

The Founding of the Evangelical Theological Association of Croatia

At the request of the Evangelical Journal of Theology *Kairos* September 22nd, 2018 the Evangelical Theological Association (Evandeosko teološko društvo - ETD) was founded in Osijek as an NGO. The English title is, the *Evangelical Theological Association of Croatia* (ETAC). The association was registered as an NGO in the Croatian NGO Register on November 28th, 2018. The president of the Association is Stanko Jambrek from the Bible Institute in Zagreb, and the vice-president is Gregory Scott Thellman from the Theological College in Osijek. The NGO headquarters are in the Bible Institute facilities in Kušlanova 21, Zagreb.

The purpose of the Association's activities is exploring and applying Biblical Evangelistic teaching and gathering Evangelical theologians, both male and female, from Croatia and neighboring countries. The Association's goals include: gaining a deeper knowledge of the Triune God: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and worshiping Him; promoting the Gospel, the Word of God, and Evangelical Christianity; encouraging spiritual and cultural nurturing based on the Word of God; exploring God's agencies and the influence of his Word during history and in contemporary times; encouraging a dialogue between the Church and the Association; encouraging a theological dialogue and research within theological disciplines, as well as on an interdisciplinary level.

The fields of Evangelical Theological Association's work include: spirituality, culture, and arts; human rights; international cooperation and education; science, and research. The accomplishment of these goals will, among other things, be reflected in organizing seminars, lectures, workshops, round tables, debates, meetings, publishing, cooperating with other theological societies, groups, and individuals on the national, European, and international levels.

Historical context

During the 20th century, the global Evangelical movement enjoyed strong development, encompassing more than 600 million people by the end of the century. In the second half of the 20th century in Croatia, under the influence of the Evangelical movement, more than a hundred local churches were planted which, together with those that were established earlier, are known as Reformation-heritage churches. Through the development of the Evangelical movement in Croatia, we see a strengthening of independent and free Reformation-heritage

churches which accepted from the Bible and from Evangelical and Reformed traditions of Reformation and Protestantism that only Scriptures, grace, and faith are the foundations of man's relationship with God. Also from the radical Reformation tradition they inherited the Biblical teaching regarding discipleship which is the belief that a person must believe first in order to be able to accept all the benefits of baptism, the awareness of practically obeying Christ's commission in proclaiming the Gospel, and the fervor for evangelizing. So, along with the existing Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches (Lutheran Church and the Christian Reformed Church) in Croatia, a number of free churches were started during the 20th century, which we commonly refer to the Reformation heritage churches. During the second half of the 20th century more than a hundred local churches started belonging to various Christian traditions: Baptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic, the Renewal Movement tradition, the Brethren Movement tradition, and home church tradition.

The Evangelical movement is focused on proclaiming the Gospel, which is the Good News that Christ died for the sins of man, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, according to Scriptures, thus acquiring redemption for the sinful mankind. The Evangelical movement emphasizes the authority of the Bible, God's sovereignty, the experience of turning to God, the need for living a holy life, following Jesus Christ (discipleship), the obviousness of newly experienced or renewed personal faith which is actively evidenced in evangelism and serving those in need.

Among Evangelical Christians, understanding of the reality of church is primarily spiritual in nature. Each local church and denomination came up with its own structural order depending on historical circumstances, i.e., the social and cultural reality in which the church emerged or was reformed. The structure of the church and its order both have a function in proclaiming the Gospel and in active glorification of God in given social circumstances. The ever-unchanging things in church are God's Word and the Spirit of God who makes it alive in the lives of believers. People and church structures can and should change, so they would be always open to the agency of God's Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

Upon strengthening local churches and starting new churches, a need emerged for well-educated pastors and spiritual workers. For this purpose, several theological schools have been founded in the last half century. Those include the Bible Institute in Zagreb and the Theological College in Osijek whose researchers and lecturers make up the core of the Evangelical Theological Association and the editorial team of the *Kairos* journal.

