

## THE EVANGELICAL AFFIRMATIONS<sup>1</sup>

Evangelical Christianity is engaged in a broad conflict on many fronts. Internally, it is struggling over moral improprieties, doctrinal lapses, and problems of self-identity. Externally, it is carrying on a lingering battle with liberal Christianity and seeking to plug leaks in its doctrinal structure that still come from that source. Moreover, new pressures are rising from the occult and from various syncretistic movements combining elements of paganism, Islam, Buddhism or other historic religions with Christianity. In Western Europe and North America (and increasingly in other parts of the world as well), modern secularism has become a major foe of evangelical Christianity.

Each of these religious movements presents its own conception of reality, and all differ from evangelical faith in doctrines that lie at the very core of biblical Christianity.

Modern secularism sees the world without God; or it formally acknowledges the existence of some ill-defined “god,” it squeezes God and all religion to the periphery of life. Either way, a theoretical atheism or a practical, functioning atheism views the universe as controlled merely by natural or human forces. Logically, the exclusion of God from the universe rules out the very possibility of miracles in any biblical sense and yields a world view without incarnation, resurrection and judgment. Unfortunately it is possible to give lip allegiance to theistic or even Christian beliefs while choosing to live practically as though God does not exist.

By contrast, historic Christianity has always affirmed that God lives and acts in this world. Evangelical faith insists on the reality of divine action in creation, providence, revelation and redemption. History is not a mindless process, but the unfolding of events through which the triune God works out his purposes in the universe. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the God of the Bible is the sovereign Lord who controls the destiny of the nations and guides the intimate details of personal life. The hairs of our head are numbered, and God sees every sparrow that falls. Both the existence and the nature of God, therefore, are fundamental questions. For atheism, whether it be theoretical or practical, the issue is settled negatively in advance: the supernatural intervening God who worked miracles, revealed himself in Jesus Christ and the Bible, and is now active in and important to our daily lives, is impossible.

World religions and modern occultic concepts of reality introduce a strange and exotic dimension to this spiritual warfare. New manifestations of spiritism, Satanism, demonology, the New Age movement, various syncretistic cults, and other developments have set a much larger and more complicated agenda for evangelical witness. Conflicts have sometimes escalated into cataclysmic confrontations between belief and unbelief and between good and evil. Such confrontations have increased in intensity due to a resurgent evangelicalism, now variously estimated to number between 30 million adherents (Christianity Today poll) and 66 million adherents (Gallup's poll) in the United States and 500 million worldwide (according to David B. Barrett).

Neither evangelicalism nor its conflicts, both internal and external conflicts, are new in the history of Christianity. Evangelical faith has deep roots in the history of mainstream churches. It did not suddenly rise from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivals. It can be traced back

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<sup>1</sup> The Evangelical Affirmations emerged from a council of theologians who convened at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 14 – 17 May 1989 to discuss and draft a theological statement defining an evangelical Christian stance.

through the Reformation and the ancient church to find its base in New Testament Christianity. Recently, however, some have declared that several evangelical doctrines are theologically innovative and do not represent the central traditions of the Christian church. Other observers have asked if the evangelical movement has become so fragmented theologically that it no longer has a coherent self-identity. In another vein, the moral failure of a number of prominent evangelicals has been all too apparent. We are shamed by our inconsistencies in living out the ethical values we profess, and we recognize the need to confess our sins before God. In the last decade of the twentieth century, a number of these troubling issues have come into sharper focus. We realize that our own house is not entirely in order. Many of our worst problems we have brought on ourselves. Not only on the outside, but even within our own ranks, some confusion exists as to exactly who evangelicals are.

Evangelical Affirmations seeks to clarify the character of the evangelical movement and to affirm certain truths critical to the advancement of the church of Christ. As we do so, we sadly confess that our own sinful failures have often discredited our proclamation of those great biblical truths. For our sinful lapses into sexual misconduct, neglect of the poor, lack of accountability on the part of our leaders, and self-seeking divisiveness, we repent before God and our neighbors.

The following affirmations do not constitute a complete doctrinal statement or a comprehensive confession of faith. Rather, they represent evangelical truths that specially need to be asserted and clarified in our day. We address these affirmations primarily to our fellow evangelicals who, though confessing their personal commitment to these doctrines, have sometimes raised questions as to their importance and as to how essential they are to an authentic evangelical faith. Only secondarily have we addressed these affirmations to non-evangelicals. In this latter case we are concerned to clarify differences between evangelicals and non-evangelicals within the Christian churches. We also wish to remove some of the caricatures of evangelicalism the general public often holds and to state what evangelicals really believe on issues growing out of the interaction of evangelicals with modern culture.

## **1. Jesus Christ and the Gospel**

We affirm the good news that the Son of God became man to offer himself for sinners and to give them everlasting life.

