

OBSERVATIONS ON THE THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

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The formal recognition of the Armenian Evangelical Church was granted by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Medjid on November 27, 1850. The first Armenian Evangelical Church, however, was established at Pera, Istanbul (then Constantinople), four years earlier, on July 1, 1846.

Armenian Evangelicalism is basically a religious movement representing both the tradition of Protestant Reformation (and the later spiritual renewal movements of Pietism and Puritanism) and the Armenian Apostolic Church. The early Armenian Evangelicals claimed that they followed «the doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ» and obeyed the Gospel, and consequently were «members of this one, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.» They insisted that, like their Mother Church, they «received the Nicene Creed of the Church... and could be considered as regular members of the National Church by simply receiving the ancient (Nicene) Creed.⁽¹⁾ They objected that the «New

1 *The Missionary Herald* (Boston: A.B.C.F.M., XLII, June, 1846), p. 194., also Stephan Eutudjian, *Dzakoumn Yev Entatzn Avedaranaganootyan Ee Hais* (The Rise and Course of Evangelicalism Among Armenians), (Constantinople: Arax Press, 1914), pp. 169-173.

Creed» Patriarch Matteos Chooajian (the Patriarch who excommunicated them from the church) had «invented» in 1846 was contrary to Holy Scriptures, and consequently, that they could not subscribe to it. They stated that the «true foundation and perfect rule of Christain faith is the Holy Scriptures alone.»⁽²⁾

The «Confession of Faith» versus the «New Creed»

In the course of time, the Armenian Evangelical Church adopted a great deal of protestant teachings, principles, and theology. These imported influences did not touch the Nicene Creed, adherence to which was emphatically reaffirmed, but they included a declaration of freedom of conscience and a number of affirmations to express the Church's views of the truth on points not explicitly covered by the «ancient Creed.» These affirmations at first were formulated by the Armenian Evangelicals in response to Patriarch Chooajian's «New Creed.» They were hammered out by men who were on the firing line. In facing accusations and excommunications, Evangelicals were forced to think out and declare the implications of their convictions. After issuing a bill of excommunication against priest Vertanes on January 12, 1846,⁽³⁾ the Patriarch had demanded that the Evangelicals sign the «Paper of Recantation» declaring that they were «deceived by the wicked enticements of Satan»⁽⁴⁾ and renouncing all further communication with the missionaries. Moreover, the Patriarch had warned all the Armenian Apostolic churches in Turkey to «beware of the seducing and impious followers of the false doctrines of the modern sectaries» (i.e. the Evangelicals).⁽⁵⁾

2 *The Missionary Herald, Ibid.*, p. 195.

3 *The Missionary Herald*, June, 1846, pp. 196-197; also Avedis Berberian, *Badmootiun Haiotz: Sgsial 1772 Minchev 1860 Hantertz Garevor Deghegootiamp yev Jamanagakrootiamp Yerevelee Eeratz* (Armenian History: Begining 1772 to 1860. Along with Important Reports and Chronology Concerning Eventful Happenings). (Constantinople: Boghos Kirishjian and Co., 1871), p. 112.

4 O.G.H. Dwight, *Christianity Revived in the Near East* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), pp. 327-328.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 329-331.

Thus, the first authoritative statement of faith by the Armenian Evangelicals, the «Confession of Faith,» was prepared in response to the so-called «New Creed» formulated by Patriarch Matteos Choochajian. The «New Creed» composed of nine articles, spelling out the position of the then Armenian Apostolic Church, was presented to the Evangelicals as a sign of orthodoxy.⁽⁶⁾ It dealt with such important issues as salvation, the church, the sacraments, Apostolic Succession, the saving ordinance of the church, The Virgin Birth, the intercession of saints, the creeds, the rites and rituals and the hierarchy of the church.⁽⁷⁾

The «Confession of Faith,» composed of twelve articles, was both a response to the Patriarch's «New Creed» and a statement of the theological position of the newly organized Armenian Evangelical Church. It reaffirmed some important beliefs common to all Christian Churches, as set forth in the Scriptures, and the doctrinal decisions of the early General Councils. It reaffirmed, for instance, the Apostolic and Catholic belief in the existence of «one only living and true God, the Creator, Preserver, and Governor of the Universe;»⁽⁸⁾ the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost as One God;⁽⁹⁾ the work of the Holy Spirit; the reality of sin; atonement; forgiveness and redemption; the existence of eternal life;⁽¹⁰⁾ Christ's role as Head of the Church; the resurrection of the dead and the promise of eternal life.⁽¹¹⁾

The «Confession of Faith» rejected some important concepts, beliefs, and practices as presented in the Patriarch's «New Creed.» It rejected justification by faith and good works⁽¹²⁾ and it affirmed

6 G.H. Chopourian, *The Armenian Evangelical Reformation: Causes and Effects* (New York: Armenian Missionary Association of America, 1972), pp. 32.

7 Dwight, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-331; also Eutudjian, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-156.

