

THE CURRENT CHALLENGES 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.

Over one hundred fifty years and a few generations have passed since the inception of the Armenian Evangelical Church. Most Armenian Evangelicals today are the children and grandchildren of the two most recent generations. Each is characterized, in a general way, in terms of its attitude toward, and its role in preserving, its heritage. In most countries of the Armenian Diaspora, the generation of Armenian immigrants immediately following World War I was too busy earning a living to worry much about assimilation and the possible erosion of its Armenian identity and Evangelical values. Yet, it was this generation that built churches, established new organizations, and laid the foundations of Evangelical work for succeeding generations.

The offspring of the immigrants, that generation which was born in the adopted countries of its parents, went through a transitional period. Members of this generation had mixed feelings about their heritage, never being wholly certain whether it was best to disown it entirely, or to seek some happy, but seemingly elusive, middle ground.

The present generation has completed the transition. But some of its members have been lost to the Armenian Evangelical Church and to the Armenian Nation because of their indifference to their heritage, and because of their lack of concern for the preservation and perpetuation of their Armenian identity. There were others, however, who built their inner strength and preserved their identity and heritage by their adherence to their national, cultural, and Christian values. These are the members who still carry the torch.

It may be worth reviewing, briefly, what this torch represents. It is a flame that has survived many efforts to douse it or push it under a bushel. Armenian Christendom is a little richer today by virtue of the illumination this unquenchable light has shed among the destitute, the hopeless, and the ignorant. The principles for which the Armenian Evangelical Church has stood in the past, and still stands in the present, are her sources of strength.

The basic and central teaching of the Armenian Evangelical Church still remains the newness of life that Jesus Christ brings to men and women. She still lays emphasis upon the principle of "justification of faith."

She still advocates the biblical concept of "the priesthood of all believers." This concept is the assertion of the individual's right and ability to approach God.

No mediation is necessary because God is directly approachable and accessible to those who seek Him.

She believes in the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture in all matters of doctrine and conduct.

Not only does she tolerate, but she encourages differences of opinion, self-criticism and self-correction. She rejects compulsory unanimity which stifles internal criticism.

She is favorable to democracy and democratic principles, but she guards against equating Christianity with a specific form of political organization or national and racial entity.

She believes that Christian life is a vocation, a calling from God. There are no qualitative differences between so-called "sacred" and "secular" tasks, so long as they are performed in the spirit of Christ.

Like the past generations, the contemporary generation of Armenian Evangelicals has been making its contributions to the religious, educational, social, and cultural life of the Armenian nation.

In the religious realm, the Armenian Evangelical Church lays emphasis on the necessity of conversion, spiritual renewal, and regeneration. She believes that being born again is an indispensable part of one's religious life. It is not something one can inherit, it is not acquired by baptism and confirmation in infancy, nor is it achieved by attending church services or Masses. It becomes a reality only when one accepts Christ as personal Savior, Lord, and Example, and when one submits to His will. This is a basic and fundamental teaching whose importance cannot be underestimated.

The Armenian Evangelical Church stresses the importance of Christian education. Armenian Evangelicalism maintains that Christian education is one of the sacred missions of the Church. In fact, evangelism and religious education go hand in hand. The Armenian Evangelical Church endeavors to impart Christian values and the principal tenets of Christianity through her day schools and church schools, through her youth groups and Christian Endeavor societies.

In the realm of education, the Armenian Evangelical Church has become a moving force, endowing the Armenian people with educational institutions ranging from kindergarten to university, and educating thousands of Armenians. These schools have brought untold blessings to all generations of Armenians, including our own. They are destined to be the most potent forces to help light the paths for our future generations. They have been the most effective tools in transmitting our culture, and teaching the Armenian language. At the present time, the 17 educational institutions of the Armenian Evangelical Church offer quality education to thousands of students, without any discrimination (90% of these students are Armenian Apostolic or Catholic), and they are a source of blessing to the entire nation.

In the area of evangelism, another great service rendered by the Armenian Evangelical Church is to make accessible the Bible to the Armenian masses, young and old, in their own language. One of the cardinal principles of Armenian Evangelicalism is that the Bible is the ultimate authority for faith and

conduct; by its translation into modern, vernacular Armenian, it has been rendering a lasting contribution to the spiritual life of many Armenians. Since Armenia's independence, the Armenian Evangelicals have inundated their motherland with Bibles in Western and Eastern Armenian languages.

The Armenian Evangelical Church has been rendering an important service to the Armenian people culturally. Culture is the social heritage of a people: works of art, collective, mental and spiritual artifacts, ideas, beliefs, Armenian perceptions, and values transmitted from generation to generation. The Armenian Evangelical Church, through her churches, educational institutions, the press, the media, art and literature, has its definite input in the life of the Armenian nation. In the realms of religious literature, the Armenian Evangelical press has been an asset to the spiritual up building of its readers. Besides the scores of church newsletters and bulletins, the Armenian Evangelical press counts about ten magazines and periodicals.

The Armenian Evangelical Church also renders a valuable service to public life through her leadership, as well as her membership in the community life. Almost in all realms of public life, Armenian Evangelicals have their input, which, proportionately to their numbers, has been noteworthy. Contrary to the accusation of their lack of involvement in the Armenian national life, Armenian Church to contemporary Armenian life are a source of strength, despite her minority status in the Armenian nation. Armenian Evangelicals, though a tiny minority, have definitely had some impact on the Nation, particularly in the Diaspora. Though they do not even represent a meager one percent of the overall Armenian population in the world, they somehow manage to perform on a level that transcends their numbers. They initiate a high proportion of the overall activities. The Armenian Evangelicals have demonstrated that they are active in various Armenian organizations. One of the eloquent evidences of this has been the large scale and total involvement of Armenian Evangelicals in the reconstruction of Armenia since its 1988 devastating earthquake and since Armenia's Independence in 1991.

