

# And Which Ones Are You? The Question of Evangelical Believers' Identity

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Essay

## Abstract

*Prompted by the recent census, the author of this essay reflects on the question of evangelical believers' identity. The first part offers a short historical overview of the Reformation, and the second speaks about similarities and differences between the Protestant and the Radical Reformation. Since there are theological differences between the two, and since the Radical Reformation stemmed from the same starting point as the Protestant Reformation, the third part considers what would be the best way to call and identify believers of those churches. In the end, speaking from the Croatian context, the author sides with the term "churches of the Reformation heritage," although the problem remains as to which term should be used for believers in such churches.*

*Keywords: evangelical movement, evangelical believers, Protestants, Radical Reformation, churches of the Reformation heritage, free churches*

## Introduction

The recent population census and the guidelines given by different evangelical denominations to its members concerning their religious affiliation in questionnaires have brought to the surface an important subject – the question of evangelical believers' identity. If you are a member of a Baptist, Pentecostal, some Charismatic, or, perhaps, Church of Christ, in our Roman Catholic context you will most probably come across the following question: "And which ones are you?" where you will be asked to identify and specify yourselves. The map of Christian-

ity is partially clear: there is the Roman Catholic Church in the West, Orthodox Churches in the East, and some people know about Protestantism and Protestant Churches. This raises a question: Where should one categorize churches from the second sentence? Should they be categorized under Protestantism or some fourth option? There is no single answer and there is no wider agreement on this topic, which makes this question a difficult one to answer.

## 1. Short Historical Overview

The Reformation is a historical event that took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although at that time Christianity was divided into Western and Eastern, the Reformation brought a new division to the Western Church. It resulted in Protestantism and, consequently, the emergence of Protestant Churches.<sup>1</sup> However, this so-called *Protestant Reformation* had its reformation, because some voices inside the movement continued to call for further reformation of reformation, which is otherwise known as the *Radical Reformation*. Namely, Luther and Calvin, who were Protestants, initially did not want to leave the Catholic Church but reform it. Also, they had no problems with the common Catholic folk but with the leadership structures (e.g., “the Pope is the Antichrist”).

Although at first glance Protestant and Radical Reformation movements might seem similar, especially since one is the product of another, these two movements are significantly different. When we talk about Radical Reformation, then we are talking about three groups of believers: “Inspirationists,” “Anabaptists,” and “Rationalists” (Estep 2020, 10). According to Williams and Mergel (1957, 22), “all three groups within the radical reformation agreed in cutting back to that root and in freeing church and creed of what they regarded as the suffocating growth of ecclesiastical tradition and magisterial prerogative. Precisely this makes theirs a ‘Radical Reformation.’”

The goal of the Radical Reformation, in accord with the teaching of the Bible, was to reform the Protestant Reformation and, consequently, the Church, and do so for the Church to be what Jesus intended and created it to be. However, one should be careful when talking about such radical groups because, far from the idyllic scenario of the previous sentence, these groups contained all sorts of views. For example, the “Inspirationists” placed the inspiration of the Spirit above the written God’s Word, while the “Rationalists” denied the Trinity. Therefore, when talking about the Radical Reformation, I will primarily focus on Anabaptism because it represents the best and the most desirable in the Radical Reformation.

1 In the context of this article, the notion of “division” is not being used in the sense of evaluating whether some division was good or bad. It is used exclusively for the purpose of pointing out that a certain division in fact took place.

It also represents the tradition that is alive today, and whose influence has left the strongest mark on all the churches that are discussed here.

## 2. Differences Between Two Reformations

What is the difference between the Protestant and the Radical Reformation? If we were to summarize the characteristics of the Radical Reformation, especially through the prism of the Anabaptist movement, then we can say that, ultimately, the churches which are nowadays called *churches of the Reformation heritage* inherited five *Solas* from the Protestant Reformation:

- *Sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) – Scripture alone is authoritative, it alone represents the basis of faith and speaks to all believers, and is not exclusively connected to the interpretation by church leaders and church councils
- *Sola Gratia* (“grace alone”) – Christ went to the cross because of God’s grace and one can earn no merits for one’s salvation – it is the unearned God’s love (grace) that justifies
- *Sola Fide* (“faith alone”) – man is justified through faith alone in Christ alone, and not through works
- *Solus Christus* (“Christ alone”) – salvation is realized in Christ alone and mediated by Christ alone (and not by the church, sacraments, saints, reliquaries, angels, etc.)
- *Soli Deo Gloria* (“Glory to God alone”) – to God alone belongs all the glory for his grace, love, and salvation.

