelical* has negative connotations, as it conjures up visions of self-righteous, judgmental Christians, talking down to/arguing with/threatening other people, demanding that they repent and believe — in order to avoid going to hell — all in the name of sharing the good news. Who wants to be associated with that?

Personally, I don’t agree with the argument that the word is irreparably compromised, but I am sympathetic. I imagine most, if not all, of us have seen or heard Christians on a public street corner with signs calling for people to repent or burn — as an extreme example — or have been turned off by the “my way is the only way” attitude of some Christians around specific beliefs and practices. If you have ever had to say, “I’m Christian, but not *that* kind of Christian,” you know what I mean.

But, at the same time, many people — and I am one of them — understand that, at its core, *evangelical* points to something fundamental to the Christian faith: sharing the good news with others about the gospel of Jesus Christ. (And here, I’d like to give a shout out to a new book from my colleague Troy Trofgruben, *Bearing Witness in Acts and Today*, which uses the language of “bearing witness” to describe this activity.) Certainly, there is work needed to redeem *evangelical* and reclaim it from those who would wield it as a weapon of condemnation and exclusion, but surely the work is worth it to embrace an identity that is both Christ-centered and expansive — sharing Christ’s love lavishly, joyfully, and boldly.

Learning evangelical

All of this is by way of introduction to the theme of this article. In what follows, I want to share what I learned from one of my beloved professors and mentors, the Rev. Dr. Winston Persaud, about being *evangelical*, and living out that identity with confidence, humility, and authenticity. There are four characteristics that Winston embodied in what was a deeply *evangelical* life, characteristics that he both taught and lived out in his vocation as a pastor and teaching theologian of the church. First, for Winston,

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evangelical means trusting in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and being patient. Second, *evangelical* means actively and regularly praying for others by name and believing in the power of prayer. Third, *evangelical* means being open-minded and open-hearted with those who have different beliefs, and no belief. And finally, *evangelical* means living intentionally and explicitly in the name of Jesus. I will elaborate on each of these traits in detail.

Trusting in the timing of the Holy Spirit

One of the most unfortunate characteristics of many conservative Christians is their manufactured sense of urgency: hurry up and change your ways or else; the end of the world is coming, where will you end up? When you turn the gospel into law — something that humans are responsible for, something that believers need to do — then time is not on your side, and every moment without a conversion is a lost moment, every day someone doesn’t accept Jesus and get baptized is a failure.

By contrast, over and against those who stress the urgency of converting people “before it’s too late,” true evangelical Christians know that the Holy Spirit takes the time she takes, and it is not our job to rush her. In Martin Luther’s explication of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, he states, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with [her] gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” This statement emphasizes that I myself do not convert anyone or bring anyone to faith — none of us can do that. Instead, faith is a gift of God, and through and through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, faith comes to each of us in God’s good time; we can count on that.

One of the most significant ways Winston taught this truth to his students was through the loving stories he told about the life and witness of his dear mother, Basant Gossai Peraud. She passed away in 2020, after spending the last years of her life living with Winston and May in Dubuque. Hindu by birth, she had a full, rich life in Guyana, marked by hospitality, warmth, and generosity of spirit to a large circle of family, friends, and neighbors. When she came to Dubuque, and became well-known to, and well-loved by, the Wartburg Seminary community, she began attending Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, where she was warmly welcomed both into Bible study and into the women's quilting group. In 2008, as Winston described it, "led by the Holy Spirit, Basant gave her heart and life to Jesus Christ, whom she had experienced in dreams of welcome, and was baptized on 18 October." Was this an example of coming to Jesus Christ "late"? Winston never described it that way or thought of it that way. Instead, he celebrated the faith of his mother that was obvious throughout her entire life, and he celebrated the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through her — in ways mysterious, profound, and generative. Being evangelical means trusting in the timing of the Holy Spirit and believing in her transformative power.

Winston reiterated this lesson in the classroom through his own active listening and affirming his students' call stories, and their varied paths to seminary, some of which were long, complicated, and winding. He encouraged each one of us to value the different experiences we had had and to be confident that God would use these experiences to enhance our ministry, particularly and especially those that might have seemed tangential or unrelated to public ministry at the time.

The power of prayer

Second, those who are *evangelical* pray for others — publicly, warmly, and lovingly. And, to be very clear, the prayers are not for others to do something I want them to do — like believe and be baptized — but instead, the prayers are for God to do something, to work in their lives for good: to bring them healing, peace, and grace; to give them strength and courage; to give them wisdom and grace. As a Christian, I pray for others to enfold them in God's arms, to bring them into God's care, and to comfort and encourage them with God's presence.

I do not have enough fingers to count how often in my time as president that Winston stopped me in the hall or came to my office and said, "I want you to know that we prayed for you today." (And it was always "we" — Winston and his spouse, May, were quite a team.) And I never, ever felt that the prayers were for me to do anything differently — or for me to do anything at all. Instead, Winston wanted me to know that, in prayer, he was bringing me before God and inviting God's presence and peace to be upon me. It was an act of pure Christian love. If you have ever been prayed for publicly by name, you know how powerful and moving it is to feel others' care for you in that way. Winston showed me that one of the most important characteristics of being *evangelical* is sharing the love of Christ in prayer with others.