8 «Confession of Faith», *A.B.C.F.M.*, 1846, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

12 Dwight, «New Creed», *op. cit.*, p. 329.

that justification and salvation are by faith alone; that salvation is God's free gift; that it cannot be earned or purchased by any kind of meritorious works, such as «fasting, alms, penances, or other deeds of our own.»⁽¹³⁾

The Confession of Faith rejected the concept that there are Seven Sacraments — (Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Communion, Ordination, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction) — and that they have saving power. It claimed that there are two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion) «the former being the seal of the covenant, and the sign of the purifying operation of the Holy Spirit, and the token of admission into the visible church;» and the latter, «a perpetual memento of Christ's atoning love, and a pledge of union and communion with Him and with all true believers.»⁽¹⁴⁾ It rejected the Apostolic Church's belief that baptism, auricular confession, and penance are saving ordinances to be supplemented after death by the mass, alms, and prayers.⁽¹⁵⁾ It maintained that salvation is through the grace of God by faith. Faith represents man's willingness to be saved on God's terms. It rejected veneration of images and of the relics of saints as well as devotion to the Virgin Mary.⁽¹⁶⁾ It affirmed the biblical view that besides God, no other being is to be worshipped and adored, and that «each person in the sacred Trinity is worthy of our worship, which to be acceptable, must be offered through no other mediation than that of Jesus Christ alone; and that the use of relics, pictures, images of any sort, in any act of worship, and of the intercession of saints, is directly contrary to the Scriptures.»⁽¹⁷⁾

A careful study of Patriarch Choohajian's «New Creed» reveals the great influence of Roman Catholic theology in his theological thinking. Melikset Vartabed Mooradian rightly points out that

13 «Confessions of Faith», *A.B.C.F.M.*, *op.cit.*, p. 240.

14 *Ibid.*

15 «New Creed», Dwight, *op.cit.*, p. 330.

16 «Confession of Faith», *op.cit.*, p. 240.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

the Patriarch in his defense of the Armenian Apostolic Church against Protestantism justifies his position in terms of Roman Catholic beliefs quite alien to Armenian Apostolic theology.⁽¹⁸⁾

Guide for Members of the Evangelical Church

With the passage of the time, the Armenian Evangelical Church was greatly influenced by Protestant theology. Within a decade of her inception, she had already entered the mold of American Protestantism. Thus, the very same Armenian Evangelicals who had told the American missionaries, «we do not need to adopt any foreign dominational polity... but wish to restore our Mother Church to her former Apostolic orthodoxy,»⁽¹⁹⁾ became obliged in 1855 to adopt a constitution and catechism entitled «Guide for Members of the Evangelical Church» prepared by the American Protestant missionaries.⁽²⁰⁾

The *Guide for Members of the Evangelical Church*, besides representing by-laws of the early Armenian Evangelical Church, was indeed a guidebook to Evangelical theology. It is one of the earliest documents which sets forth the important tenets that distinguish Evangelicals from Apostolics. One of its purposes was to state in simple terms the basic convictions and affirmations of Evangelicalism. It also stated some of the beliefs and practices that are alien to Evangelicalism.

The *Guide for Members of the Evangelical Church* presents the following distinctive affirmations of the Evangelicalism which, then as now, are the basic principles of Protestantism; namely, that a man is justified by faith alone without works; a man's salvation depends entirely on divine grace; the Bible is the only Christian norm and practice; all believers are priests not only on behalf of themselves but also on behalf of each other.

18 Melikset Vartabed Mooradian, *Badmootune Hayastanyatz Soorp Yegeghetzvoh* (History of the Armenian Apostolic Church) (Jerusalem: St. James Monastery Press, 1872), p. 616.

19 Eutudjian, *op.cit.*, p. 167.

20 *Arachnort Avedaranagan Yegeghetzvoh Antamneroun* (Guide for Members of the Evangelical Church), (Constantinople: A.B. Churchill, 1855).

The book explains the nature and the meaning of the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Furthermore, it deals with the other five «lesser sacraments» which the ancient churches accept, but Protestantism does not. It criticizes the Armenian Apostolic Church for not separating Scripture and Tradition.⁽²¹⁾

In this early Evangelical document one can clearly see the strong theological influence of the American missionaries. Most of these missionaries were graduates of Andover Theological Seminary who, in turn, were greatly influenced by the new theology of Hopkins and Jonathan Edwards — a theology which made much of a personal religious experience, of a new birth through trust in Christ, commitment to Him; it sought to win nominal Christians to an acceptance of the Gospel; it advocated a revivalistic kind of preaching. This was theology of anti-celibacy, anti-ceremonialism, anti-monasticism, and anti-episcopacy.⁽²²⁾ The *Guide for Members of the Evangelical Church* is a reflection of the American missionaries' thinking. The life principles of Evangelicalism is described here to be the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through the merits of Jesus Christ, by means of living faith. One of the major thrusts of the book is to define Evangelicalism and to insist that the Armenian Evangelical Church is a Scriptural Church and that the sufficiency and unerring certainty of the Bible is the only norm of all-saving knowledge. Here there is an emphasis on evangelism; an urgency to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The Evangelical person is urged to take seriously the «great commission,» namely, to preach the Gospel to everybody.⁽²³⁾

Theological Diversity among Armenian Evangelicals

In the course of time, Armenian Evangelicalism became diversified, to the extent that today the Armenian Evangelical Church covers a broad spectrum of theological thought all the way from conservative fundamentalism to liberal modernism. Within the Arme-

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 120-132.