One of the greatest sources of pride and glory of the Armenian Evangelical Church is the Armenian Missionary Association of America. As a non-profit, nonpolitical missionary and philanthropic organization, the AMAA has supplied vision and material support, as well as moral inspiration to Armenians everywhere. There is no question that the AMAA has achieved an outstanding record of service in educational, cultural, physical, spiritual and moral spheres -- a service broader today than ever before. It has proved a consistent contributor to a myriad of worthy causes, and has developed a worldwide missionary outreach in 20 countries around the world; serving underprivileged Armenians through numerous missionary projects, such as child education sponsorships, college and seminary scholarships, medical and general relief provisions, widespread missionary outreach and activities, encouragement of neophyte mission centers, financial aid to religious publications and meeting the needs of the destitute or forgotten.

Since the earthquake in northern Armenia, the Armenian Missionary Association of America has allocated millions of dollars of aid by outright grants and matching funds, along with other missionary and humanitarian organizations to help Armenia.

The Armenian Evangelical Church is also involved in a number of joint ventures with Armenian and non Armenian ecclesiastical and missionary organizations, including educational, philanthropic and humanitarian enterprises.

The contributions of the Armenian Evangelical people - are responsible for a number of ventures requiring substantial funds and concerted efforts on the part of the membership at large.

It is gratifying that the numerically small Armenian Evangelical Church, like a tree, has scattered her seed on the five continents of the world, and in the face of many problems, has managed to do more than merely survive. In some places, she has shown every sign of vitality, including some significant achievements in terms of building programs, finances, and activities.

In spite of all these manifestations of progress, however, the present state of the Armenian Evangelical Church is not very viable.

In the past few decades, the Armenian Evangelical Church has been experiencing a deterioration of her *élan vital* and an erosion of long established religious and cultural values. Does this mean that the Armenian Evangelical Church is a hopeless case? No. In spite of present weaknesses, Armenian Evangelicalism still has the potential for improvement and effectiveness, provided that she remains true to herself, her calling, and her original guiding purpose -- the spiritual enlightenment of the Armenian Church and nation. This means that the Armenian Evangelical Church must first reform herself, and then embark upon the venture of reforming her Mother Church and the Armenian people.

The Armenian Evangelical Church today needs a revival, a spiritual renaissance, so that she can revitalize herself, and become a witnessing Church, an agent of evangelism. In order to do that, she has to continue the movement of the unfinished reformation; she has to go to her roots, be true to her distinctive affirmations and cherished values and face the challenges of our times. There are new horizons and new problems; new opportunities and new needs to be met. Armenian Evangelicals are challenged to greater efforts. The present status of the Armenian Evangelical Church places her in the forefront of the great challenges which she must face in order to justify her *raison d'être*. What are these challenges?

Christ-likeness and Spiritual Regeneration

The first and foremost challenge of the Armenian Evangelical Church is to become a Christ-like Church, making her highest priority to bring people to a vital relationship with Christ.

Becoming Christ-like is the *raison d'être* and the birth right of any Christian community, including the Armenian Evangelical Church. First things first! The

Church must be the Church. It must be in the image, in the likeness of Christ; it must be Christ's Body.

The Armenian Evangelicals are called to be a community of the committed drawn together by their faith in Christ. They have a common *destination*, a common *purpose*, and a common *commitment*. Their common destination is to grow up in Christ and to become Christlike persons. Their common purpose is to do what Christ did, to be His agents and ambassadors. Their common commitment is to their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

The Armenian Evangelical Church should emphasize the *necessity of spiritual regeneration and rebirth*. To be a Christian, a person *must be born again*; that is the biblical mandate. In His encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is recorded to have said the following in John 3:3: "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again." Being born again is the foundation of one's Christian life.

Personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the basis of Christian faith. The claim which God, through Christ, makes upon His children to live the redeemed life within the human society is absolutely primary. The surrender which Christians make of their whole life to God, through Christ, is the act which brings their salvation by God, through Christ, from lostness and fragmentariness of life. This fundamental principle is being eroded in the contemporary Armenian Evangelical Church. It has to revive again. It has to be proclaimed in no uncertain terms.

This principle has also a strong implication on the corporate level. Like all Christians, all Armenians also have a genuine need for *living a contemporary faith*. Undoubtedly, pride in the "faith of our fathers" is important. Honoring the past is noble. But it is something that can be overdone and overplayed, and thus, can be damaging and destructive. It must also be stated that one generation of Armenians cannot operate on the faith of their ancestors, because faith is not something inherited.

Faith of our ancestors -- the faith of St. Gregory, St. Mesrop, and St. Vartan is wonderful; but the faith of these noble ancestors cannot save us or serve us. It is not enough to be proud of being "*Hai Kristonia*" (Christian Armenian). Such profession must be supported by Christian performance. The vital faith, which accomplishes and sustains, has always to be a personal and contemporary faith. The question is not how to preserve an abstract past, but how to transmit to the present and future the virtues of the race, the virtues of the "faith of our fathers." Sentimentalization of the past can destroy the effectiveness of the present and the aspirations of the future. The question all Armenians should ask is whether they have the courage to chart a course for the future, or whether they are content to drift into it under the influence of winds from the past. The basic quest must be to move from an orientation based on the past to one based on the future. This is another facet of the biblical principle that Armenian Evangelicalism should proclaim through the pulpit, media, and in everyday contacts.

The Bible and the Bible-Centered Lifestyle

The second challenge of the Armenian Evangelical Church is to inspire her members to lead reformed lives according to the teachings of the Bible, enabling them to make the Bible a rule for faith and conduct not only in word, but in deed.

Historically, the Holy Bible has played a very important role in the life of the Armenian nation. In 404, Mesrop Mashtots, in collaboration with Catholicos Sahak Part'ev and King Vramshapouh, invented the Armenian alphabet in order to translate the Bible so that they could propagate the Christian faith among Armenians. The Bible left a tremendous impact on the Armenian people. In the seventeenth century, two educational centers played influential roles in imparting Christian education among Armenians: the *Monastery of Tat'ev* and the city of *New Julfa*. Moses of Tat'ev rebuilt and founded the Monastic Order of Suinik in the early 1600's. He was a great evangelist. He spread the Gospel over the whole land.