However, it is also true that the churches of the Reformation heritage have inherited some doctrines from the Radical Reformation, namely the doctrine of adult baptism (and all it entails) and the doctrine of the free church concept.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, what makes the Radical Reformation radical is, in the first place, the formation of the church according to a New Testament pattern which included the necessity of personal commitment to Christ, making it a precondition for water baptism. Although the matter of baptism may seem irrelevant from our contemporary standpoint, in the time of Radical Reformers baptism determined and, I would add, still determines, the very nature of the Church. Writing about Conrad Grebel, one of the leaders of the Anabaptist movement, Estep (2020, 21) states the following:

Although Grebel’s disillusionment with the Swiss Reformation began with Zwingli’s failure to follow through on plans to observe the Lord’s Supper in a simple apostolic pattern on Christmas day, 1523, by 1525 the protest movement involved much more than the mass, or even believers’ baptism — it

2 For more about this topic, see Jambrek 2007.

involved the nature of the church. The concept of a church of committed believers had taken the place of a church made up of a mixed multitude. This new church, like that of the apostles, was to be made up only of those confessing Christ as Lord followed by believers' baptism, instead of everyone born in a given parish. The Lord's Supper would then be observed by the baptized in a simple manner, shorn of its medieval trappings, as a pledge of brotherly love in remembrance of the one, all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ.

If adult baptism is the biblical norm, then being a part of the Church means being a disciple of Jesus Christ (therefore, discipleship) and it also entails church discipline, i.e., that church members are responsible for what they say and do to God and others. It equally means that the term *believer* or *Christian* cannot be used for everything and everyone, but only for that person or persons who truly know God's Word and live it out in practice, or for a person that we can call a *born-again* person. Such persons gather in a visible local church and make what the Bible calls the *Church*.

Secondly, what makes Radical Reformation radical is the concept of *free churches*. While Protestants believed that the Catholic Church, despite its errors and fallacies, has never stopped being a Church, radical reformers did not share that view, which is why they named the Reformers "halfway reformers." The union of church and state that began under Constantine and the introduction of infant baptism damaged the character of the Church as a community of born-again people and was considered to be "the fall of the church" (Estep 2020, 176–177). So, when we talk about free churches, the Anabaptists opposed both the "church-state" and "state-churches" (Estep 2020, 187), and this term is used to speak about the Radical Reformers' endeavor to break the bond between the Church and State, i.e., the right of the state to have authority in religious matters (Estep 2020, 187). What follows is that the Anabaptists did not submit to authorities when it came to religious matters and they believed that it was necessary to separate those two entities, due to the very nature of the Church (Estep 2020, 189–190).

Table 1: *Theological Differences Between Protestant and Radical Reformation*

PROTESTANTS	CHURCHES OF THE REFORMATION HERITAGE (followers of the Radical Reformation)
5 Solas.	5 Solas.
Consider Catholic Church to be a church.	Do not consider Catholic Church to be a church.
Did not break the bond between the state and the church.	Broke the bond between state and church, i.e., wanted neither a "church-state" nor "state church." Hence the term "free church," where "free" implies the freedom from state interference in church faith and practice.
Continue with infant baptism.	Practice only adult baptism.

PROTESTANTS	CHURCHES OF THE REFORMATION HERITAGE (followers of the Radical Reformation)
The church is a “mixed society.	The church is only made up of born-again believers and is therefore possible to practice discipleship and church discipline. Those who are not disciples and who reject church discipline are not church members.
Since church membership includes infants, greater importance is given to sacraments (e.g. Christ is somehow present in the elements of bread and wine), and in the context of church service, preaching is more important than the sacraments.	Since church membership is made up of adults, there is a lesser emphasis on sacraments, and in the context of church service, preaching is seen as more important than the mystery of sacraments.

### 3. Issue of Terminology

Since there are theological differences between the Protestant and Radical Reformation, and Radical Reformation has begun from the same starting point as the Protestant Reformation, one must ask which “camp” should Baptist, Pentecostal, and other churches be categorized in, and what terms should be used to denote them? I am aware that some might be irritated by the use of the term “camps,” but it is important to consider this topic because it ultimately represents the question of identity.