22 Chopourian. *op.cit.*, pp. 21-22.

23 *Arachnort Avedaranagan Yegeghetzvoh Antamneroun*, *op.cit.*, pp. 30-105.

nian Evangelical Church there are differences in theological perspective, belief, and practice. This is so because, like other Protestant Churches, she recognizes the rights and liberties of the individual mind. The right of private judgment is one of the cardinal principles of Protestantism. It is this right of interpreting the Scriptures, for instance, that has produced great diversity of views. Besides, the Armenian Evangelical Church, like other Protestant Evangelical Churches, has no general ecclesiastical council to pronounce any religious or doctrinal matter as binding upon all Armenian Evangelicals. Nor does it have, nor likes to have, any central authority to enforce conformity or to exercise discipline upon dissenters.

One of the most obvious facts about the Armenian Evangelical Church as a whole has been, and still is, her theological diversity. The right of private judgment in religious matters, the tolerant attitude toward dissenters, and the general religious climate of Armenian Evangelicalism have favored the rise, and in some cases the growth of a number of religious groups and a variety of theological thought. Thus, in Turkey, for example, the Episcopalians organized their little community in the early 1860's; then, the Disciples of Christ in 1879; the Baptists in 1881; the English Quakers in 1883.⁽²⁴⁾ In the Middle East, the Church of God was one of the first foreign churches to organize an Armenian Protestant church in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century, under the leadership of Rev. Garabed Ouzounian of Alexandria, Egypt.⁽²⁵⁾ The Plymouth Brethren began Armenian Brethren churches in the 1930's, first in Aleppo, Syria, then, in Beirut, Lebanon, and in Palestine.⁽²⁶⁾ The Nazarene Church established a strong Armenian Protestant church in Damascus, Syria,

24 Leon Arpee, *A History of Armenian Christianity* (New York: Armenian Missionary Association of America, 1946), pp. 75-76.

25 Dicran H. Kherlopian, *Voskemadian* (Golden Anniversary. A History of the Armenian Evangelical Movement and the Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East). (Beirut: Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East, 1950), Vol. 1, p. 471.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 430.

in 1946, under the leadership of the Reverend Nerses Sarian.⁽²⁷⁾ Most of these churches were shortlived; they were eventually absorbed by, or combined with, the larger Armenian Evangelical Church.

Of all religious groups that worked among Armenian Evangelicals, however, none has left a greater impact than the Armenian Brethren Church. It was born as a spiritual movement in the larger Armenian Evangelical Movement. It began in 1924 with Bible study and prayer meetings in Emmanuel Armenian Evangelical Church in Aleppo, Syria. Its founder and moving force was an Armenian Evangelical layman by the name of Abraham Seferian. In less than two decades the Brethren Church branched out in other cities and countries of the Middle East and fragmented the small Armenian Evangelical churches in such places as Aleppo, Syria; Beirut, Lebanon; Cairo, Egypt; and South America and the United States. Undoubtedly, the devotion and evangelistic zeal of the members of the Brethren churches was instrumental in communicating the basic tenets of the Christian faith to the ignorant. The greater simplicity of their fellowships and churches, their organization, and in most cases, their smaller demands in terms of education gave them a flexibility which sometimes Armenian Evangelical churches could not equal. But their religious exclusiveness and fanaticism became detrimental to the growth and consolidation of the Armenian Evangelical Church. Evangelicalism, which had advocated religious liberty, was terribly compromised by their attitude in a critical period of Armenian diasporan life when Armenian Evangelical churches were seriously engaged in the task of reconstruction. Instead of complementing a diversity that bred tolerance and flexibility, the Brethren churches accused the Armenian Evangelical Church of liberalism, and often used the withdrawal of love as punishment against the Armenian Evangelical constituency. At times they even quarreled among themselves over trifles, and vilified one another for alleged adherence to tenets which have never been either precisely defined or adequately understood.

A classic example of these theological quarrels was the debate between two Armenian Brethren Church leaders, Brother Abraham Seferian and Rev. Minas Bozoklian, in 1930's over the issue of Christian sanctification. Seferian was an advocate of the concept of «Chris-

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 456-458.

tian perfection» and taught that after one's sanctification and baptism of the Holy Spirit, sin is completely eradicated from one's life. Bozoklian disagreed. As a result of this controversy, there was a split in the Armenian Brethren community which lasted until the death of Bozoklian. The Armenian Brethren movement also created mass emotionalism and gave rise to some charismatic groups such as the Pentecostal and Full-Gospel fellowships which are inclined to be separatistic.

The separation of the Armenian Brethren community had another detrimental effect. It made the leadership of the Armenian Evangelical Union of Syria and Lebanon oversensitive and apprehensive about doctrinal issues. The spiritual leaders of A.E.U.S.L. did not want to be accused of liberalism. «Liberalism» or «modernism» was the worst accusation that the Armenian Brethren Church as well as other conservative-fundamentalist elements were able to make against the Armenian Evangelical Church.

Suddenly some of its ministers in positions of leadership assumed the role of defenders of orthodoxy. They began openly to criticize their only seminary, the School of Religion, for its liberal theological training. The prestigious dean of the school, Prof. Loutfi Levonian, came under attack. But the greatest scapegoat of all became a young scholar and saintly minister, the Reverend Hampartzoum Hampartzoumian of Cairo, Egypt, a graduate of the School of Religion and an intimate friend of Dean Levonian, who, for his liberal theological stance, was «excommunicated» from the Union. As a result, the Armenian Evangelical Church of Cairo was split. The followers of Pastor H. H. Hampartzoumian organized their own church which they named the Armenian Evangelical Congregational Church. Because of doctrinal controversies, the latter was forced into isolation and was excluded from the Near East Armenian Evangelical Union until 1961. This episode constitutes one of the saddest pages of the Armenian Evangelical Church.