In 1604, Shah Abbas of Persia deported thousands of Armenians from four provinces in Armenia and resettled them in different cities of Iran. Some of these refugees, on the outskirts of *Isphahan*, picked up the pieces of their shattered lives, calling their new settlement *New Julfa*. In this refugee city, an Armenian school was opened in 1628 and a printing house by Khachatur Vardapet Kesaratsi. From among the many pupils of Khachatur Vardapet, two distinguished themselves in *Grabar* Armenian: *Jacob IV*, who became Catholicos of All Armenians in 1655, and *Voskan Vardapet*.¹

In 1666, through the efforts of Voskan Vardapet, the Bible was printed for the first time. The printing of the Bible resulted in the spiritual and cultural vitality. Moreover, Armenian scholarship tried to make the Bible accessible to other nations. In 1740, Armenian scholars, under the leadership of George of Julfa, translated the Bible into Persian. In the nineteenth century, John Lazarian, a resident of the Portuguese port of Macao in China, rendered the entire Bible into Chinese. The translation were made from the *Grabar* Armenian.

Also historically, the Armenian Evangelical Movement began with Bible studies. The early Armenian reformists were a tiny band of seminarians and priests who began to study the Bible under Grigor Peshtimaltjian, principal of the Armenian Seminary for Religious Studies. It was this Bible study group that established a secret society, named *Barepashtutian Miabanutyun* ("The Society of Piety") in order to reform the Armenian Apostolic Church. The organization of this society may properly be said to mark the beginning of Armenian Evangelicalism.

Furthermore, historically, the Armenian Evangelical Church became instrumental in propagating the Bible among the Armenians. The earliest evangelistic work was that of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), founded in 1804, in London, which together with the Russian Bible Society (founded in 1813), undertook to reprint and distribute the ancient (*Grabar*) Armenian Bible. By 1815, five thousand complete Bibles and two thousand New Testaments were purchased by the educated classes and clerics and sent to Russian Armenia. Two thousand more New Testaments followed in 1817.²

In 1822, the BFBS, translated the Bible into Armeno-Turkish (i.e. Turkish language written in Armenian characters). Bible reading and Bible study gradually were taking roots.

The Evangelistic campaign of the early Armenian reformists was greatly augmented by the translation and publication of the Bible in the Armenian vernacular, the *Ashkharabar*.³ These Armenian reformists believed the Bible is a sufficient rule of faith and practice for the Church. They insisted that Christians have the right and the privilege to direct access to the Bible in reading and interpreting it for themselves.

It was interesting that the early Armenian reformers found a criterion within the Bible by which the whole could be judged. The criterion was the Gospel -- the *Evangel* -- the Good News of salvation by grace through . No wonder they wanted to adopt the name, *Evangelical*.

The early Armenian Evangelicals and their successors stressed the teaching of the absolute authority of the Bible for faith and conduct. They were *bibliocentric*, not only in their theological orientation, but in their lifestyle as well.

The insights, teachings, and inspirations of the Bible had become not only part of their inner equipment, but an expression of their actions in their daily lives.

One cannot, in all fairness, say the same thing about the contemporary Armenian Evangelicals. While the modern Evangelicals affirm the sufficiency of the Scripture as the rule of faith and practice for Christian, and while they affirm the right and privilege to read it for themselves and interpret it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is not a book of daily application.

The Armenian Evangelicals should make every effort to make the Bible their instructional manual. But most importantly, they should put its teachings into practice, for the best instruction in the world will do people no good unless they make use of it.

Christian Education

Third, the Armenian Evangelical Church should intensely dedicate herself to the task of building Christian character through Christian education.

One of the most important ingredients to have in any human endeavor is a good character. It is the greatest quality of a healthy personality and the most crucial factor in an efficient organization. When character crumbles, society collapses because the society, like the individual, lives by character.

The fundamental crisis of our age is, undoubtedly, moral and spiritual in character. Therefore, what the Armenian nation as well as the world need now, more than anything else, are men of good character. Hence, the greatest service people can render to their nation and to themselves is being people of good moral and spiritual character. There is nothing more eloquent than Christian character; it is a platform, a medium and a living testimony.⁴

Christian character however, is not built by magic power; it is built by *Christian education*. The aim of Christian education is to instill the spirit of Christ in individuals and to make them Christ-like.

Christian education begins at home, in the family. Children are born into family units.

One of the prime tasks of each society should be the strengthening of the family, because it is the family that influences the child decisively. No individual grows into a mature human being accidentally. A lot of toil and tears, teaching and training go into the making of his life, and the most important influence in attitude formation, in early education, is that of the family, particularly, of the parents.

Strong biblical and theological foundations of faith and their application to life for all age groups ought to be the concern of **all** Armenian Evangelical churches.

It is a great privilege, and at the same time, an awesome responsibility to bring up, to educate and to mold the character of those tiny human beings, who are the future hope of the oncoming generations. It is evident that the biological phenomenon of birth does not transform humans into competent, nurturing caretakers. Parenting itself is a learning, growing process; it is also a tremendous responsibility, because the most impressive and long lasting lessons occur in the early years of life and are drawn from the quality of care and concern children receive at their home. Each parent shares in creating an atmosphere of moral responsibility at home, because transmitting moral values begins with the parents, with their right conditioning of attitudes for their children.⁵

One of the most important tasks of the Armenian Evangelical churches ought to be the Christian training of children. For that important task three factors are needed:

a) *Right type of teachers* who will endeavor to unlock each small heart with keys of kindness and loving care.

b) *Cooperative parents* in whom children must see in practice what the church is teaching in theory.

c) *A progressive congregation*, adopting the ways that the needs of modern times call for.⁶

Because Christian education is not the monopoly of children and youth, but also includes adults, there are a number of means that could be utilized, such as:

a. Regular Sunday School classes for adults before or after Sunday morning services.

b. Mid-week study and discussion groups, meeting in church or in homes, hosted by members and friends.

c. Bible study or discussion groups sponsored by church organizations or groups before or during their regular meetings.

There is a widespread ignorance about the Bible and Christian teachings among masses of Armenians, particularly in Armenia. Preaching and teaching the Word, which are the cornerstones of the Armenian Evangelical movement, should be the perennial challenge of Armenian Evangelicalism.