Interestingly, in Croatia, there are several approaches. Some who belong to the aforementioned churches see themselves in the camp of the Radical Reformation and do not consider themselves Protestants, since they emphasize the theological differences between the Radicals and the Protestants. Some others who belong to those same churches consider themselves *Protestants* because they believe both reformations stemmed from the same starting point, the only difference being that one went further than the other. A third group does not want to share the term *Protestant* with the *Radicals* (Baptists, Pentecostals, etc.). So, who has it right? The answer will depend on whom you ask... For example, Stanko Jambrek (2007, 318) says that the Reformation further developed into four traditions: 1. Lutheran; 2. Reformed (Presbyterian) or Calvinist tradition; 3. Anglican, and; 4. Anabaptist tradition or *the free church* tradition. According to Jambrek, only Lutheran and Reformed traditions can truly be called Protestant, since the Anglican tradition primarily had a political and not religious background, while Anabaptism continued where Reformers faltered. However, Jambrek points out that, in its widest sense, Protestantism can refer to a “whole spectrum of non-Roman Catholic western Christianity with different doctrinal worldviews.”

Things get additionally complicated if, in our context, we consider the terminology used in conversations:

- If the aforementioned churches are called *Protestant*, then their believers must be called *Protestants*. However, theologically, these churches are neither state churches (less important or even irrelevant today) nor do they practice infant baptism (very important).
  - If we call these churches the *churches of the Reformation heritage*, we are still dealing with the issue of how to call the believers belonging to those churches. According to their denominations?
  - If at this point we introduce the term *evangelical* and begin talking about *evangelical* churches or *evangelical* believers, we must know that this term derives from the *evangelical movement*, and it is considered that this movement has always existed, present wherever the Holy Spirit is present and where the Word of God is alive and effective in people's hearts (Jambrek 1997, 27–28). On the other hand, the modern evangelical movement originates from the Reformation and gathers people from the Protestant churches, free churches of the Reformation heritage, and even the Roman Catholic Church (Jambrek 1997, 28).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the use of the term *evangelical* puts Pentecostals, Lutherans, and Catholics into the same proverbial basket.
  - If we use the term *free churches*, it is a term that is internationally recognized because it denotes the churches of the Radical Reformation. However, how do we call believers belonging to those churches – *Free men and women*?
  - We can simply say that we are *Christians*, but nowadays this term can be used to cover many things and is often bereft of true meaning.
- 3 What are the basic characteristics of evangelical Christianity? According to Jambrek (1997, 28) they are: “The experience of conversion to God, need for a holy living, the obviousness of newly experienced or renewed personal faith, which expresses itself actively in evangelization and serving the needy.” According to Bebbington (2005, 2–3) they are: *conversionism*: a person needs to convert (there is no salvation without personal conversion); *activism*: the Good News needs to be spread; *biblicism*: special respect for the Bible as God's Word (all key spiritual truths are found in the Bible); *crucicentrism*: focus upon Christ's work of salvation on the cross. According to Larsen (2007, 1) an *evangelical Christian* is a person who is: 1. an orthodox Protestant; 2. stands on the tradition of global Christian networks which sprang forth from the Great Awakening movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century connected with John Wesley and George Whitefield; 3. puts the Bible first in his Christian life as a God-breathed, final authority in the matters of faith and practice; 4. emphasizes reconciliation to God through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ on the cross; 5. emphasizes the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual leading him to conversion and life in communion with God and others, including the responsibility of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the Gospel to all people. According to J. I. Packer (1978, 15–23), six foundational evangelical teachings are: 1. the supremacy of Holy Scriptures (because of its unique inspiration); 2. the majesty of Jesus Christ (the God-Man who died as a sacrifice for sin); 3. the lordship of the Holy Spirit (who initiates various key ministries); 4. the necessity of conversion (a direct encounter with God on God's instigation); 5. the priority of evangelization (witnessing is a form of worshipping God); 6. the importance of fellowship (the church is a living community of believers).