Within the Armenian Evangelical Movement, the spirit of theological individualism is manifest in the fundamentalist and conservative positions of Confessional churches as well as in the liberal position of some other Armenian Evangelical churches.

In between these two extremes, there are many Armenian Evangelical churches and individuals who emphasize the principles of the Reformation in response to theological liberalism on the one hand

and fundamentalism on the other. This lack of unanimity and observable diversities are conspicuous in a number of important areas. The confessional churches of Armenian Evangelicalism (primarily the Armenian Evangelical churches in France, South America, and the Soviet Union), for instance, like all Protestant Fundamentalist Churches, do place great emphasis on what they consider the five «Fundamental» doctrines of the Christian faith: inerrancy of the Scriptures, the virgin Birth, the bodily resurrection of the Christ, the Second Coming, and substitutionary atonement.⁽²⁸⁾ They criticize the liberals for holding too shallow a view of sin and «a false optimism about man's likeness to God and the possibility of steady progress of civilization.»⁽²⁹⁾ Their basic idea is that their churches should consist of only regenerate persons. They stress the personal experience of conversion and the mandate to evangelize others. In reaction to the one-dimensional social-Gospel of liberals, they emphasize a one-dimensional personal Gospel.⁽³⁰⁾ At the other end of the spectrum, the liberal Armenian Evangelicals accuse the conservatives of identifying religion with creeds. They insist that the uniqueness of Christ is not to be found in some metaphysical doctrine about Jesus or in some miraculous origin such as the Virgin Birth.⁽³¹⁾ For them Christian ethics take a central place. The acid test of religion is not what a man believes but «in as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these.»⁽³²⁾

All Armenian Evangelicals believe in the inspiration of the Bible. They look upon the Bible as a library of inspired books which

28 See, James M. Malloch, «Fundamentalism», *A Practical Church Dictionary*. (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1964), p. 196.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

30 Kenneth L. Wilson, «Evangelicals: How Do They Live», *A. D. United Church of Christ*, May 1981, Vol. X, No. 5, p. 22.

31 H.H. Hampartzoumian, *Ov, Yev Oor Eh Asdvads* (Who and Where is God) (Cairo: Houssaper Press, 1961), pp. 88-90; Loutfi Levonian, «What is Religion», *Religious Questions: Eight Studies* (Beirut: Shnorhokian Press, 1944), pp. 90-96.

32 A.A. Bedikian, *Jrak* (Lamp), second edition, (New York: M.M. Chamalian publication, 1958), pp. 128, 156.

occupies a preeminent place in private and public worship. The conservative and fundamentalist elements accept it literally and regard it as infallible in every detail. The ultraconservatives believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures; that God dictated the original manuscripts word by word.⁽³³⁾ The record of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, for instance, is considered not a fable but literal fact.⁽³⁴⁾

The liberal Armenian Evangelicals hold the Bible very dearly, but reserve the prerogative of critical appreciation. They question the absolute and indisputable authority of the holy Scriptures and they question the assumption that everything in the Bible is factual. They claim that in the Bible we hear of men as well as the Word of God.⁽³⁵⁾

Unlike both fundamentalists and liberals, a majority of Armenian Evangelicals accept the Bible as infallible in religious teachings and a trustworthy record of the progressive revelation of God, climaxed by the supreme revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.⁽³⁶⁾ In other words, they believe in a progressive revelation and understanding whereby as they read the Scriptures, they discover an unfolding, enlarging, more meaningful revelation developing in the history of God's search for man and man's search for God. Each stage in that growing revelation is important, but all is to be judged and understood in terms of the fullest and final disclosure in the person of Jesus Christ.⁽³⁷⁾

33 See, «Editorial», *Panper*, *op.cit.*, Dec. 1976, p. 3; also Theodore Daghlian, *Polor Martig Assdoudso Vortiner Yen* (All Men Are Sons of God), (Cairo; 1973), pp. 15-45.

34 Theodore Daghlian, *Kristos Mer Michnorte* (Christ Our Mediator), (Cairo, 1940), pp. 1-5, 35-52.

35 Yervant H. Hadidian, «Theology for Laymen», *The Armenian Memorial Church Bulletin*, Monthly Publication of the Armenian Memorial Church, Watertown, MA., Vol. XIV, N° 4, April, 1963, p.3.

36 G.H. Chopourian in an editorial entitled «How Does One Correct Injustice», points out, «We do believe that the Scriptures demonstrate progressive development of ideas on worship, conduct faith, and God.» (See, *AMMA News*, publication of the Armenian Missionary Association of America, Paramus, NJ: August, 1981, Vol. XV, No. 4, p. 2).

37 Dikran Antreassian, *Kristoneagan* (Catechism), (Beirut: Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, 1954), pp. 44-45.