One of the most fundamental and effective vehicles to impart Christian education is *Bible study*. This methodic reading and expounding the Scriptures enables people to carefully read and examine the biblical text and discover its original and intended meaning. It also enables them to determine what the text means for them in their time and context, and hopefully, enables them to be led in obedience to the dictates of the Holy Spirit.

Along with Bible study, Christian literature is a very conducive factor to Christian education. The Society of Piety and the early Armenian Evangelicals found it extremely beneficial for their spiritual edification to be nurtured by a number of religious tracts which left a great impact on their readers. Noteworthy among them were: *The Lord's Prayer*, *Thy Kingdom Come*, *Christ, the Way to God and Heaven*, *the Great Salvation*, and Leigh Richmond's, *The Dairyman's Daughter*.

Not too long after, the Armenian Evangelical churches, in cooperation with and assisted by the American Mission press, published a number of magazines for the education of the Armenian masses. These include: *Eshtemaran Pitani Giteliats* (the Repository of useful knowledge), *Avetaber* (the Herald), *Avetaber Deghayots Hamar* (the Herald for boys), *Buragn* (Thousands of sources), *Yeprat* (Euphrates), *Yeni Emur* (New life), and *Bari Lur* (Good news). All these were published in the vernaculars, in the languages spoken in the respective areas.⁷

Along with the pulpit and the church school, the day schools, high schools and colleges laid the strongest foundations of Christian education. Almost every church had a day school, a considerable part of whose curriculum consisted of Christian instruction.

Just as in the past, Armenian Evangelicals, through their production and dissemination of Christian literature -- like Bibles, Bible dictionaries, concordances, Scriptural study plans, magazines, textbooks, curriculum for Christian education -- can provide effective witness to their compatriots.

Preserving and Perpetuating the Armenian Heritage

The fourth challenge of the Armenian Evangelical Church is to preserve and perpetuate the Armenian Heritage.

A people can learn from its heritage an appreciation of its *past values* and be able to build upon them. It cannot build a sound and strong present and future without those values it has inherited from the past. It is heritage or culture of a people that **holds** that people *together*. The Armenian cultural heritage has proven to be more effective and undergirding than military fortifications or territorial conquests of other nations. Deep roots of their Armenian heritage have been the strongest tie that has brought them together. If Armenian Evangelicals are to retain their identity, they will do so through their **ethnic heritage**. Moreover, the Armenian Evangelical Church cannot decide on her future *mission* if she is unaware and unattached to her people's heritage. She must find her roots and foundation and prove unto herself why she should continue to exist. A tremendous challenge lies before Armenian Evangelicals. The great task at hand is to preserve their heritage and keep the Armenian culture thriving. The

abdication of this responsibility is unforgivable. If they believe that they are inheritors of a three-thousand-year old glorious culture, they should actively commit themselves to insure its survival, which in turn, will insure their own survival. With a reaffirmation of will, determination, faith and fortitude, the safekeeping of the Armenian heritage will be a certainty. But where to begin?

1.- *The Armenian Schools.* The Armenian School is destined to be the most potent force to help light the path for the future generations of Armenians. It is one of the guarantors of a well-organized Armenian community. Why Armenian Schools?

a) The Armenian School is the most effective tool in transmitting Armenian culture. Through the ages Armenian culture has provided Armenian people with sustenance in times of prosperity and in times of trial. It has been a means of self-preservation.

b) The Armenian School is the most effective weapon against the so-called *white massacre*. Today, in the entire Diaspora, the preservation of the Armenian culture and identity is at stake. Armenians are in imminent danger of assimilation. The challenge of the present times can be effectively met by a systematic way of preserving Armenian heritage. **Armenian education** is the **key**, and the Armenian School is a solid and valid bastion of preserving that heritage.

c) The Armenian School is the necessary common ground and the *bridge* that will unite Armenians of different background, outlook and philosophy.

d) The Armenian School is a vital *aorta* connecting Armenians to their roots. It is an important *depository* and at the same time, a powerful *transmitter* of their ethnic values without which they are rootless and hopeless. Just as the bud needs nourishment from the roots in order to blossom, so the new generations of Armenians need the *knowledge of their roots* in order to chart meaningful courses for their future lives.

e) The Armenian School is the most effective *means* of teaching the Armenian language -- one of the strongest ingredients of Armenianism. Undoubtedly, the Armenian language has played a decisive role in the preservation of Armenian national *identity*. It is through Armenian language that one may properly study the literature, history and culture of the Armenian people. It is the language that reflects the thoughts and mentality of a people. The Armenian language is an important tool of communication in Armenian community life. It is the common language of Armenian people in their Fatherland, as well as the Diaspora. Of course, one can be an Armenian without knowing the language, but such lack of knowledge will cut him off considerably from the amount of Armenian experience and community life. The Armenian language is that element which cements together the Armenians scattered throughout the world. The language is the *liaison* between communities and persons. Also, ministering to one's people in his own mother tongue enables a person to establish a better rapport -- a confidence and good will in communicating with his compatriots. The Armenian language is a conducive factor to enhance the Armenian soul and consciousness. Recent studies show that

ethnic awareness is an important foundation for growth and emotional maturity. Leading education experts assert that the most relevant language for a child to study is the language of his parents and forbearers.⁸

The Armenian Evangelical Church, which has in the past distinguished herself for her educational services to the Armenian people, should inundate both her motherland and the Armenian Diaspora with educational institutions.

The birthright of Armenian Evangelicalism carries with it the responsibility of enlightening Armenian people spiritually, as well as educationally. Armenian Evangelicals know by experience that education is an excellent investment which yields substantial returns.

2. *The Media.* Another powerful tool at hand is the media. Television, radio and the press carry a potential one cannot afford to ignore. Radio time, in particular, is readily available, and even now, is being utilized in presenting many fine programs of ethnic nature. Armenian Evangelicals are sorely deficient in the area of media. Whereas other churches, organizations and individuals have their radio hours, Armenian Evangelicals do not have airtime. There lacks, too, an *Armenian Evangelical Press* - a press that is a formal organ of its cultural expression. Armenian Evangelicals have a number of commendable publications in print today, but they need to go beyond this number and, again, form a durable Armenian Evangelical organ capable of representing the Armenian theological and intellectual directions and aspirations. They need a strong *Armenian Evangelical organ*, which should also be an objective and unbiased publication for the Armenian masses within the polarized Armenian community life and try to achieve a better understanding among Armenian people of diverse political persuasions.