We affirm that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man with two distinct natures united in one person. The incarnation, substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ are essential to the gospel. Through these events a gracious God has acted in time and history to reach out to humanity and save all who believe in him.

Without Christ and the biblical gospel, sinful humanity is without salvation and is left to create its own "gospels". These "gospels" take various forms and many are set forth by so-called "Christian" sects that omit the heart of the biblical gospel. Any "gospel" without the Christ of the Bible cannot be the saving gospel, and leaves sinners estranged from God and under his wrath.

We affirm that the people of God are commanded to witness to the world concerning God's offer of redemption in Christ. The gospel, working by the Holy Spirit, is powerful to transform the lives of individuals lost in sin; provides believers with meaning for life on this earth; empowers the church to accomplish Christ's work in the world; serves as a leavening influence in society; and sustains the faithful in hope for the life to come.

## **2. Creation and Fall**

We affirm that the triune God created heaven and earth, and made human beings, both male and female, in his own image. In his providence God upholds all things and reveals himself through creation and history.

Because of Adam's fall, all became sinners and stand under God's righteous judgment. Human rebellion against God shows itself today in many ways: such as in atheistic denials of God's existence; in functional atheism that concedes God's existence but denies his relevance to personal conduct; in oppression of the poor and helpless; in occult concepts of reality; in the abuse of earth's resources; and in theories of an accidental naturalistic evolutionary origin of the universe and human life; and in many other ways.

As a result of the fall of the race into sin, human beings must be born again to new life in Christ. They can be pardoned and redeemed by faith in Christ alone.

## **3. God as Source and Ground of Truth**

We affirm that God the Creator is the source of truth and the ground of the unity of all truth. By revelation God makes known the truth concerning himself, the world, human sin and redemption. God's revelation addresses the whole person-intellect, will and emotion. The Holy Spirit accompanies his Word in convicting, instructing, nurturing, and empowering his people so they learn to live in fellowship with God and other persons in accordance with scriptural directives.

We reject irrationalistic theologies and philosophies that compromise or deny objective truth. We also reject rationalistic alternatives based on autonomous human reason. We recognize that as finite and sinful creatures we do not have complete knowledge of God, and that "now we know in part." We rejoice, nonetheless, that God reveals himself in creation and the Bible.

We encourage Christian churches and Christian schools to develop and implement disciplined instruction that relates the mind of Christ to all knowledge, that emphasizes the compatibility of scientific inquiry with biblical teachings about nature, and that challenges believers to understand and apply a Christian view of the world to all of life.

## **4. Holy Scripture**

We affirm the complete truthfulness and the full and final authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures as the Word of God written. The appropriate response to it is humble assent and obedience.

The Word of God becomes effective by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through in and through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit creates faith and provides a sufficient doctrinal and moral guide for the church. Just as God's self-giving love to us in the gospel provides the supreme motive for the Christian life, so the teaching of Holy Scripture informs us of what are truly acts of love.

Attempts to limit the truthfulness of inspired Scripture to "faith and practice," viewed as less than the whole of Scripture, or worse, to assert that it errs in such matters as history or the world of

nature, depart not only from the Bible's representation of its own veracity, but also from the central tradition of the Christian churches.

The meaning of Scripture must neither be divorced from its words nor dictated by reader response.

The inspired author's intention is essential to our understanding of the text. No Scripture must be interpreted in isolation from other passages of Scripture.

All Scripture is true and profitable, but Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture. The truth of any single passage must be understood in light of the truth of all passages of Scripture. Our Lord has been pleased to give us the whole corpus of Scripture to instruct and guide his church.

## **5. The Church**

We affirm that the church is a worshiping and witnessing community of Christians who profess faith in Christ and submit to his authority. Christ is building his church where his Word is preached and his name confessed. He sustains his church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We affirm that the church is to provide for corporate worship on the part of believers, the instruction of the faithful in the Word of God and its application, and the fellowship, comfort, exhortation, rebuke, and sharing in the needs of the entire body of Christ in a day of lax doctrine and even more lax discipline, we specially affirm that Scripture requires the defense of sound doctrine, the practice of church discipline, and a call for renewal.

We affirm the mission of the church to be, primarily, that of evangelism of the lost through witness to the gospel by life and by word; and secondarily, to be salt and light to the whole world as we seek to alleviate the burdens and injustices of a suffering world. Though some are specially called to one ministry or another, no believer is exonerated from the duty of bearing witness to the gospel or of providing help to those in need.

We distance ourselves from any movement that seeks to establish a world church on the premise of a religious pluralism that denies normative Christian doctrines. Rather we encourage efforts that help believers and faithful churches move toward fellowship and unity with one another in the name of Christ, the Lord of the church.