Fundamentalist Evangelicals believe in the so-called doctrine of the Virgin Birth; that Jesus was born miraculously, a virgin birth in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. This, in their view, in one of the vital truths of the Christian faith, foretold in the Old Testament and confirmed in the New.⁽³⁸⁾

Most liberals do not accept the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. They claim that the fact of Christ, and not the manner in which He was born is the significant factor.⁽³⁹⁾ They find a symbolic rather than a physical meaning in the accounts of Jesus' birth and life.

Most Armenian Evangelicals affirm the Apostles' Creed as a basic summary of belief, including «born of the Virgin Mary», but they do not insist that Christ is unique because of His Virgin Birth.

All Armenian Evangelical churches believe in the Atonement, the reconciliation between God and man through Christ's life and death on earth,⁽⁴⁰⁾ but the Armenian Evangelical Church as a whole does not accept any particular theory of Atonement.

The fundamentalists have emphasized the Ransom and Satisfaction theories of Atonement. The idea in the Ransom Theory of Atonement is that Christ discharged a debt to Satan, who had rights over man due to man's fall; the Satisfaction Theory tries to explain that Christ offered infinite satisfaction for sin for which finite man could not himself atone.

By Jesus' death and His blood shed on the Cross, man was reconciled to God. Through faith in this reconciling ministry of Christ, man is saved from his sins.⁽⁴¹⁾

38 Samuel Melkonian, «Creed and Life», *Verabadveli Samuel Melkonian Hoviv Yev Oussoutzich* (The Reverend Samuel Melkonian: Pastor and Teacher), (Beirut: Yervant and Elisa Kutchukian, 1956), p. 300; *Panper*, *op.cit.*, September, 1978, p. 20.

39 H. H. Hampartzoumian, p. 276.

40 See, the *Constitution and By-Laws of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East*; also, *Constitution and By-Laws of the Armenian Evangelical Union of France*; also, *Constitution of Armenian Evangelical Union of North America*; also, see, Antreassian, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

41 Nerses Sarian, «The Necessity of Blood Sacrifice», *Christ and His Cross* (Armenian), (Beirut: Kalfayan Publishing House, 1967), pp. 74-89; also, Melkonian, *op.cit.*, 290-291. Samuel Bakalian, *Looyis Kishervan Metch* (Light at Night), (Beirut: Shirag) 1976, pp. 200-203, 110-111.

The liberals accuse the fundamentalists of presenting God as a cruel Power who has to be pacified and persuaded to forgive man. They maintain that the Cross is not to be explained in terms of placating a God who demands His «pound of flesh». Rather, the Cross is the God-grounded love of Christ for humanity. They insist that at the heart of this universe is a God of love. Jesus came to this world to reveal that God, and to bring the world and humanity to the highest quality of life and full potential.⁽⁴²⁾

Armenian Evangelicals believe in the Resurrection of Christ. They believe that the Resurrection brings a victorious perspective into the realm of death as well as into life here and now. They believe that God is the Master of a creative universe and has the final word.⁽⁴³⁾

The fundamentalists believe that Jesus was Himself raised from the dead in bodily form, and anyone who does not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is a «hopeless modernist» and «cannot be saved».⁽⁴⁴⁾

Obviously, the liberals do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. They believe that the real meaning of Christ's Resurrection was His victory over evil powers.

Although the majority of Armenian Evangelicals accept the story of «the empty tomb» as a fact, they claim that Christ's Resurrection, like the Virgin Birth, is not «a proof or a demonstration of His divinity.» For example, Dr. Yervant Hadidian, one of the liberal ministers of the Armenian Evangelical Church writes, «Many Christians believe that the message of Easter is the message that men will go on living without losing their identity and this continuing existence is one of bliss for the 'saved' and one of torture for the 'sinner.' ... We believe that by their very nature good life and truth can-

42 Levonian, *op.cit.*, «Faith in God», p. 19; also Hampartzoumian, pp. 98-101; also Hadidian, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

43 A. B. Hussian, «The Resurrection of Our Lord», *Chahagir*, Religious monthly, (Armenian), Fresno, 1954, N° 2, pp. 1-6; also, A. A. Bedikian, «*Gabree, Gabree*» (He Lives, He Lives) *Jrak*, Vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 133; Vol. II, p. 182; also, Vahan H. Tootikian, *Reflection of an Armenian* (Detroit: Armenian Heritage Committee, 1980), pp. 72-73.

44 Daghlian, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

not be destroyed. This is the message of Easter».⁽⁴⁵⁾ They believe that Easter is not only a remembrance of what happened twenty centuries ago, but a celebration of the fact that in every present instant there is triumphant life available, that we should not only be unafraid of death, but unafraid of life and its challenges.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Again, most Armenian Evangelicals believe in the Second Coming of Christ. The fundamentalist and liberal Evangelicals disagree on the nature and meaning of Christ's Second Advent. The fundamentalists, for instance, believe in the return of Christ physically to judge the living and the dead. They are highly apocalyptic in outlook. They look for the *Parousia*, the imminent coming of Christ and His victory over the forces of evil. They are preoccupied with eschatology, the theology of the last things: judgment, the «pre-millennial» coming of Christ, Armageddon, death, judgment, heaven, and hell. The fundamentalists believe that the Kingdom of God, the perfect society, awaits the Second Coming of Christ, when He will return upon the clouds and when history will end in catastrophe. Christ will set up His Kingdom and rule for a thousand years, the millennium. Armageddon follows, the symbolic field of battle where the war of evil forces against Christ will take place and where God will triumph over all, following which all saints will be elevated to heaven for eternity while the damned will suffer in hell.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The liberals do not believe in the Second Coming of Christ in bodily form. Some of them believe in the realized eschatology, i.e., the ultimate dimension of meaning is already present in the life and

45 Yervant Hadidian, *A.M.C. Bulletin, op.cit.*, Vol. XII, 1961, N° 4, p. 1. Peter B. Doghramji, «Exploring Our Faith», Part II, *A.C.C.M. Bulletin*, monthly publication of the Armenian Congregational Church of Martyrs, Havertown, PA, May 1977, p. 10.