Kairos: The Evangelical Journal of Theology (<https://hrcak.srce.hr/kairos>) is published twice a year in Croatian and English as *Kairos: Evangelical Journal*

of *Theology* (<https://hrcak.srce.hr/kairos?lang=en>). The journal was started by Stanko Jambrek in 2007 and he has been the editor-in-chief since, and the main publisher of the journal is the Bible Institute in Zagreb. Starting from 2010, the Bible Institute was joined by the Theological College from Osijek as the co-publisher. In its regular sessions in 2017 and 2018, the editorial team of the Kairos Journal discussed the need of founding a theological association and authorized the editor-in-chief, Stanko Jambrek, to organize a meeting with Evangelical theologians with the goal of founding a theological association. The first consultative meeting was held in June 2018 at the Bible Institute in Zagreb, while the second one was held as the founding assembly on September 22nd, 2018 at the Theological College in Osijek.

The Evangelical Theological Association was founded due to the need for a high educational, theological, and scientific support to Evangelical Christianity and to Reformation-heritage churches in Croatia and neighboring countries.

Evangelical theology¹

Theology is the totality of teachings about God, His creation and works, and man's relationship with God through faith. It is the exploration, studying, and describing of God and his creation and agency in the past and present. The point and purpose of theology is to know and love God and to be involved in His mission.

Theology is thinking about God in His total revelation: in the past, through His great works, through His prophets and apostles, and through the incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 1:1-2). In contemporary times, God reveals Himself through His written Word, the Bible. Today, therefore, the written Word of God is the primary source for theologians to meditate on and draw conclusions from.

For the most part, theology encompasses and covers the area of science, but also goes beyond it, providing actual answers to the questions that science does not have an answer for, or the scientific method is found to be inadequate for finding these answers. Theology is a scientific discipline but it is also much more than that because under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a person uses theological research and writing in order to reveal and publish truths and facts about God, his creation, and his activities, which science cannot and, very often, does not wish to see.

1 The section, "Evangelical Theology," is a summary from Stanko Jambrek's book, *Methodology of Research And Writing In Theology* (Zagreb, Biblijski institut, 2017).

Theology is a particular scientific discipline which always needs to explain, show, and practically prove its purpose – in real life. Due to the fact that it is focused on knowing God and His creation, theology is therefore standing between God and His creation. Symbolically speaking, theology connects heaven and earth; heavenly realities with the earthly ones. Therefore, all those who are involved in it should be living both in heavenly and earthly realities and know both of them very well. Living in the heavenly reality presupposed by knowing God, knowing his Word through which he revealed himself, his will, the plans he's implementing in the world, his activities in the past, present, and eternity; his abilities, his relationship with man, humanity and everything that was created, etc. Unlike other scientific disciplines, where the scientist is mostly focused on the physical reality and its interpretation, theology should include the fullness of reality, both spiritual and physical, heavenly and earthly – the way God created it and eternally maintains it. This implies knowing about God's creation, especially humans and the community they are a part of. Along with extensive research and knowledge of God, the theologian, just like any other Christian, needs to practically know himself and people around him, his own and their problems, and bring them before God, whose abilities and love for mankind are known to him, and then to communicate God's solutions, making them come alive for those that they were intended for.

The Evangelical theological method provides us a path and points to a procedure, firstly for becoming and remaining Christ's disciples, for achieving a quality relationship with God the Father, and then for a living co-creating effort with God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit by obeying His creative will in everyday life, "*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*" (Eph. 2:10).

Since the purpose of theology is to know and love God and to participate in His mission in this world, it means that theology is much more than gathering information about God. It implies a relationship: *knowing* God, *loving* him, and *obeying* his will. The basic task of Evangelical theology is glorifying God by knowing him, loving him and his creation, and serving him in his world. Evangelical theology is based on listening to the living Word of God – Jesus Christ - and listening to the Word with faith results in obedience and administering the Word. And obeying the Word forms the individual and the Christian community, i.e., the Church.

Theology is always closely related to and with the Church of God and its mission that God gave it. Christian theological thinking and Christian service stem from a personal relationship with God; they are rooted in God's word and, being empowered by the Holy Spirit, they complement one another in various ways.

Each theology has at its disposal a variety of sources to draw from and base

its conclusions on. The most significant among them are the Holy Scriptures (the Bible), reason, experience, culture, and tradition. The difference between theologies is always the order of priority of these five elements. Thus, theologians greatly differ in the way they accept authority by selecting the sources of theological thought and practice. For some theologians, tradition comes first, for some it's reason, and yet for others it's experience. Evangelical theology considers the Bible to be the primary and sufficient source of knowledge of God. Surely, reason, experience, culture, and tradition always can and contribute to theological thinking to a lesser or greater degree.