Still another way to help preserve and perpetuate Armenian heritage is to make available to the new generations Armenian history and literature in the language they can read. If they are to identify with the Armenian people, they must be able to make contact with their best thought.

In short, the media has tremendous power in today's society. People feel almost daily the impact of political news, be it through television, the wire service, radio or newspapers. So, too, can the cause of Armenian Evangelical heritage make its impact with a well directed program in each of these areas.⁹

3. *The Church.* The third arm of defense should be the Church. Armenian Evangelicals must have their ethnic identity based on Armenian Church history. For example, without reading Nerses Shnorhalee, Grigor Narekatsi and other Armenian religious titans, one cannot interpret the mystery and glory of Armenian Christianity.

Armenian Evangelical churches carry the strength of the pulpit, one of the most valuable aspects of any spiritual mission. Ministers, in their sermons, can look to the rich Armenian history for illustrations, be they in a religious vein or a purely ethnic one. They should strive to establish within their religious communities an atmosphere conducive to the preservation and perpetuation of the Armenian heritage.¹⁰ This includes going beyond the message of the pulpit,

promoting cultural communication in the Sunday School, for instance, or encouraging the observance and celebration of all major Armenian festivals.

4. **The Home.** There is much work to be done, and ideally, it should begin at home. Sadly enough, the foundation for ethnic consciousness is neglected in the family. Cultural intermarriage sometimes takes its toll on ethnic strains, to the extent that many are no longer concerned with their lineage and its respective history, no matter how rich and colorful as it may be.

Armenian parents should realize that the Armenian school is one important agency, but not the only one in their children's educational process. Without the help of the home and other influences on the child, the school cannot train for living. No school can transmit that sense of heritage, that tradition of values, that sense of real connection with the life of the Armenian people. Schools can only amplify what takes place in the home. If the commitments to the Armenian heritage are not expressed and lived out in the home, the school will only amplify the dissonance between what is taught within its walls and what is lived within the home of the student.

However, one of the major thrusts in the transmission of the Armenian heritage at home is the *value system*. How do children learn and develop Armenian cultural values? Children fashion their value system mainly during childhood. One of the most important ingredients, then, is the parents. One of the important classrooms is the home, and parental dimension is extremely decisive in effective Armenian heritage education. If Armenian Evangelicals are going to raise children who can be proud of their national heritage, ethnic and cultural values, they have to fulfill their responsibilities as Armenian parents by creating such a conducive atmosphere at home where their children are exposed to the Armenian language, history, music, art and other cultural expressions of their heritage.

They should not also lose sight of the fact that a lot depends on their *attitude*. It becomes increasingly clear that it is not so much what they say as what they *do* and *are* that count; for by their attitudes and personal examples, they impart a set of values which will leave a greater impression than their lip service. As in the other endeavors, in the realm of Armenian heritage, what they do and what they are, as good Armenians, speaks louder than what they say.¹¹

Evangelism

The fifth challenge of the Armenian Evangelical Church is Evangelism.

Evangelism is the spread of the Christian Gospel or good news (in Greek, *evangelion*), whether by formal preaching or by personal witness. It is the privilege and duty of every Christian. It should be also the Church's first priority. The Church must proclaim, bear witness, and tell the Good News. The initiator of this is the Spirit of God; it takes the initiative to extend the sovereignty of God through the Word of God.

The early evangelists were preoccupied with proclaiming the Good News of Jesus to others. They had experienced God's love in Jesus Christ, and wished to live their lives consistent with their proclamation. They wished to share their

faith with others. They used public, household, personal and literary methods of evangelism. They preached and taught in the synagogues, at Christian assemblies, and in the open air. They also used their homes.

In our day and age, Christians have the same privilege and responsibility of evangelism. They are bound to their fellow humans by the ties of God's family and by the command, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel." Thus, the assembly of believers, the Church, is a fellowship with a commission, i.e. the *Great Commission*! "Go, therefore," commanded Jesus, "and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The early disciples were thrilled by the challenge to evangelize the world. They saw mankind as hopelessly lost without Christ. They had the answer. They had Christ, Who possessed the power of an endless life. They were to make disciples and teach them the will of Jesus Christ. This is the Church's peculiar prerogative and privilege.¹²

The Armenian Evangelical Church should always be an evangelistic Church, a religious community of evangelizers. She was born of evangelism and for evangelizing. She should always stress the importance of complete loyalty to Christ. Her members should not lose sight of the fact that their sublime task is the evangelization of the Armenian people and the world. In this sense, all Armenian Evangelicals are called to be missionaries.

Armenian Evangelicals should realize the Lord Who calls people to be disciples by saying, "Come, follow Me," in the same breath says, "and I will make you fishers of men." He offers relief to those who "labor and are heavy-laden," puts them on their feet and sends them away, ordering, "Go and preach the Gospel to every creature."

In spite of some heartening evangelistic and missionary ventures in some places, particularly those of the Armenian Missionary Association of America, there is a general complacency in Armenian Evangelical churches.

Can the Armenian Evangelical Church survive and overcome complacency and lethargy? Yes she can, if she first realizes that she has plenty of room for constructive discontent and aspirations for improvement.

Armenian Evangelicals can overcome complacency if they abandon their passive spectator's role and become Christ's ambassadors.

Sometimes the *good* can be an enemy of the *best*. Armenian Evangelicals have to aspire for the best. It is good for the contemporary Armenian Evangelicals to get involved in distribution of scriptures; making provisions for church extension, giving financial aid to churches, social services, and needy students; preparing devotional booklets and tracts; but much more is expected of them.

There are tremendous needs and opportunities. Here we can mention just a few:

1. *Finding and placing evangelists in places where there are no churches.* God has called the Armenian Evangelical Church to mission and commissioned her to worldwide proclamation. She must confirm the Holy Spirit's selection of candidates, equip them and send them out.