46 Tootikian, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

47 D. H. Chorpajian, «The Spirit of the Anti-Christ», *Esmayleli kantzer* (Splendid Treasures) (Beirut: G. Donigian Press, 1965), pp. 333-341; also, B. B. Ajemian, *Yerchanig Hooys, op.cit.*, November, 1979, Vol. XIX, N° 221, pp. 1-4; see also, Vahram Touryan, «The Second Coming of Christ», *Badgamavor*, an Armenian religious periodical, 1977, Vol. II, N° 10, pp. 1-3; A. Yeghoyan, «The Second Coming», *Yerchanig Hooys*, (Armenian) (Buenos Aires, Vol. XIX, N° 222, December, 1979, p. 3; also, Melkonian, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

work of Jesus Christ.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Others believe that each time a person accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, He comes into the life of that person.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Some others claim that the Second Coming of Christ is not from up downward, but from the future to our present experience.⁽⁵⁰⁾ There are still others who maintain that the abiding value of the Second Coming is its affirmation that Christ is not removed from history, that, in the long run his righteousness outlasts evil and He becomes triumphant Lord in men's lives.⁽⁵¹⁾

There are differences of belief concerning life after death. Most Armenian Evangelicals believe in some form of life beyond the grave. Ideas range from nebulous, indefinable existence to a definite place. Fundamentalists, for instance, believe that heaven and hell are real places.⁽⁵²⁾ Heaven, they claim, is like a city of «golden streets», and hell is «a lake of fire» where there will be everlasting torment for sinners.⁽⁵³⁾ Liberals, on the other hand, repudiate literal interpretations of heaven and hell as places of eternal bliss or damnation. They claim it will be heaven to be with God and hell without Him.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Many Armenian Evangelicals believe that heaven is a state in which the vision of God is enjoyed in a «life of perfect service» to God; hell is alienation from God.⁽⁵⁵⁾ They think heaven and hell should not be understood «geographically or spatially.»⁽⁵⁶⁾ Those who live and die in

48 S. H. Halajian, *Hayastani Gochnag*, Vol. 62, May 1962, p. 19.

49 Hampartzoumian, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

50 Doghramji, «Exploring Our Faith», *op.cit.*, December, 1976, p. 8.

51 A. A. Bedikian, *Dzaghgakagh* (Antology of Thoughts), (New York: Kalfayan Publishing House, 1970), pp. 192-195.

52 Khatcher T. Sarian, «Good and Evil Angels», *Avedarani Tzolker* (Gospel Beams), (Beirut: 1959), pp. 186-191.

53 Chorbajian, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-52.

54 Hampartzoumian, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

55 Antreassian, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

56 Doghramji, *A.C.C.M. Bulletin*, December, 1976, p. 8.

faith in Christ will live with Him eternally, freed from the limitations of time and space.

There are also differences in the interpretation and mode of administration of Sacraments. Although all Armenian Evangelicals accept two Sacraments only, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, there are wide variations of meaning concerning them. The Confessional churches of Armenian Evangelicalism believe in what they call «believer's baptism», meaning that the profession of Christian faith is an essential prerequisite to baptism. Their baptism is by immersion. It is limited to adults and to such children as have reached an age when they can understand the meaning of the ceremony. They look upon immersion as realistic symbolism, through which the life of sin is buried and the new life of faith emerges.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Most Armenian Evangelicals, however, look upon the Sacrament of Baptism as «a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, as union with Christ in his body».⁽⁵⁸⁾

Baptism is usually by sprinkling. It is primarily for infants or children, but not limited to them; adults also can be baptized.⁽⁵⁹⁾ It is an act of dedication. In the case of children's baptism, the parents dedicate themselves to bringing up their children in the Christian faith, and the church assumes the responsibility of receiving the baptized children into its love and care, and to upholding and encouraging the parents in the fulfillment of their covenant.⁽⁶⁰⁾ In times past, some Armenian Evangelical churches considered the profession of

57 See, Section of «Membership» of the *Constitution and By-Laws of the Armenian Evangelical Union of France*, also, the *Constitution of Armenian Brethren Church*.

58 See, Antreassian, «*The Sacraments*», Kristoneagan, *op.cit.*, p. 103; Barkev Darakjian, «Armenian Evangelical Doctrines: Baptism», *Chanasser*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1973, pp. 129-130, 140-142.

59 *Hovvagan Tzeradedr Mertzavor Arevelki Hai Avedaranagan Miootyan Hovivneroo* (Pastor's Manual of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East), (Beirut: U.A.E.N.E., 1967, p. 28; see also, the *Constitutions and By-Laws of the Churches of the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America*.

60 *Hovvagan Tzeradedr, Ibid.*, p. 28.