Faithful Christian theology is rooted in the Bible as the primary source of theological research and thinking, and the standard above all standards. As affirmed by the apostle Paul, *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Evangelical theology holds that the authority and precedence of the Holy Scriptures are above the authority of tradition, experience, reason, and culture. In this, we do not negate the importance of tradition, experience, reason, and culture in theological thinking; instead, they are given their appropriate places in the order of authority. The Bible is the foundation of theology, and tradition, experience, reason, and culture help us in faithfully interpreting the Holy Scriptures.

The Goals of the Evangelical Theological Association

The Association gathers Evangelical theologians from Croatia and neighboring countries with the purpose of achieving the following fundamental goals.

1. Knowing and glorifying of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in a better way. Intimate knowledge of each person of the Trinity is the fundamental and most important goal of human life, and consequently theology. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus stated, *“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent”* (John 17:3). Eternal life is in knowing God the Father, and Jesus Christ, His Word, his character, his will, everything he's created; his past, present, and future agencies; his mission, ministry in the world, etc. At the start of every theological research we have the knowledge of God and only then are we able to research everything God created, as well as his past and present activities all over the world and in all of his creation. Apart from knowing God, the theologian is particularly called to know about God's work in the context of his own life: in his personal life, his family, church, city, etc. At one time, Jesus gave the Jews a key fact about His own life, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also*

does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel" (John 5:19-20). This is Jesus' testimony that was written down as an encouragement to all people, especially for theologians and researchers to invest all of their efforts in getting to know God the Father, so they could know what it is he's telling them and that they would be able to see what they need to do at the present time in context of their own life or mission. It is not hard to know God the Father. He reveals himself in many ways. The author of Hebrews said, "*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world*" (Heb. 1:1-2). These words from the authors of Hebrews reveal the pinnacle of "scientific and theological thinking" which comes from the personal knowledge of God and his activities in the past and present.

Glorifying God is the fruit of knowing the triune God. Knowing God's character and his work always evokes praise from the depth of our heart, because man was created to worship. There is no use to learn about God if that which we learn fails to bring us closer to him and to the fulfillment of the purpose that mankind was made for: to worship and magnify the Creator (Isa 43:7). If theological research, thinking, and writing does not encourage us to worship, we need to ask ourselves whether we are too preoccupied with ourselves and gathering knowledge about God, instead of getting to know him, worshiping him, and glorifying him. Knowledge about God is fruitless without worshiping and praising. James emphasizes that Satan knows more about God than humans do, but this knowledge is not a blessing to him because he refused to bow before God (James 2:19). Therefore, a Christian theologian needs to always wonder if studying theology is making him more arrogant and aggressive towards those who know less or have different ways of gaining knowledge and interpretation of their knowledge of God, or whether theological research, thinking, and writing is drawing him closer to God, to knowing his will, and to honest and spontaneous worship of God in humility.

The mark of every theologian who is a Christian is genuine worship of God, which is primarily accomplished through achieving the work that was intended by God for every man. One cannot know this work or these works without an intimate relationship with God. Jesus left us an example by praying to God the Father, "*I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do*" (John 17:4). The apostle Paul emphasizes the reality of the works that God had prepared beforehand for every Christian to live in them (cf. Eph. 2:10). Knowing these works comes from the relationship with God. During and after doing the works that God the Father told Christians to do, the doer expe-

riences a spontaneous praise and worship of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

2. Promoting the Gospel, the Word of God, and Evangelical Christianity.

Jesus commanded his disciples to proclaim the Gospel and to make all nations his disciples. This command was written in all four Gospels (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-16; Lk. 24:46-49; Jn. 20:21-22) and in Acts (Acts 1:8). Known as the Great Commission, the command to preach the Gospel to all creation is actually a command to evangelize the world and it is a divine authorization for us to be Christ's ambassadors to all nations in the world. The Great Commission is the command to spread the Gospel which includes proclaiming the Gospel through preaching and writing, through witnessing about one's own personal experience and relationship with God, through practical love towards our fellow man as empowered by the strength of the Holy Spirit, and through the process of discipleship and growing as part of the Church.

True proclamation of the Gospel through the written and spoken or preached word which adequately communicates the divine revelation and its appropriate application in our lives is the kind of proclamation which faithfully expounds the Scripture text as the Word of God. Theological exposition of the Holy Scriptures must not be separated from the proclamation of the written Word of God because there is no other message from God apart from the one in the Holy Scriptures.