Table 2: *The Issue of Terminology*

CHURCH TITLE	BELIEVER TITLE	EXPLANATION
Protestant Church	Protestants	Sociologically, believers of the churches of the Reformation heritage are indeed Protestants, however, theologically speaking, they are not, because there are significant differences between the Protestant churches and the CRH.
Churches of the Reformation heritage (CRH)	?	How do we call believers from such churches?
Evangelical Church	Evangelical believers	The problem here is that there is a denomination in the Republic of Croatia with this term in its title. Besides, the term evangelical believer includes believers from Protestant Churches as well (like the Anglican John Stott), thus erasing the theological difference between Protestants and CRH.
Free Churches	?	The concept of free churches aptly describes the differences between Protestants and CRH.
?	Christians	This is a problematic term since it can mean many things, i. e., it means different things to different people.

## Conclusion – What Now?

When we speak about *the churches of the Reformation heritage* today, we must be aware that one of the problems we encounter is the problem of identity – who are we, really? In a sociological sense, believers in these churches are often placed in the rubric of *Protestants* (sometimes of their own accord), since they do not differentiate between the two mentioned kinds of reformation. Moreover, the Radical Reformation grew out of the Protestant Reformation and shares with it some basic tenets of faith, which further complicates this “nuance.”

Furthermore, *churches of the Reformation heritage* are the result of historical development and various influences, movements, and theologies, and it is often hard for the ordinary believer to know, understand and follow this historical development. As Kraljik (2021) points out, in the centuries after the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, *the churches of the Reformation heritage* have continued to reform their church life and practice through personal beliefs established on the level of individual denominations, through their teachings, understanding, and interpretation of Scriptures as the main basis of their doctrines, and in our modern age, to a certain extent through interdenominational encounters on the continental and global level (e.g., *Lausanne Movement*, *World Evangelical Alliance*, etc.). However, when one takes into account different Scripture interpretations, theological doctrines, and different understandings of how the Church should look and

function, it was inevitable that these various movements, such as Pietists, Anabaptists, and Puritans, issued forth various theological movements in the coming centuries which also became ecclesiastical (denominational) movements such as Baptist Churches, Brethren Churches, Methodist Churches, Renewal Churches, Holiness Churches, Pentecostal Churches, Independent Charismatic Churches, etc. (Jambrek 2003, 13–14).

Therefore, churches of the Reformation heritage do not necessarily have a *historical* order of the Radical Reformation (e.g., Pentecostal, because they appeared at a later date). However, on one side, they are *theological* heirs of their faith and practice and, on the other, they are the product of certain historical development. It is exactly this diversity that makes it difficult to answer the question of who we are.

Chronologically, the first Christians were one of the Jewish sects (sect as a positive notion) and were called “the Way.” We are *Christians*, but the term *Christian* appears later in Acts 11 and most probably represents a form of mockery directed at followers of Jesus by their enemies. We could say that we are *Protestants* in the widest possible sense because we have inherited basic tenets of the Protestant Reformation, but not all. We are also *Radicals* because theologically and practically we are most like them – namely, Anabaptists. Ultimately, we are also *evangelical Christians* because the basic postulates of the evangelical movement suit the radical reformation although both Protestants and Catholics can be found under that concept. However, if I were to choose one concept that best describes our churches, in Croatia that would be the concept of churches of the Reformation heritage, and on the global level, *free churches*, although in this case we are left with the problem of which term to use for believers of such churches.

Whether you consider the answer to the question: “Which ones are you?” a simple or a complicated one, the matter of identity is very important for the everyday life of the churches of the Reformation heritage, but also their future. Indeed, in a time of spiritual globalization, correct identity gives us roots, stability, and security and keeps us from forgetting Jesus’s calling and mission. And, as this article has implicitly pointed out, this question is related to and opens many other questions and topics such as soteriology and ecclesiology, the question of ecumenism, evangelization, rebaptism, etc.

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## A koji ste vi? Pitanje identiteta evanđeoskih vjernika

### Sažetak

Potaknut nedavnim popisom stanovništva, autor ovog eseja promišlja o pitanju identiteta evanđeoskih vjernika. U prvome dijelu daje se kratki povijesni pregled nastanka reformacije, a u drugome dijelu govori se o sličnostima i razlikama između protestantske i radikalne reformacije. Budući da postoje teološke razlike između protestantske i radikalne reformacije, a radikalna reformacija krenula je iz iste polazne točke kao i protestantska, u trećem dijelu razmatra se kako bi bilo najbolje nazvati i identificirati vjernike spomenutih crkava. Na kraju, autor se u hrvatskom kontekstu opredjeljuje za naziv „crkve reformacijske baštine“ iako u tom slučaju preostaje problem koji pojam koristiti za vjernike tih i takvih crkava.