Christian faith of the parents as an essential prerequisite to baptism (the parents of baptized children were supposed to be believers and were to profess their faith. In some cases, when the parents were unable to meet this requirement, the grandparents substituted for them). This is not a requirement, in the non-confessional Armenian Evangelical churches any more.

There is also diversity in the meaning and the mode of administering the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. No Armenian Evangelical church believes in the doctrine of transubstantiation; i.e., the whole substance of the Communion elements of bread and wine are changed into actual Body and Blood of Christ. But there is a variety of meaning concerning Communion, from the «spiritual presence» to mere «symbol.» Some Armenian Evangelicals, for instance, believe that Christ is spiritually and not physically present in Holy Communion. Others regard this sacrament as a simple, dignified ordinance with no supernatural significance. No special «grace» resides in it, nor does its observance convey any special spiritual gift. Still others look upon this sacrament as «a memorial of Christ's love,» «a symbol of His atoning death, a seal of its efficacy, and a means whereby Christ confirms and strengthens the spiritual union and communion of believers with Himself.»⁽⁶¹⁾ Confessional Armenian Evangelical churches hold closed communions admitting only the regularly recognized members of their constituency, whereas most other Armenian Evangelical churches admit to holy communion all people who profess Christian faith regardless of their denominational connections.

Common Affirmations and Cherished Values

In spite of the diversity among various Armenian Evangelical churches and groups, there are some common convictions and some cherished values shared by all Armenian Evangelicals. In fact, beneath the observable diversities and differences there is a solid body of agreement which the Armenian Evangelical Church shares with the rest of Protestantism. These principles and values originated with the Reformation Movement and were crystallized in the course of time.

61 Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), p. 404, see also, Antreassian, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

The distinctive affirmations and cherished values of Armenian Evangelicalism are as follows:

1. *Justification by Faith Alone.* This was a central principle of the Protestant Reformation. Justification means an accomodation with God — the establishment of a joyful relationship with him. It means that the people cannot justify themselves. They cannot make themselves right with God. God alone justifies them, by virtue of sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ. It is with the undeserved grace of God through Jesus Christ that the repentant sinner is brought into fellowship with Him.

God, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, restores the broken relationship between rebellious and sinful man with Himself. It is by faith that a man receives this free gift of God. Faith is belief that God has actually provided in Jesus Christ a Mediator between Himself and man. Faith is also trust in Christ to do this work of reconciliation. Furthermore, faith is fidelity or faithfulness «in maintaining that belief and trust and living in accordance with that 'newness of life' which comes through union with Him.»⁽⁶²⁾

«Justification by faith» means that people cannot earn God's favor by performing meritorious acts or by the merits of saints. It is a rejection of the performance of set tasks of devotion to earn merit for oneself or a share of those that the church had at its disposal in its «bank of merits.»⁽⁶³⁾ Salvation is a gift from God to man given on the sole condition of faith alone — *sola fide*.

2. *Priesthood of all Believers.* This is an affirmation and an assertion that every believer has the right of direct access to God on his own behalf. This is both his privilege and responsibility. This is the assertion that the Christian can come into the presence of God without a priestly intermediary. He can confess his sins to God and can make his own commitment to the way of Christ.

The «priesthood of believers» is closely connected with the doctrine of the Church. The Church is the body of Christ and the

62 Winfred, E. Garrison, *A Protestant Manifesto* (New York: Abington Press, 1963), pp. 29-30.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

fellowship of those who are committed to Him. This Protestant principle rejects the priestly monopoly on the means of grace and the priestly power of absolution. Absolution is the authoritative declaration by a priest of God's pardon of the penitent. In the Roman Catholic Church, the priest announces absolution to the individual who confesses his sin. In the Armenian Apostolical Church a general absolution is given to a group. The form used is declaratory, meaning simply that God forgives the repentant.

Protestantism also rejects the assumption that the priestly class is a separate class representing the church. Furthermore, it rejects the so-called Apostolic Succession, the historic continuity of the ministry, which supposedly has been passed on from age to age by the laying on of hands of the bishops.

According to the ancient churches the authority of Christianity is seated in the church, and the Church is built on the episcopate. There is a hierarchy of order, consisting of three grades of divine institution: bishops, priests, and deacons. The historic and «valid» churches are those founded by the Apostles, wherein the apostolic succession has been maintained by the succession of the bishops. The entire structure of these churches is that of «hierarchy», the root meaning of which is «rule by priests», and that the priests themselves are arranged in grades and that the lower are ruled by the higher.

The idea that an episcopate in lineal and tactual succession from the apostles represents the essence of the Church, and that ordination by the bishops standing in this succession is a prerequisite to the valid performance of Christian ministry are alien to Evangelical mind and spirit.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The principle of the «priesthood of all believers» is not a denial of the function and role of clergy. The Armenian Evangelical Church recognizes the importance of recognized and qualified ministry. It recognizes the need for specially trained people who can devote all their time to pastoral duties. For that reason she ordains those who have received a call, undergone pastoral training, and have dedicated their lives to fulltime Christian ministry.

In the Armenian Evangelical Church, ministers are not a special class by themselves. They are on equal standing with the rest

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

of believers, except that they are authorized by the Church to be her spokesmen, to conduct the corporate acts of worship, and to be teachers and administrators. Aside from this formal authorization, they are like the rest of church members. All have the privilege and the duty to minister to each other, to be each other's «priest», especially those in need. As part of the Body of Christ they are all a «royal priesthood». They are all ministers under Christ, «the High Priest» and the Head of Church.