The theologian's lasting mission is to proclaim and promote the values of the Word of God, as well as all the other values which stem from the Word of God. Those primarily include spiritual values such as reading and studying the Word, prayer, family worship, and grace and forgiveness in relationships. Following are family values, such as choosing a boyfriend/girlfriend according to Biblical principles, premarital purity, sanctity and permanency of marriage, relationships of blessing in the family, raising children according to Biblical standards, and relating with the elderly and the disabled. These very important values, which are often neglected among Christians, include ethical values in areas such as biomedical issues, euthanasia, the way we treat the environment, the issues of homosexuality, and Biblical values regarding work, money, property, and free time.

3. Encouraging spiritual and cultural building-up based on the Word of God.

All people were created as spiritual beings who are on a constant quest for fulfillment of their spiritual and cultural needs. Christians who have entered into a relationship with God are called to spiritually build up and deepen their existing relationship with God so they would be able to co-create with God in every life circumstance. The fruits of a relationship with God and co-creating with Him are seen in the totality of our social relationships, especially in terms of culture. Whether they are aware of it or not, Christians always bring a change into the spiritual atmosphere, social relationships, and the culture in which they

live and work. The quality and intensity of these changes depends on their spiritual development. We are somewhere between their extraordinary relationship with God, which is reflected in obeying and doing the Word of God, and a faulty relationship with God, which is reflected in opposing God and in adapting to the worldly spiritual atmosphere, social relationship, and culture.

Theologians have been called to research and write about the rich Christian cultural heritage in literature, arts, music, archeology, ethnology, customs, traditions, etc. The Word of God changes every culture, which is why it is good for the present and future generations to write about the influences of the Word and about the changes which it brought into a culture.

It is the duty of the Evangelical Theological Association to systematically encourage spiritual and cultural nurturing of individuals on the basis of God's Word.

4. Research of God's agency and the influence of his Word during history and contemporary times. God created everything and He maintains everything through his Word. The Bible gives us a very clear account of creation, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). It then offers brief explanations for individual events and ages of creation, "Then God said... and it was so" (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 24, 26-30). During the history of mankind, God has created and maintained everything through his Word, and he keeps creating and maintaining everything through his Word to this day. Numerous accounts that we find in the Bible confirm God's supernatural actions through his Word. Jesus and his disciples have been supernaturally healing the sick, driving out evil spirits, raising the dead, and giving back sight to the blind from the 1st century all the way to the 21st century. The only scientific evidence of these supernatural agencies are people whose lives have been changed by God and the testimonies of those who witnessed what had happened.

All people, and theologians in particular, need to be witnesses of God's sovereign agencies, and researchers of his agencies throughout history. When we study God's agencies and the influence of his Word during history and modern times, we must apply the Evangelical theological method, because God's activities are usually supernatural and not subjected to laws of science, which is why it is very hard to research them using scientific methods. God's existence and agency are accepted by faith and the results of his creation and agency can be partly researched and confirmed by science. By creating everything he created, God organized everything into a system, and man has spent thousands of years discovering individual laws of operation of this system which was established through the Word of God. The secrets of the inner workings of man, living organisms, the Earth, and the universe, even though they have been discovered for the most part, still are and will remain unfathomable. Just when the scientists

begin to think that science has reached the end of research and that it found all the answers, they end up discovering new, magnificent and much more complex worlds.

Each scientific discovery is an excellent testimony of God's glory because scientists, regardless of whether they're Christian or not, point to God as the Creator and the source of all existence through their findings.

5. Encouraging a dialogue between Church and the community. Born-again Christians live and work in the world, but they are not of the world. Anything that happens in society will have an impact on them, as well. They are therefore called and sent to participate in the life of the community they live in with a special mission: to be salt and light to the community. Therefore, theologians need to use every opportunity to provide the social community with Biblical solutions to modern social issues and happenings, including changing and participating in the government, environmental protection, social issues, education, economy, general culture, music, and sports.

Who can become a member of the ETAC?

Becoming a member of the Evangelical Theological Association of Croatia is open to any Christian in Croatia and the surrounding countries who accepts the principles of Evangelical belief, who is a member of a Reformation-heritage church, and who has a Ph.D. or a Master's degree in theology. As an exception, one can become a member of the Association if they have a Ph.D. or a Master's degree in some other scientific field and have made a significant contribution to theological thinking through their publications and through serving their own local Evangelical church.

Stanko Jambrek