2. *Setting up a multi-faceted media for missions outreach.* The Armenian Evangelical Unions, in cooperation with the Armenian Missionary Association of America, should organize programs of evangelism and ministry to the unchurched people in Armenia and in the Diaspora, through various means, such as radio and television programs for broadcasting; publications of tracts, brochures, magazines, and books; periodic evangelistic campaigns, ministry of itinerant preachers, summer camps for youth; and relief and rehabilitation programs, including social service centers.

3. *Evangelism also should be understood in terms of discovering mission in one's own backyard.* The challenge is to reconceptualize mission from being located in faraway places to identifying missional needs close to home and responding to those needs. If the old paradigm called for church members to pray for missions, pay for missions, and encourage a modest number of people to volunteer for a full time career as paid missionaries, this new paradigm calls for the laity to be directly engaged in doing missions.

The challenge of the Armenian Evangelicals today is to involve in such programs as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, the proliferation of all-day care centers in churches, ministering with single parent families, spending time to help construct new buildings for new missions or repairing the damage after a natural disaster, proliferation of congregational supported pastoral counseling centers, etc.

This kind of evangelism focuses not so much on the number of dollars sent away but on the number of volunteers involved in local outreach ministries.

Ministry of the Laity

Sixth, Armenian Evangelicalism should emphasize the ministry of the laity.

Communication with God is the privilege of all individuals. Worship, prayer, ceremonies are means of communication. However, throughout the ages, a "priestly order" has been created to perform the role of mediator between creature and Creator. Armenian Evangelicalism, like all Protestant Churches, has cherished the biblical principle of priesthood of all believers. This is an affirmation and an assertion that all believers have the right to direct access to God on their own behalf. This is both their privilege and responsibility. This is the assertion that Christians can come into the presence of God without a priestly intermediary. They can confess their sins to God and can make their own commitment to the way of Christ.

The "priesthood of all believers" is closely connected with the doctrine of the Church; the doctrine which maintains that the Church is the Body of Christ and the fellowship of those who are committed to Him.

In the Armenian Evangelical Church, ministers are not a special class by themselves. They are on equal standing with the rest of the 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 the church members. All believers have the privilege and the duty to minister to each other, to be each other's "priest,"

especially to 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 the Church.

Armenian Evangelicalism should impress upon all Armenian Churches and all Armenians that Christian ministry belongs to the whole Church, and that 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. The Armenian churches must build a strong base of active and dedicated members. It is true that the Armenian Apostolic Church is one of the most democratic of all Orthodox and Ancient Churches. But it still has not fully utilized the resources of its membership. Women play a very minimal role in the leadership of the church. They are the great absentee in the ecclesiastical and national assemblies of the church.

Armenian Evangelicals, who for many decades have involved women in the leadership positions, can provide the example. Armenian Evangelicals should impress upon all Armenian churches that lay people, males and females alike, should be trained to assume their rightful place and responsibility in their church affairs. They should exercise their privilege and right of responsible membership. It seems high time to elevate, for special recognition, the status of the laity in the ministry of the church. Revising the status of the laity raises a number of important questions: How can the ministry of the laity fulfill its role by going into all the world to live out the Good News in homes, in the marketplace, and along the "Jericho roads" to life? How can the ministry of the clergy, defined as training, teaching, practicing, and equipping the laity for their ministry, achieve its mandate? Perhaps Armenian Churches have waited too long for the rediscovery of the Church as a lay academy where clergy train and prepare members for mission.

Ecumenical and Inter-Church Relations

Seventh, The Armenian Evangelical Church should strengthen her ties with the "Mother Church" and other Armenian religious and civic organizations.

The Armenian Evangelical Movement was born in the Armenian Apostolic Church. It is a historical fact that a group of Apostolic Armenians initiated the movement of church reform within the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. The reform movement was crystallized by a group of Armenian Apostolics under the title "Society of Piety." Ultimately, this group became the nucleus of the new Evangelical Church of Armenia in Constantinople, July 1, 1846.

Attempts have been made in the past to strengthen the ties of the Armenian Evangelical Church with the Mother Church and even engage in discussions of reuniting the two Churches. One such serious attempt was the creation of the Rapprochement Commission of the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Evangelical Churches in 1970. Undoubtedly, it was a most welcome development. It was a very encouraging phenomenon that representatives of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America and the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America seriously deliberated the

question of church reunion. Their report, submitted on February 12, 1972, to the "proper authorities of both Churches," raised hopes in both camps. Unfortunately however, Vazgen I, the then Catholicos of All Armenians, unexpectedly and abruptly put an end to these ecumenical dialogues.

In his letter of December 30, 1972, to Archbishop Torgom Manukian, the Primate of the Eastern Diocese, His Holiness Vazgen I, in a negative mood, stated that "The Report of the Rapprochement Commission does not correspond with the objectives of the Bishop's Council (held in 1968, in Edjmiatzin, Armenia)." He added, "We wish to offer invitation of union to our Evangelical children and to submit to their kind attention, that to arrive at that goal...it is necessary to adhere more firmly to the canonical and traditional principles, understandings, and hierarchical structure...only they become the supreme pledge of the perpetuity of the particular survival of Armenian Christianity...and the spiritual, cultural, and national unity of the Armenian people." He then concluded with a rhetorical question, "Are our separated children, Catholic and Protestant, prepared to hear the invitation of the Mother Church of the Armenians?"¹³

This letter was a complete shock to the members of the Rapprochement Commission and many ecumenically-minded clergy and lay people from both Armenian and Evangelical Churches. Of course, there were reasons for this unfortunate "letter." There were internal and external pressures on Catholicos Vazgen; perhaps there were factors and circumstances beyond his control! But whatever the causes, there was no justification for such a drastic decision!