## **6. Doctrine and Practice**

We affirm the critical need to conjoin faith and practice. To profess conversion without a genuine change of heart and life violates biblical teaching and substitutes dead orthodoxy for a living faith. Christian leaders, have a responsibility to serve as spiritual role models and moral examples. Any disjunction between faith and practice generates hypocrisy.

We send forth an urgent call for the practice of holiness and righteousness. Justification by faith must issue in sanctification. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are to deny such characteristics of a selfish nature as immorality, evil desire, and covetousness, to walk in righteousness and integrity, and to practice justice and love at all times. Purity of doctrine must be accompanied by purity of life.

## **7. Human Rights and Righteousness**

We affirm that God commands us to seek justice in human affairs whether in the church or in society. In accord with the biblical call for righteousness, God's people should model justice in social relationships and should protest, confront, and strive to alleviate injustice. We must respond to the plight of the destitute, hungry, and homeless; of victims of political oppression and gender or race discrimination, including apartheid; and of all others deprived of rightful protection under the law. We confess our own persistent sin of racism, which ignores the divine image in humankind.

We affirm the integrity of marriage, the permanence of the wife-husband relationship, the importance of the family for the care and nourishment of children, and the primary responsibility of parents for the instruction of their children.

We affirm that evangelicals living in democratic societies should be active in public affairs. We advocate a public philosophy that advances just government and protects the rights of all. In cooperation with like-minded persons, we should support and promote legislation reflecting consistent moral values. We condemn abortion-on-demand as a monstrous evil, deplore drug and alcohol abuse, and lament sexual hedonism, pornography, homosexual practices, and child abuse. We encourage evangelicals to exercise responsible stewardship of their own personal wealth and the conservation of the earth's resources.

## **8. Religious Liberty**

We affirm the duty of state and society to provide religious liberty as a basic human right. We deplore any oppression to maintain or elicit religious commitments. We hold that civil government should not arbitrate spiritual differences, and that neither church nor mosque nor temple nor synagogue should use political power to enforce its own sectarian doctrines or practices. We do not consider laws to protect individual rights, such as the right to life or the freedom of anyone to confess his or her faith openly in society, to be a sectarian position.

## **9. Second Coming and Judgment**

We affirm that Christ will return in power and glory to bring full and eternal salvation to his people and to judge the world. This prospect of the Lord's return to vindicate his holiness and subjugate all evil should accelerate our witness and mission in the world.

We affirm that only through the work of Christ can any person be saved and be resurrected to live with God forever. Unbelievers will be separated eternally from God. Concern for evangelism should not be compromised by any illusion that all will be finally saved (universalism).

We affirm the preaching of ultimate hope in and through Christ. In an age of anxiety and despair, the blessed hope of God's ultimate victory is not only a warning of divine judgment, but a wonderful hope that gives light and meaning to the human heart.

## **Conclusion: Evangelical Identity**

Evangelicals believe, first of all, the gospel as it is set forth in the Bible. The word evangelical is derived from the biblical term *euangelion* meaning "good news." It is the Good News that God became man in Jesus Christ to live and die and rise again from the dead in order to save us

from our sin and all its consequences. The Savior's benefits and his salvation are bestowed upon us freely and graciously and are received through personal faith in Christ. They are not conditioned on our merit or personal goodness but are based wholly on the mercy of God.

Evangelicals are also to be identified by what is sometimes called the material or content principle of evangelicalism. They hold to all of the most basic doctrines of the Bible: for example, the triuneness of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; the pre-existence, incarnation, full deity and humanity of Christ united in one person; his sinless life, his authoritative teaching; his substitutionary atonement; his bodily resurrection from the dead, his second coming to judge the living and the dead; the necessity of holy living; the imperative of witnessing to others about the gospel; the necessity of a life of service to God and human kind; and the hope in a life to come. These doctrines emerge from the Bible and are summarized in the Apostles' Creed and the historic confessions of evangelical churches.

Evangelicals have a third distinguishing mark. In accordance with the teaching of their Lord they believe the Bible to be the final and authoritative source of all doctrine. This is often called the formative or forming principle of evangelicalism. Evangelicals hold the Bible to be God's Word and, therefore, completely true and trustworthy (and this is what we mean by the words *infallible* and *inerrant*). It is the authority by which they seek to guide their thoughts and their lives.

These then are the three distinguishing marks of all evangelicals. Without constant fidelity to all three marks, evangelicals will be unable to meet the demands of the future and interact effectively with the internal and external challenges noted in these affirmations.

Evangelical churches also hold various distinctive doctrines that are important to them; but nonetheless, they share this common evangelical faith.

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We offer these Affirmations to God, to Christians everywhere, and to our world. In sincere repentance and sorrow, we remind ourselves of our own sins and failures; and we pray that God would renew us in confessing Christ as our Lord and Savior in all that we say and do.

### **Soli Deo Gloria**

*The Consultation on Evangelical Affirmations co-sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, May 14 to 17, 1989.*

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