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Additionally, prayer was a regular part of all Winston's classes, and Winston taught his students that, as theologians, our work was not first and foremost to talk about God, but to talk with God (and to listen to God, of course, as well). The classic phrase from Anselm, "faith seeking understanding" perfectly describes Winston's own practice of systematic theology, and the way he taught this discipline to countless classes of students. Throughout the process of reading different theologians and learning how to reflect on different theological arguments, Winston never failed to emphasize that this work was not purely an intellectual exercise, but to build up the church for the sake of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world. From Winston I learned that systematic theology is a prayerful discipline, one that involves one's full being, and the fullness of one's relationship to God.

An ecumenical and interfaith identity

Third, Winston taught me that being *evangelical* is being ecumenically minded and inter-religiously curious. His was an inclusive, not exclusive, Christian faith. When I came to Wartburg Theological Seminary as a student in 1992, I was already deeply interested in other religious traditions, specifically Buddhism and Hinduism, and I knew that in one way or another, I wanted to include interreligious engagement in my seminary education. I was very fortunate that my two primary theological mentors at Wartburg, Winston and his dear friend Duane Priebe, encouraged me enthusiastically in this interest, as they, too, had made interreligious engagement a part of their theological scholarship and teaching.

For both Winston and Duane, other religious traditions are not a threat to Christians, but an opportunity for learning and growth: for witnessing how other people experience God, for gaining a new perspective on one's own beliefs and practices, and for sharing with others how God has revealed Godself in Jesus Christ. Winston often talked about his early life in Guyana, which was marked with regular interreligious encounters, especially with Muslims and Hindus. His literal (not figurative) neighbors were people of other religious traditions, and together, they were one community, one family.

And, in terms of ecumenical relationships, Winston always has been deeply interested in ecumenical theology, and in ecumenical relationships, both personally and professionally. Part of the

history of Wartburg Seminary includes deep relationships with the Catholic Aquinas Institute of Theology (now relocated to St. Louis) and the University of Dubuque Presbyterian Seminary. These three schools formed a consortium in the 1960s, one of the first of its kind, and shared faculty, students, and programs. Winston participated in this consortium both as a student and a faculty member; and throughout his scholarly career, he was a leading proponent of ecumenical partnerships in Dubuque. Most recently, he was one of the primary organizers of a significant ecumenical worship service and program, which occurred at Wartburg Seminary in October 2024, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Lutherans and Catholics in 1999. Winston is well-known for his engagement in global Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues, and his seminary course offerings regularly included theology electives that focused on ecumenical relationships.

Again, too often, conservative Christians act like the Christian faith is under siege by non-Christians (or even Christians who don't believe and act the "right" way), and the "true faith" needs to be aggressively defended against anyone with differing views. This attitude regards other believers — again, certainly non-Christian believers, but even Christian believers of a different stripe — as enemies of the gospel, or at the very least, suspicious people to keep one's eye on and hold at arm's length. This disposition of mistrust closes off experiences of divine revelation, interfaith friendships, and holy envy that promote not only personal religious growth but also greater peace in communities and societies.

In the name of Jesus

Finally, the last characteristic of being *evangelical* that I learned from Winston is to actively and joyfully use and share the name of Jesus. Winston was well-known among the faculty for regularly lifting up the name of Jesus in prayer, on student forms, and in any context where we were discussing the mission and vision of Wartburg. Winston's Christ-centered orientation was particularly evident at the retirement celebration we had for Winston and May at Wartburg. Repeatedly, speakers lauded not Winston in and of himself, but Winston's embodiment of the gospel of Jesus Christ, his commitment to the proclamation of Jesus, and his deep, deep faith in Christ, which is the foundation for his personal and professional life.

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offended or angry; and sometimes, frankly, Christians are embarrassed to use the name of Jesus, wondering what people will think of them — maybe they will be laughed at, or dismissed. But Winston didn't care about any of that, and frankly, I can imagine that he would regard the whole idea of being unsure or embarrassed about using the name of Jesus as puzzling. For Winston, there was nothing but joy and comfort in using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and nothing but confidence that sharing Christ's peace and blessing would bring calm and assurance into any situation.

An evangelical life

The God Christians worship is known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus: the face of God is seen most clearly in the face of the crucified one; the love of God is seen most clearly in the love of the one who welcomed sinners and ate with them; the mercy of God is seen most clearly in the one who healed lepers and raised the dead. The Christian hope is not just in any God, but in the God of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit; being explicit about this good news is both the responsibility and the privilege of the Christian.

So, as I continue to talk with others about what it means to be *evangelical* — and why that name matters for the Lutheran Church as a whole, and Lutheran Christians individually, I continue to give thanks to God for the life, ministry, and friendship of Winston Persaud, who, perhaps more than anyone else I have ever known, manifests the very best of an evangelical life.