Times have changed, leaders have changed, and circumstances have changed since the writing of the letter. More than a quarter of a century has elapsed. Political circumstances have changed; the Soviet Union has collapsed, Armenia is a free and independent country since 1991, the cold war is over and a new Catholicos, in the person of Catholicos Garegin I (1995-1999) came to the scene to change the *status quo* of the dormant relationship between the two churches. There were indications that he would initiate the implementation of the resolutions of the Rapprochement Commission. Alas, his reign as Catholicos of All Armenians was a brief one. After almost a year of illness, he died in 1999. Now, as of November 4, 1999, a new Catholicos, Garegin II, is on the throne of Holy Edjmiatzin as the 132nd Catholicos of All Armenians. If the new pontiff of the Armenian Church pursues the same ecumenical policies of his predecessor, there is hope to revive the formal dialogue between the Armenian Apostolic and the Armenian Evangelical Churches. Undoubtedly, he will find genuine support from the present pontiff of the Great House of Cilicia, Catholicos Aram I, who is a highly esteemed leader in the World Council of Churches and an equally ecumenically-oriented leader of the Armenian Church. If the basic elements of the unity dialogues are *reciprocation, mutual understanding and respect*, then surely, the Armenian Evangelical response will be positive and the rapprochement will be fruitful.

It is important that either the former Rapprochement Commission be reactivated and augmented, or a new and more representative commission be

established. Since the old Rapprochement Commission represented only the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America and the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America (Eastern States and Canada), it would be preferable to establish a new Rapprochement Commission which would represent all the major components of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church. In the best interests of all parties involved, it is also important that the Commission on the Armenian Apostolic side represent the two Catholicosates (Edjmiatzin and Cilicia) and the two Patriarchates (Istanbul and Jerusalem). The Armenian Evangelical counterpart should be represented by all the Unions presently under the auspices of the Armenian Evangelical World Council. The Rapprochement Commission can benefit from the valuable experience, findings and recommendations of the old Commission.

The Armenian Evangelical Church should also strengthen her ties with other reformed Armenian Christian groups such as Armenian Brotherhood, Armenian Nazarene, Pentecostal, and other Churches. All of these churches, with varying degrees, share common affirmations and have common stances against certain beliefs and practices. Among these churches there are wide differences in theological perspective, belief and practice. The right of private judgment and liberties of the individual mind, as well as the right of interpreting the Scriptures is characteristic of these groups.

With all their differences, these smaller churches and religious groups have an internal spiritual unity which binds them together. It is their common religious heritage and their cultural legacy. They all have roots in the Protestant reform movement, and they are all Armenians!

Generally, these churches are mission-oriented and highly evangelistic churches. Currently, one of their largest mission fields is Armenia, where they have been investing considerable financial and moral resources. But they also meet considerable resistance by temporal and spiritual leadership of Armenia. Yerevan and Edjmiatzin openly disprove their missionary activities, and accuse them of "proselytism." They even labeled them as "foreign sects or cults." These are unfortunate and unjustifiable accusations and appellations. These churches have been rendering valuable service to the Armenian people. They can continue to do the same. But if they are denied official status, and if they want to maintain their existence and continue their missionary work in Armenia, perhaps they should seriously consider to place themselves under the umbrella of a recognized Armenian Church organization.

This should not be done for merely utilitarian considerations, but should be a genuine venture of unity. The Armenian Evangelical Church, which has been officially recognized by the Armenian Apostolic Church and by the government of the Republic of Armenia, could take these Christian groups under her "wings" and provide them with guidelines and ground rules with which they can operate freely to do their evangelistic work.

Undoubtedly, much spiritual and moral strength can come from this type of partnership and this kind of "spiritual federalism." There will be much blessing in this kind of relation. A united federation of these smaller churches, with

hostile barriers down, not only can lead to the total enrichment of relationships, but can be a source of blessing to the Armenian people.

One of the challenges of the Armenian Evangelical Church is to take initiative, through her prime agency, the Armenian Evangelical World Council and the constituent Church Unions, to actively venture a dialogue with "Evangelically-oriented" reformed and independent churches for the sake of Christian witness and more efficient missionary outreach.

As for the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Evangelical Churches, it is an established fact that the Armenian Apostolic Church is the Mother Church of the Armenian Evangelical Church. People may have differences with their mother, but a mother does not cease to be a mother. They may disagree with her, but they would not be disagreeable.

With all their diversity and differences, Armenian Apostolic and Evangelical Churches are called to have unity. But their unity is not expressed through uniformity. The idea is not that they all think alike, feel alike, reason alike, act alike. No, they can't do that! They are not carbon copies of one another. And then, they couldn't improve, they couldn't challenge and motivate, if their unity was expressed through uniformity.

Again, their unity is not expressed through unanimity. Quite the contrary, their unity is expressed by what Paul calls, "speaking the truth in love to each other." That's not an easy thing to do, for it means telling each other where they are and how they are. That's what they are called to do.

Unity is not necessarily an organic union. The idea is not that both Churches think alike, reason alike, believe alike, and worship alike. The hope is to experience, together, that *unity of heart* which is deeper than whatever may divide them in terms of doctrine, theology, rites, rituals; so that they may know they can embrace each other as Christians and Armenians, even when they do not always agree on everything.

Perhaps the day has come for the two Churches to fully realize that their national life is like an investment program -- it is as if they are in a mutual fund. A mutual fund is essentially the pooling of the resources of a number of people who share in earnings and capital gains or losses.

Likewise, the Armenian Apostolic and Evangelical Churches are involved in the "mutual fund" of their ethnic life; it is a mutual endeavor, and they will either *rise or fall together*.

As for Armenian Evangelicals, it is important for them to recognize their indebtedness to their "Mother Church," the Armenian Apostolic Church, because she has been for centuries the custodian of rich religious and cultural values, which have shaped the destiny of the Armenian nation.

Armenian Evangelicals must also remember that they are rooted in the past and that theirs is the responsibility to know their heritage, to appreciate it, to preserve it, and pass it on to future generations. The Armenian heritage is the continuous chain that connects all Armenians to Armenianism, the links of which are a common history, a common memory and a common fate.

As for the Armenian Apostolic Church, she needs a drastic change of attitude toward the other Armenian denominations. She must develop a broader and more tolerant attitude toward non-Apostolic Armenian Churches. There is a widespread belief, for instance, that the Armenian Evangelical and the Armenian Catholic Churches were, from their inception, "protest-religions" which militantly opposed the faith from which they had sprung.