In short, Christian ministry belongs to the whole church and all Christians, both lay and ordained, are ministers and in their own way they are to be as faithful and as committed to their life in Christ as possible.

3. *The Liberty of the Christian Man.* Another principle of Armenian Evangelicalism affirms the conviction that a Christian has the right to think his own thoughts, to make his own decisions, and to be his own person, and to live his own life. He is free from legalistic life; his faith in Christ frees him from bondage to the law. This concept of Christian liberty does not mean freedom to do «anything under the sun», but freedom to follow the injunction, «through love be servants of one another.» This kind of freedom does not mean to be wrapped up in oneself, but to live a life of outgoing concern for others.⁽⁶⁵⁾

This kind of freedom, also, is concerned with the minority rights rather than the majority rule. It recognizes the importance of each individual regardless of his status. It respects the right of private judgment, and cherishes freedom of conscience.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Armenian Evangelicals at times may have misused or abused their freedom; they may not have displayed absolute allegiance toward their Church. But they have always believed in the right of dissent. They have always cherished the concept that the Church being fallible is not the final authority; that deep in the heart of every believer, there is a higher court of appeal, his conscience as molded by biblical values. Hence, the religious institutions and church organizations have meaning and value only as they serve to meet the needs and enrich the lives of people.

65 Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), p. 253.

4. *The Concept of Vocation.* The Christian is called by God to that useful work for which he is best suited and which the fortunes of life bring within his reach, whether it be a specifically religious work or secular occupation.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The Armenian Evangelicals, like all Protestants, believe that no one calling is intrinsically more sacred than any other. The smallest work, performed at the right place in the consciousness that it fulfills a divine commission, stands ethically on the same level as the highest work, measured by its results. God calls people to carry out their Christian concern in various occupations.

Armenian Evangelicals do not believe that in the Christian life there are some «sacred» professions that may be distinguished from less «sacred» ones. They consider this distinction between the so-called «sacred» and «secular», «holy» and «profane» artificial and against the spirit of the Gospels. The vocation of a Christian layman is as sacred as that of the minister, priest, monk, or nun. Thus, laymen are not second-class Christians. Every Christian's occupation is a service to God and his/her fellows.

5. *The Sufficiency of the Bible.* Armenian Evangelicals, like all Protestants, affirm the sufficiency of the Bible as the rule of faith and practice for Christians and for the Church.⁽⁶⁸⁾ They believe that the Bible reveals God in a way which will never be superseded. They also believe in the «open Bible» and encourage individuals to read it for themselves, leaving them free to make their own interpretation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁽⁶⁹⁾

Thus, the principle of the sufficiency of the Bible is accompanied by the assertion that all Christians have the right and privi-

66 Puzant S. Levonian, *Poghokaganoutyan Yev Gatoligoutyan Darperoutunnere* (Differences Between Catholicism and Protestantism), (Beirut: Chanasser Press, 1958), pp. 174-176.

67 Garrison, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

68 Hovhannes N. Karjian, «Evangelical Principles», (in Armenian) *Chanasser, op.cit.*, Vol. 44, No. 7, July, 1981, p. 134; *Antereassian, op.cit.*, p. 44; also, P. Levonian, *op.cit.*, pp. 102-104.

69 Barkev Darakjian, «The Particular Characteristics of the Armenian Evangelical Church», (in Armenian) *Haigazian Armenological Review*, published by the Armenian Department of Haigazian College, (Beirut: Atlas Press, 1971), pp. 185-186; see also, Puzant Levonian, *op.cit.*, pp. 103-105.

lege to have direct access to the Bible and read and interpret it for themselves.

The Evangelical assertion of the sufficiency of the Scriptures is a denial of the claim that the tradition of the Church is also an indispensable channel of revelation through which «other truths not contained in the Bible but just as authoritative are transmitted.»⁽⁷⁰⁾ The Armenian Evangelical and the Armenian Apostolic Churches differ on the question as to who should interpret the Bible. For the Armenian Apostolic Church the answer has always been that the same continuing Christian community which accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as its Old Testament and which determined the list of books of the New Testament retains the final authority to interpret the Bible. While individual Armenian Apostolics can read and study the Bible, it is the responsibility of the Church to interpret the Scriptures with authority. In the Armenian Evangelical Church, as in all Protestant Churches, the responsibility of interpreting the Bible falls on the individual believer, who, assisted by the Holy Spirit, prayerfully searches the Scriptures and arrives at a true interpretation. Tradition is not irrelevant but it should not be equated with or made comparable to Holy Scripture.

Undoubtedly, Armenian Evangelicals have their differences in interpreting the Bible. Some have the tendency to identify the Word of God with the Bible. Others treat Scripture as a «self-sufficient Pope.» But they all regard the Bible as the highest authority in matters of faith and Christian life. Historically one of the radical aspects of the Armenian Evangelical Movement was its handling of the Bible. It called believers back to the authority of the Bible or the authority of a person's interpretation of it over against the authority of the Church. Thus the Armenian Evangelicals met authority with authority by claiming that the Bible was the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

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⁷⁰ Garrison, *op.cit.*, p. 117; also, Karjian, *op. cit.*, p. 134.