There are many Armenian Apostolics who claim, for example, that like all "protest movements," Armenian Evangelicalism sought to prove itself at the expense of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

This is a charge which Armenian Evangelicalism has denied. On the contrary, most Armenian Evangelicals identify themselves with their Mother Church and Nation. What they regret is the Apostolic Church's lack of charity and understanding. In recent years, for instance, Armenian Evangelicals have complained that while the ecumenical contacts of the Armenian Apostolic Church with non-Armenian denominations have grown, her reservoir of tolerance for the Armenian Evangelical Church has run dry. Many Armenian Evangelicals have never ceased protesting that they have been and still are treated as a misguided, fallible, heretical minority. They are outraged by continuous discrimination from many Armenian Apostolic laity and clergy; although both sides have sought, on occasion, to promote better relations as time diminishes the significance of ancient animosities. Armenian Evangelicals should continue to point out to their Armenian Apostolic compatriots that the Armenian nation should not be equated with the Armenian Apostolic Church; that there are Armenians, too, who happen to be Evangelical and Catholic. Armenian Evangelicals should impress upon the Armenian Apostolics, through their pulpits, media and social contacts, to see beyond their pride and prejudices and tear down the barriers that continue to separate them from Armenians of other religious persuasions.

In our day and age, Armenians have to understand that the totality of the Armenian people is bound up as one indivisible unit. What happens to Armenians in one place affects the destiny of Armenians throughout the world. In recent years, the tragic earthquake in northern Armenia, the Azure massacres in Baku and in the historic Artsakh, the Turkish and Azeri economic blockade of Armenia, the heart-rending suffering of the Armenian people in their Fatherland in the face of enormous hardships have awakened all Armenians to the stark realization that none of the religious or political groups is self-sufficient in itself. Thus, all Armenians must recognize that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and they must be sure that every link in their chain is forged just as strongly as another. Each component of the nation must realize that it is a link in an endless chain, and to be an Armenian is to have a bond with every other Armenian, no matter where or in what circumstances.

In short, all Armenians are bound together for weal or woe. They must be unified in spirit. Their solidarity is based on two important principles:

- a. They are all one in Christ, and are bound by Christian ties;

b. They all belong to one nation, united in destiny and indivisible as an entity.

Their greatest challenge now is to be one strong-nation serving God and mankind in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹ Vartkes Kassouni, "Impact of the Printed Bible on the Armenian Nation," *Armenian/American Outlook*, Spring, 1967, Vol. 4, No. 1, New York: AEU-East and West and AMAA, p. 3.

² Hagop Apraham Chakmakian, *The Armenian Evangelical Movement: Why Needed, Why Separated*, Fresno, California: Liberty Printing Co., 1985, p. 109. Also, Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East*, Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910, p. 98.

³ There were several attempts to translate the Bible into the vernacular Armenian, the *Ashkharabar*. In 1821, the Mekhitarist Fathers of Venice undertook the task of translating the *Old Testament* from *Grabar* to *Ashkharabar*, under the leadership of Father Hovhannes Zohrapian. In 1841, the *New Testament* was translated by Zenob of Erzurum. In 1843, missionary O. G. O. Dwight translated the *Book of Psalms*.

In 1844 Dr. Elias, Riggs embarked upon translating the entire Bible into Armenian, with the help of the following scholars: missionary Mr. Schauffler, Bishop Dionysius Garabedain, H. Jellian, Vagharshak Sarkis Hovhannessian, Senekerim Der Minassian, Antreas Papazian, and *Varjabed* (teacher) Avedis. See: Dicran J. Kherlopian, *Vossgemadian* (Golden Anniversary), in two volumes, published on the occasion of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Armenian Evangelical Movement, Beirut: Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, 1950, pp. 73-75.

Barkev Darakjian, "Evangelism in the Early Armenian Evangelical Church," *AMAA News*, Paramus, N. J., Nov/Dec., 1995, Vol. 35, No. 6, p. 4.

⁴ Vahan H. Tootikian, *Reflections of an Armenian*, Detroit: Armenian Heritage Committee, 1980, pp. 8-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁷ Darakjian, p. 4.

⁸ Vahan H. Tootikian, "Preserving our Ethnic Heritage," *First World Conference of Armenian Evangelicals*, Haverford, PA: AMAA and AEUNA, 1978, pp. 38-86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

¹² Wayne C. Clark, *The Meaning of Church Membership*, Philadelphia, PA: The Judson Press, 1960, p. 29.

¹³ Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I's letter to His Eminence Archbishop Torgom Manookian, *Edjmiatzin*, Vol. 52, No. 4, January 15, 1974.

**ՀԱՅ ԱՒԵՏԱՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ ԵԿԵՂԵԾԻՒՆ
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ՎԵՐ. ՎԱՀԱՆ ԹՈՒԹԻԿԵԱՆ

Որոշ է որ այսօր հայ քրիստոնեությունը քիչ մը աւելի հարստացած է շնորհիւ հայ աւետարականութեան:

Յօդուածին մէջ կը հարցադրուին Հայ Աւետարանականութեան այժմեականութիւնը եւ անոր շարունակուող գոյութեան իմաստն ու իմաստաւորումը:

Հայ Աւետարանական Եկեղեցին կարելոր նպաստ ունի հայ կրօնական, հոգեւոր, կրթական, մշակութային եւ հանրային կեանքի կալաւորներուն:

Անդրադառնալով մերօրեայ մարտահրաւերներուն, հեղինակը կ'առանձնացնէ հոգեւոր վերածնունդի, Աստուծաշնչական ապրելակերպի, քրիստոնէական դաստիարակութեան, հայկական ժառանգի պահպանման ու յարատեւումի, Աւետարանականութեան, հոգեւորականութեան կոչումի, էքիւմենիք եւ միջ-եկեղեցական յարաբերութիւններու, (մանաւանդ՝ Հայ Առաքելական Եկեղեցոյ հետ առաւել գործակցելու) հապէս բարեւլաման կարիք ունեցող հարցերը:

