

One Faith

The Evangelical Consensus

By J.I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden

Synopsis and Comments by William H. Gross – Colorado Springs 2006

Historical Background

In 380 AD, the Church became an institution, and church doctrine became a required set of teachings; failure to adhere to them was subject to criminal punishment. While Constantine had made Christianity legal in 313 AD, Theodosius made it the “official” religion of Rome and imposed it on his subjects. The Church rode the coat-tails of the Roman Empire around the civilized world for a thousand years, even after the Roman Empire had vanished. The fall of Rome left the Church as the de facto ruler of the known world with the Pope as its emperor.

With the rise of kings in the Middle Ages, competition with the Pope for political power became fierce. The Church raised armies and built battlements, using the tools of the world to attain worldly ends. It was no longer yeast sifted amidst the flour. It became another thing entirely. Thus, when the Reformation of the 1500’s afforded the kings of nation-states a justification for the sort of independence from Rome they desired, the church splintered along national lines. It sought political advocacy and military protection of the sort it originally enjoyed under Rome, and which it had exercised under its own power for centuries. Only now it had to submit to the patronage of a monarch: national churches arose, set apart by denominational distinctives. The Christian world divided itself between Roman Catholics and a theological array of Protestants.

In the early 1700’s, a competing theology arose under John Wesley that was vigorously attacked by those of the Reformed churches. It was Arminianism. It took firm root in the American soil of democracy and egalitarianism. But the church splintered further over issues raised by Arminians as to the extent of the atonement, conditional salvation, and practical faith. Once the orthodoxy of the Reformed Church had been successfully challenged by Arminianism, a myriad of theologies emerged. In the late 1800’s, the Holiness movement arose, and out of that came the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements of the early 1900’s. The Great Awakening and the Revivalist periods led to alternative approaches to evangelizing, church polity, and worship.

The distinctives of the faith, doctrines meant to distinguish Christianity from non-Christianity, had been used for centuries to separate Christian camps from one another, creating sub-churches within the larger Church. Unity was seemingly impossible and became increasingly irrelevant until Liberalism arose at the close of the 19th Century. The teachings of Liberalism were so far from what the Church had taught for 2000 years, that they caused J. Gresham Machen to characterize Liberalism as non-Christian.

Confronted by the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, Evolutionary Theory, Humanist Psychology, Philosophical Materialism, and Christian lethargy, the churches banded together under the umbrella of Evangelicalism. They agreed to set aside their denominational and theological distinctives in favor of ecumenism. They wanted to present a united front in opposition to an increasingly modern world that considered Christianity a superstitious myth, and the Bible an interesting but not authoritative text.

Liberal scholars emerged within the Church academies at the close of the 19th century. They advocated not just *textual criticism*, but a “scientific” approach to biblical studies – a “higher” criticism. Annotated and standardized source texts were developed such as the Westcott-Hort, Nestle-Aland, and UBS source texts. The Bible began to undergo a series of revisions and alternative interpretations that greatly distressed conservative Evangelicals. In response, they founded new seminaries and denominations as they drew apart from the rapidly deteriorating theology of the Liberals and other liberal-leaning Protestants.

In the 1950’s, Billy Graham began large-scale crusades. Originally a reformed theologian, he soon adopted the more popular Arminianism. Television and radio became alternative outlets of biblical teaching and preaching. Study bibles proliferated, each with its unique brand of theology. An explosion of Bible translations destroyed the common language of Scripture like a modern Tower of Babel. Parachurch organizations like the Navigators, Campus Crusade, Youth for Christ, etc. came alongside the churches, offering teaching and evangelistic tools. Then they became independent sources of theological instruction and evangelism as denominations faltered in a secular, consumer-driven world. Unaffiliated mission organizations popped up everywhere, and a generalized, non-traditional theology began to develop among the churches.

Today, some sections of Roman Catholicism sound like Evangelicals; some Evangelicals sound like Catholics; some Calvinists sound like Arminians, and Arminians sound like Calvinists. Even the cults are beginning to sound like Evangelicals. Creeds and Confessions, catechisms and liturgies, have been widely set aside in favor of private interpretation and personalized worship. Orthodoxy has been dying a quiet death, and a kind of pan-doctrinalism is growing up around us. It is a non-descript jumble of teachings nurtured by a theological environment in which all views are equally valid, and no view should be accepted as uniquely “true” or contradictory.

Scriptural interpretation using a fixed set of hermeneutical principles suffered the same fate: it metamorphosed into pan-hermeneuticalism, in which all principles are equally valid, whether literal or figurative, grammatical or historical, objective or subjective, biblical or systematic, contradictory or consistent. The Bible may be taken as entirely true, or mostly true, somewhat authoritative or absolutely authoritative – whatever an individual chooses to believe about it. This prompted an evangelical gathering in Chicago in 1978 to develop a *Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, and another gathering in 1982 to develop a *Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*.

Even so, “off-the-shelf” theological teaching is now available by radio, TV, book, and Internet. It is selected by individual believers according to their personal preferences, resulting in “designer” religions, eclectic and often inconsistent. The theologies of those with the largest fan-base and the greatest market-share become a de facto orthodoxy. These theologies are being validated by their popularity, not by their conformity to biblical truth. That’s because no one can judge their conformity when truth is no longer absolute; Creeds and Confessions have lost their authority.

This is the Evangelical World of the 21st century. The question naturally arises, “What’s left?” What do all evangelicals believe? And considering ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together), are the differences between Protestants and Catholics still valid, or were they merely political distinctives that we can now toss on the trash heap of history?

What must all Christians believe if they are to be called “Christians”?

The importance of and impetus for this question is our need to develop a *theological center*, a doctrinal platform from which to operate in this new millennium. Christianity is not current affairs. It doesn't change with the times. Its teachings are eternal. That being so, what doctrines are we to pass on to future generations and teach to the current generation? The Church cannot equip the saints if it does not know the answer to that question. Moreover, the Church cannot preach if it does not know which gospel to proclaim. Are the differences between reformed and Arminian gospels just mechanics, or substance? Do we speak with one voice, or a cacophony that persuades the world there is no universal and absolute truth?

That is the subject matter of this book. J. I. Packer is Reformed in his doctrine, while Thomas Oden is a Wesleyan Arminian. Which doctrines do they and the wider Evangelical community all agree upon? Which doctrines do they consider *diaphora* (issues that matter), and which are *adiaphora* (matters of indifference)? What follows is the consensus to which most evangelicals subscribe. Even if it is not a complete theology, it may at least be used to distinguish evangelicals from non-evangelicals, and perhaps stop our rapid slide into spiritual pantheism.

I'm sorry to say that I don't share the rosy optimism that Packer and Oden espouse in their book when they claim that this consensus is not only clear but continuing. I still see bickering between evangelical factions, abandoning doctrinal creeds rather than embracing them, neutrality and pluralism rather than synthesis, and anti-denominationalism rather than trans-denominationalism. The anti-intellectual bent of evangelicalism, born of an egalitarian pursuit of self-fulfillment, still characterizes its theology and its evangelism. I think it is still a reactionary movement instead of being proactive. So too the Emergent Church, which is now reacting against Evangelicalism much as Evangelicalism reacted against Liberalism and denominationalism.

Some of the wording cited in this book is cautious and conflicting. Faith is said to be in Christ, which is a Catholic statement, and also in Christ *alone*, which is Protestant. Faith is added to the atoning work of Christ as the “basis” of our justification, rather than faith being the *instrument* of our justification. On the other hand, some in the Emergent Church would remove all the sola's of the Reformation, abandon all polities, re-write all liturgy and doctrine, excise all traditionalism, and reject all foundationalism in a scorched-earth policy of “renewal and reinvention.” Packer and Oden, to their credit, decry such a wholesale abandonment of our heritage.

Thus, they have gathered together a core of teaching from which to begin the process of healing our wounds of division, offering a common table at which all are welcome to sit, and to discuss, and to reason together in the sight of God. If we continue toward an immanent view of God, individualism, consumer theology, seeker-based worship, and self-focused spirituality, the Gospel will become just one voice in a sea of many voices. It will be corrupted into a pantheon of gospels, each with a market niche and its own constituency. *There is only one balm in Gilead that can heal our souls, one fountain of living water from which to quench our thirst. We must drink deeply of it, honoring and preserving what has been entrusted to us.*

Toward An Evangelical Creed

Introduction

The following presents a series of extracts from evangelical statements of faith produced between 1950 and the present day [2004]. They embody a shared interpretation of the Bible, a shared understanding of the gospel, and a shared view of the church and its mission, and when on occasion they differ from each other in detail it is within this overall frame of agreement. Each of them is a consensus statement from and for the constituency it represents.

These statements align their framers with what faithful Christians have always believed. Many of them have already secured the consent of large numbers of evangelicals. Consent expresses harmony of opinion, sentiment, and intention. At the root and center of today's countrywide, continent-wide, and world-wide solidarity of evangelicals is consensus about what these statements formulate as the essentials of biblical Christian faith. These statements, backed as they are by creeds and confessions from past times, have been so welcomed, embraced, and consented to, that trans-national, trans-denominational, trans-cultural unity of faith among evangelicals has become a demonstrable global fact. Pp. 13-14

One person stands out as the human catalyst for the production of these materials: Dr. Billy Graham. While he neither invented the form nor drafted the texts themselves, it was he who initiated the consultative and networking gatherings on world evangelism out of which statements of prime and pioneering significance emerged. These included the Berlin Congress of 1966, the International Congress on World Evangelism at Lausanne in 1974, the 15-point Amsterdam Affirmations at the International Conference for Itinerant Evangelists in 1983, and the Second International Congress on World Evangelism at Manila in 1989. A key statement expressing broadly accepted evangelical convictions is *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*, produced in 1999. P. 31 [[available in the book's appendix](#)]

The widespread image of evangelicals is one of a people who cannot be expected to agree, either with each other or with the rest of the church. They are famous, indeed notorious, for eccentric individualism, for fighting and splitting, for dissenting and separating. But in fact, evangelicals worldwide are today unified on all the basics. This presentation of those basics is devotional, catechetical, systematic, and ethical. Its purpose is to *edify*, not divide. As such, we decline to discuss "secondary" matters on which disagreements surface: variations in polity, modes and subjects of baptism, glossolalia, millennialism, theological epistemology, and specifics of exegesis. P. 15

What is avowed? The truth of the gospel, which the consensus attests. What is acknowledged? The grace of God in and through the living Lord, Jesus Christ. From where does illumination come? From the Holy Spirit, whose help should be sought whenever questions about the meaning of Scripture or the understanding of God's revelation come up. The evangelical consensus was, and is, at every point a refraction of a God-given discernment of how all that is in the Bible fits together as a single Christ-centered message of grace to sinners.

The dawning of this discernment, the “ah-ha” recognition of the reality at which one has been looking but which one has hitherto not seen, comes as a gift from God. Psychologists would call it pattern acknowledgement; Christians celebrate it as the teaching of the Holy Spirit, whose special role it is to open the eyes of the mind and heart. When this recognition comes, you will not need some expert to authenticate it. You will already have the authentication within – what Scripture calls the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. It is, precisely, an undeniable, irrefutable perception of the undergirding unity of the catholic Christian faith. Pp. 17-18

WHAT IS MEANT BY EVANGELICAL?

Evangelical Christians, in our definition, are those who read the Bible as God’s own Word, addressed personally to each of them here and now; and who live out of a personal trust in, and love for, Jesus Christ as the world’s only Lord and Savior. They are people who see themselves as sinners saved by grace through faith for glory; who practice loyal obedience to God; and who are active both in grateful, hopeful communion with the triune God by prayer, and in neighbor-love, with a lively commitment to disciple-making according to the Great Commission. P. 19

Evangelicalism identifies a core of necessary truth that has remained central through many shifts of the Christian scene over time. This core is demonstrably the content of historic Protestant-evangelical teaching and is in fact the consensual frame and glue that holds it together. P. 22

By the year 2000 a New Ecumenism was emerging, re-grounded in classic Christianity and drawing together the biblically orthodox from pre-Reformation, Reformation, and post-Reformation traditions. All these efforts point a way to a possible closer consolidation and cooperation, uncompromising, uncompromised, and within recognized limits, between conservative Christian constituencies. Clearly, any such development would have to be based on the primacy of Scripture, the truth of the Trinity, a biblical view of the uniqueness and universal claims of Christ, classic Christian sexual ethics, and a serious commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission by worldwide church-planting evangelism. P. 25

The Good News - The Heart of the Gospel - *The heart of the biblical message is the good news of God’s salvation, which comes by grace alone through faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning death on the cross for our sins.*¹ Amsterdam Affirmations 1983

The Bible – The Authority of Holy Scripture – *We affirm that in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments God has given us an authoritative disclosure of his character and will, his redemptive acts and their meaning, and his mandate for mission.* Manila Manifesto 1989

The One True God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – *We affirm our belief in the one eternal God, Creator and Lord of the world, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who governs all things according to the purpose of his will.* Lausanne Covenant 1974

¹ This may be the “heart” of the Gospel, but it is not the content of it. That will be fleshed out in the propositional statements which follow. The power of the Gospel is in its content, not in its intent. In the same way that faith is not mere intellectual assent, it is not mere emotional response either. The Gospel is a series of propositional truths to which the mind must assent, and the heart must respond. The issue for the evangelical community to resolve is which propositional truths are essential to the gospel. If any of these essentials are excluded, the gospel loses its power to transform. This call to faith in the work of Christ alone is an essential. But if that faith is believed to be causative and not merely instrumental, the whole tenor of the gospel is changed; the work of Christ becomes tentative rather than final. It goes to the heart of God’s grace and sovereignty. It impacts our peace and our eternal security, as well as our motivation for love and good deeds. Cautious wording will not resolve this issue.

Human Life Under God – Creation Fallen into Sin – *We believe that human beings are created in the image of God as male and female and possess dignity. All people are called to glorify God, to live in relationship with God and one another, and to be stewards of the creation. We further believe that our first parents, in disobedience to God, sinned and consequently incurred physical death and spiritual separation from God, bringing sin, guilt, depravity, and misery upon all humanity.* Tyndale University College & Seminary

Jesus Christ – His Person and Work; a Summary – *The canonical New Testament sets forth and the historic Christian creeds and confessions attest: He was, and is, the second person of the triune Godhead, now and forever incarnate. He was virgin-born, lived a life of perfect godliness, died on the cross as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins, was raised bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven, reigns now over the universe and will personally return for judgment and the renewal of all things. As the God-man, once crucified, now enthroned, he is the Lord and Savior who in love fulfills towards us the threefold mediational ministry of prophet, priest, and king. His title, “Christ,” proclaims him the anointed servant of God who fulfills all the Messianic hopes of the canonical Old Testament.* Amsterdam Declaration 2000

Christ’s Reconciling Work on the Cross – His Substitution for Our Sin – *To effect salvation, he lived a sinless life and died on the cross as the sinner’s substitute, shedding his blood for the remission of sins.* Christianity Today International

The Exalted Lord – His Resurrection, Ascension, and Session – *Having redeemed us from sin, the third day he rose bodily from the grave, victorious over death and the powers of darkness. He ascended into heaven where at God’s right hand, he intercedes for his people and rules as Lord over all.* Fuller Theological Seminary Statement of Faith

Justification by Grace through Faith – The Acquittal – *Justification is the gracious judicial act of God fully acquitting the repenting and believing sinner (Rom 3:24-26; 5:1). God grants full pardon of all guilt, release from the penalty of sins committed, and acceptance as righteous, not on the basis of the merits or efforts of the sinner, but upon the basis of the atonement by Jesus Christ and the faith of the sinner (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; Tit 3:7).* OMS International

The Meaning of Salvation – God Saves Sinners – Salvation. *This word means rescue from guilt, defilement, spiritual blindness, alienation from God, and certainty of eternal punishment in hell, that is everyone’s condition while under sin’s domination. This deliverance involves present justification, reconciliation to God and adoption into his family, with regeneration and the sanctifying gift of the Holy Spirit leading to works of righteousness and service here and now, and a promise of full glorification in fellowship with God in the future. This involves in the present life joy, peace, freedom and the transformation of character and relationships and the guarantee of complete healing at the future resurrection of the body. We are justified by faith alone and the salvation faith brings is by grace alone, through Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.²* Amsterdam Declaration 2000

² This is an interesting twist on the sola’s of the Reformation. Instead of being saved by grace alone *through* faith alone *in* Christ alone, here we are justified by faith *alone*, which comes by grace alone, *through* Christ alone. Faith becomes the cause of our justification, and Christ its means. In point of fact, Christ’s atonement is the cause and our faith in him is the means. These are not word games. The issues go to the core and power of the Gospel. Subsequent explanatory quotes in the book clarify the end of this quote. See *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, p. 15 below, #16.

The Sending of the Holy Spirit – Uniting the Faithful to Christ – *We believe in the Holy Spirit who, with the Father and the Son, is worthy of our worship, who convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment, who makes the death of Christ effective to sinners, enabling them to turn to God in repentance and directing their trust towards the Lord Jesus Christ; who through the new birth unites us with Christ, who is present within all believers; and makes us partake in Christ's risen life, pointing us to Jesus, freeing us from slavery to sin, producing in us his fruit, granting to us his gifts, and empowering us for service in the world.* London Bible College

The Holy Life – Sanctifying Grace – *By his sanctifying grace, Christ works within us through faith, renewing our fallen nature and leading us to real maturity, that measure of development which is meant by “the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The Gospel calls us to live as obedient servants of Christ and as his emissaries in the world, doing justice, loving mercy, and helping all in need, thus seeking to bear witness to the kingdom of Christ.* Gospel of Jesus Christ, The Gospel. 1999

- We reject any view of justification which divorces it from our sanctifying union with Christ and our increasing conformity to his image through prayer, repentance, cross-bearing, and life in the Spirit.
- Nothing commends the gospel more eloquently than a transformed life, and nothing brings it into disrepute so much as personal inconsistency. We are charged to behave in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Unity in the Truth of the Gospel – The Unity of All Believers – *We believe in... the unity of all believers in Jesus Christ, manifest in worshiping and witnessing churches making disciples throughout the world.* InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

- Avoiding presumption. Our reference to “the whole church” is not a presumptuous claim that the universal church and the Evangelical community are synonymous. For we recognize that there are many churches which are not part of the Evangelical movement.
- Foregoing undue attachment to controversial terms. At times, some Christians have become unduly attached to the precise wordings of doctrine – whether of events in the last days, the meaning of baptism, or the use of a catch phrase like “the inerrancy of Scripture.” But it is well to remember that all our formulations of Christian truth must ultimately conform not to some preset statement but to the Scriptures, all parts of which are divinely inspired.

The Church – The People of God – *We believe that the Church is the people of God, the body of Christ and a fellowship in the Spirit of all those saved by the grace of God. We further believe that this one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church represents itself in a local body of believers and encompasses and transcends the various local, denominational, and trans-denominational expressions of the life of the believing community. The Church is called and sent into the world by the Triune God to declare and demonstrate the Good News of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.* Tyndale University College & Seminary

Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Christ – *Salvation in Christ Alone – Salvation is found in Christ alone. God witnesses to himself in creation and in human conscience, but these witnesses are not complete without the revelation of God in Christ. In the face of competing truth claims, we proclaim with humility that Christ is the only Savior, conscious that sin as well as cultural hindrances often mask him from those for whom he died.* Iguassu Affirmation 1999

Christian Social Responsibility – *The Integration of Words and Deeds – The authentic gospel must become visible in the transformed lives of men and women. As we proclaim the love of God we must be involved in loving service; as we preach the Kingdom of God we must be committed to its demands of justice and peace.*

Evangelism is primary because our chief concern is with the gospel, that all people may have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Yet Jesus not only proclaimed the Kingdom of God, he also demonstrated its arrival by works of mercy and power. We are called today to a similar integration of words and deeds. In a spirit of humility we are to preach and teach, minister to the sick, feed the hungry, care for prisoners, help the disadvantaged and handicapped, and deliver the oppressed. While we acknowledge the diversity of spiritual gifts, callings, and contexts, we also affirm that good news and good works are inseparable.

Manila Manifesto 1989

The Future – *The Last Things – God's redemptive purpose will be consummated by the return of Christ to raise the dead, to judge all people according to the deeds done in the body, and to establish his glorious kingdom. The wicked shall be separated from God's presence, but the righteous in glorious bodies shall live and reign with him forever. Then shall the eager expectation of creation be fulfilled and the whole earth shall proclaim the glory of God who makes all things new.* Fuller Theological Seminary

Conclusion

The roots of Evangelicalism go back much farther than its name would suggest. Its account of God and godliness builds on the Trinitarian, incarnational and transformational consensus that the patristic period achieved, and then on the consensus of the magisterial Reformation about biblical authority and justification by faith only, through grace only, in virtue of Christ only. Within this frame, evangelicalism characteristically emphasizes the penal-substitutionary view of the cross and the radical reality of the Bible-taught, Spirit-wrought inward change, relational and directional, that makes a person a Christian (new birth, regeneration, conversion, faith, repentance, forgiveness, new creation, all in and through Jesus Christ).

Building on this foundation, evangelicalism then formulates its consensual view of the universal and local church as a worshipping, witnessing, working fellowship of the faithful, committed to mutual nurture and evangelism, and also to neighbor-love as a venture of gentleness that seeks to relieve material and spiritual needs as widely as is possible.

Evangelicals see themselves vocationally as stewards of God's truth and guardians of his gospel in an age of apostasy; as a renewing and revitalizing force in world Christianity; and as a spearhead of sanity, discipline, and reconstruction in a wasteland of antinomian worldliness. They view the preaching of God's Word as the climax of church worship, the Eucharist as the

confirmation of divine grace; they value small Bible study and prayer groups as a key means of maintaining the spiritual life; they believe that spiritual gifts are given to all believers and that every-member ministry in the body of Christ is the cutting-edge principle for congregational advance. It is this combination of distinctives that mark them out from alternative forms of Christian belief and life.

There is also a characteristic evangelical ethos, encouraging and invigorating morale-raising informality in which biblical and theological discussion, personal testimony, and extempore prayer are welcomed. It is consolidated against the wasting disease of reductive naturalism and supernaturalized Christianity, along with such social ills as abortion and euthanasia on demand, the weakening of the family, the secularizing of education, and the political enfranchising of homosexual behavior.

THE EVANGELICAL CONSENSUS – Ten Observations – pp. 162-172

1. It focuses on a cohesive account of the canonical Scriptures and their integral canonical interpretation.
2. It sets forth the Christ-centered story of redemption that earlier creeds and confessions also told.
3. It is internally consistent and comprehensive in its proclamation.
4. It claims continuity with what faithful Christians have always believed.
5. It calls for wholehearted discipleship to our Lord Jesus Christ.
6. It understands the church to be continually in mission as an expression of discipleship to Jesus Christ. [\[mission is the focus and the purpose of the Church, not just an add-on\]](#)
7. It has extended its doctrinal range. *During the past half century, evangelicals, striving side by side to maintain biblical orthodoxy, have discovered a deeper and wider measure of unity in this truth than they previously knew they had. Evangelicals have been discovering a united mind on matters about which they thought themselves divided.*
8. It shows a deepening concern for Christian unity in profession, proclamation, and pastoral care.
9. It is an ecumenically significant reality. *The confessional utterances on which we have drawn all follow the expository sequence of the great ecumenical creeds, the Apostles' and the Nicene, an order that is also followed by Lombard's Sentences, Melancthon's Loci, Calvin's Institutes, John Pearson on the Apostle's Creed, and many later systematic surveys of the faith.*
10. The evangelical consensus is evidently here to stay.

Evangelicalism is first a God-given stewardship of gospel truth and then a God-sent force for reviving, revitalizing, and reforming what has become deformed in personal faith and spirituality, pastoral nurture and discipline, theological witness and education, and evangelistic outreach to a lost world. Evangelicalism is a restoring of ideals of doctrinal purity, Christlike character and conduct, good personal spiritual health, worship with eagerness and joyful passion, and church growth according to the Scriptures, that is, qualitative first (Eph 4:11-16) and quantitative within that frame. Fresh spiritual, moral, intellectual, and doxological power in the church is what most of all we long to see. Pp. 174-174

Appendix – The Gospel of Jesus Christ

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. — John 3:16

Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. — Isaiah 12:5

Preamble

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is news, good news: the best and most important news that any human being ever hears.

This Gospel declares the only way to know God in peace, love, and joy is through the reconciling death of Jesus Christ the risen Lord.

This Gospel is the central message of the Holy Scriptures, and is the true key to understanding them.

This Gospel identifies Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel, as the Son of God and God the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, whose incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension fulfilled the Father's saving will. His death for sins and his resurrection from the dead were promised beforehand by the prophets and attested by eyewitnesses. In God's own time and in God's own way, Jesus Christ shall return as glorious Lord and Judge of all (1 Thess. 4:13-18; Matt. 25:31-32). He is now giving the Holy Spirit from the Father to all those who are truly his. The three Persons of the Trinity thus combine in the work of saving sinners.

This Gospel sets forth Jesus Christ as the living Savior, Master, Life, and Hope of all who put their trust in him. It tells us that the eternal destiny of all people depends on whether they are savingly related to Jesus Christ.

This Gospel is the only Gospel: there is no other; and to change its substance is to pervert and indeed destroy it. This Gospel is so simple that small children can understand it, and it is so profound that studies by the wisest theologians will never exhaust its riches.

All Christians are called to unity in love and unity in truth. As evangelicals who derive our very name from the Gospel, we celebrate this great good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ as the true bond of Christian unity, whether among organized churches and denominations or in the many transdenominational co operative enterprises of Christians together.

The Bible declares that all who truly trust in Christ and his Gospel are sons and daughters of God through grace, and hence are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

All who are justified experience reconciliation with the Father, full remission of sins, transition from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, the reality of being a new creature in Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. They enjoy access to the Father with all the peace and joy that this brings.

The Gospel requires of all believers worship, which means constant praise and giving of thanks to God, submission to all that he has revealed in his written word, prayerful dependence on him, and vigilance lest his truth be even inadvertently compromised or obscured.

To share the joy and hope of this Gospel is a supreme privilege. It is also an abiding obligation, for the Great Commission of Jesus Christ still stands: proclaim the Gospel everywhere, he said, teaching, baptizing, and making disciples.

By embracing the following declaration we affirm our commitment to this task, and with it our allegiance to Christ himself, to the Gospel itself, and to each other as fellow evangelical believers.

The Gospel

This Gospel of Jesus Christ which God sets forth in the infallible Scriptures combines Jesus' own declaration of the present reality of the kingdom of God with the apostles' account of the person, place, and work of Christ, and how sinful humans benefit from it. The Patristic Rule of Faith, the historic creeds, the Reformation confessions, and the doctrinal bases of later evangelical bodies all witness to the substance of this biblical message.

The heart of the Gospel is that our holy, loving Creator, confronted with human hostility and rebellion, has chosen in his own freedom and faithfulness to become our holy, loving Redeemer and Restorer. The Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14): it is through his one and only Son that God's one and only plan of salvation is implemented. So Peter announced: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). And Christ himself taught: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Through the Gospel we learn that we human beings, who were made for fellowship with God, are by nature—that is, "in Adam" (1 Cor. 15:22)—dead in sin, unresponsive to and separated from our Maker. We are constantly twisting his truth, breaking his law, belittling his goals and standards, and offending his holiness by our unholiness, so that we truly are "without hope and without God in the world" (Rom. 1:18-32, 3:9-20; Eph. 2:1-3, 12). Yet God in grace took the initiative to reconcile us to himself through the sinless life and vicarious death of his beloved Son (Eph. 2:4-10; Rom. 3:21-24).

The Father sent the Son to free us from the dominion of sin and Satan, and to make us God's children and friends. Jesus paid our penalty in our place on his cross, satisfying the retributive demands of divine justice by shedding his blood in sacrifice and so making possible justification for all who trust in him (Rom. 3:25-26). The Bible describes this mighty substitutionary transaction as the achieving of ransom, reconciliation, redemption, propitiation, and conquest of evil powers (Matt. 20:28; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 3:23-25; John 12:31; Col. 2:15). It secures for us a restored relationship with God that brings pardon and peace, acceptance and access, and adoption into God's family (Col. 1:20, 2:13-14; Rom. 5:1-2; Gal. 4:4-7; 1 Pet. 3:18). The faith in God and in Christ to which the Gospel calls us is a trustful outgoing of our hearts to lay hold of these promised and proffered benefits.

This Gospel further proclaims the bodily resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Jesus as evidence of the efficacy of his once-for-all sacrifice for us, of the reality of his present personal

ministry to us, and of the certainty of his future return to glorify us (1 Cor. 15; Heb. 1:1-4, 2:1-18, 4:14-16, 7:1-10:25). In the life of faith as the Gospel presents it, believers are united with their risen Lord, communing with him, and looking to him in repentance and hope for empowering through the Holy Spirit, so that henceforth they may not sin but serve him truly.

God's justification of those who trust him, according to the Gospel, is a decisive transition, here and now, from a state of condemnation and wrath because of their sins to one of acceptance and favor by virtue of Jesus' flawless obedience culminating in his voluntary sin-bearing death. God "justifies the wicked" (ungodly: Rom. 4:5) by imputing (reckoning, crediting, counting, accounting) righteousness to them and ceasing to count their sins against them (Rom. 4:1-8). Sinners receive through faith in Christ alone "the gift of righteousness" (Rom. 1:17, 5:17; Phil. 3:9) and thus become "the righteousness of God" in him who was "made sin" for them (2 Cor. 5:21).

As our sins were reckoned to Christ, so Christ's righteousness is reckoned to us. This is justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. All we bring to the transaction is our need of it. Our faith in the God who bestows it, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is itself the fruit of God's grace. Faith links us savingly to Jesus, but inasmuch as it involves an acknowledgment that we have no merit of our own, it is confessedly not a meritorious work.

The Gospel assures us that all who have entrusted their lives to Jesus Christ are born-again children of God (John 1:12), indwelt, empowered, and assured of their status and hope by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 7:6, 8:9-17). The moment we truly believe in Christ, the Father declares us righteous in him and begins conforming us to his likeness. Genuine faith acknowledges and depends upon Jesus as Lord and shows itself in growing obedience to the divine commands, though this contributes nothing to the ground of our justification (James 2:14-26; Heb. 6:1-12).

By his sanctifying grace, Christ works within us through faith, renewing our fallen nature and leading us to real maturity, that measure of development which is meant by "the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The Gospel calls us to live as obedient servants of Christ and as his emissaries in the world, doing justice, loving mercy, and helping all in need, thus seeking to bear witness to the kingdom of Christ. At death, Christ takes the believer to himself (Phil. 1:21) for unimaginable joy in the ceaseless worship of God (Rev. 22:1-5).

Salvation in its full sense is from the guilt of sin in the past, the power of sin in the present, and the presence of sin in the future. Thus, while in foretaste believers enjoy salvation now, they still await its fullness (Mark 14:61-62; Heb. 9:28). Salvation is a Trinitarian reality, initiated by the Father, implemented by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit. It has a global dimension, for God's plan is to save believers out of every tribe and tongue (Rev. 5:9) to be his church, a new humanity, the people of God, the body and bride of Christ, and the community of the Holy Spirit. All the heirs of final salvation are called here and now to serve their Lord and each other in love, to share in the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings, and to work together to make Christ known to the whole world.

We learn from the Gospel that, as all have sinned, so all who do not receive Christ will be judged according to their just deserts as measured by God's holy law, and face eternal retributive punishment.

Unity in the Gospel

Christians are commanded to love each other despite differences of race, gender, privilege, and social, political, and economic background (John 13:34-35; Gal. 3:28-29), and to be of one mind wherever possible (John 17:20-21; Phil. 2:2; Rom. 14:1-15:13). We know that divisions among Christians hinder our witness in the world, and we desire greater mutual understanding and truth-speaking in love. We know too that as trustees of God's revealed truth we cannot embrace any form of doctrinal indifferentism, or relativism, or pluralism by which God's truth is sacrificed for a false peace.

Doctrinal disagreements call for debate. Dialogue for mutual understanding and, if possible, narrowing of the differences is valuable, doubly so when the avowed goal is unity in primary things, with liberty in secondary things, and charity in all things.

In the foregoing paragraphs, an attempt has been made to state what is primary and essential in the Gospel as evangelicals understand it. Useful dialogue, however, requires not only charity in our attitudes, but also clarity in our utterances. Our extended analysis of justification by faith alone through Christ alone reflects our belief that Gospel truth is of crucial importance and is not always well understood and correctly affirmed. For added clarity, out of love for God's truth and Christ's church, we now cast the key points of what has been said into specific affirmations and denials regarding the Gospel and our unity in it and in Christ.

Affirmations and Denials:

1. We affirm that the Gospel entrusted to the church is, in the first instance, God's Gospel (Mark 1:14; Rom. 1:1). God is its author, and he reveals it to us in and by his Word. Its authority and truth rest on him alone.

We deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel derives from any human insight or invention (Gal. 1:1-11). We also deny that the truth or authority of the Gospel rests on the authority of any particular church or human institution.

2. We affirm that the Gospel is the saving power of God in that the Gospel effects salvation to everyone who believes, without distinction (Rom. 1:16). This efficacy of the Gospel is by the power of God himself (1 Cor. 1:18).

We deny that the power of the Gospel rests in the eloquence of the preacher, the technique of the evangelist, or the persuasion of rational argument (1 Cor. 1:21; 2:1-5).

3. We affirm that the Gospel diagnoses the universal human condition as one of sinful rebellion against God, which, if unchanged, will lead each person to eternal loss under God's condemnation.

We deny any rejection of the fallenness of human nature or any assertion of the natural goodness, or divinity, of the human race.

4. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, the only mediator between God and humanity (John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5).

We deny that anyone is saved in any other way than by Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Bible offers no hope that sincere worshipers of other religions will be saved without personal faith in Jesus Christ.

5. We affirm that the church is commanded by God and is therefore under divine obligation to preach the Gospel to every living person (Luke 24:47; Matt. 28:18-19).

We deny that any particular class or group of persons, whatever their ethnic or cultural identity, may be ignored or passed over in the preaching of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-22). God purposes a global church made up from people of every tribe, language, and nation (Rev. 7:9).

6. We affirm that faith in Jesus Christ as the divine Word (or Logos, John 1:1), the second Person of the Trinity, co-eternal and co-essential with the Father and the Holy Spirit (Heb. 1:3), is foundational to faith in the Gospel.

We deny that any view of Jesus Christ which reduces or rejects his full deity is Gospel faith or will avail to salvation.

7. We affirm that Jesus Christ is God incarnate (John 1:14). The virgin-born descendant of David (Rom. 1:3), he had a true human nature, was subject to the Law of God (Gal. 4:5), and was like us at all points, except without sin (Heb. 2:17, 7:26-28). We affirm that faith in the true humanity of Christ is essential to faith in the Gospel.

We deny that anyone who rejects the humanity of Christ, his incarnation, or his sinlessness, or who maintains that these truths are not essential to the Gospel, will be saved (1 John 4:2-3).

8. We affirm that the atonement of Christ by which, in his obedience, he offered a perfect sacrifice, propitiating the Father by paying for our sins and satisfying divine justice on our behalf according to God's eternal plan, is an essential element of the Gospel.

We deny that any view of the Atonement that rejects the substitutionary satisfaction of divine justice, accomplished vicariously for believers, is compatible with the teaching of the Gospel.

9. We affirm that Christ's saving work included both his life and his death on our behalf (Gal. 3:13). We declare that faith in the perfect obedience of Christ by which he fulfilled all the demands of the Law of God in our behalf is essential to the Gospel.

We deny that our salvation was achieved merely or exclusively by the death of Christ without reference to his life of perfect righteousness.

10. We affirm that the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead is essential to the biblical Gospel (1 Cor. 15:14).

We deny the validity of any so-called gospel that denies the historical reality of the bodily resurrection of Christ.

11. We affirm that the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is essential to the Gospel (Rom. 3:28; 4:5; Gal. 2:16).

We deny that any person can believe the biblical Gospel and at the same time reject the apostolic teaching of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. We also deny that there is more than one true Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

12. We affirm that the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us, whereby our sins are fully forgiven and we are fully accepted, is essential to the biblical Gospel (2 Cor. 5:19-21).

We deny that we are justified by the righteousness of Christ infused into us or by any righteousness that is thought to inhere within us.

13. We affirm that the righteousness of Christ by which we are justified is properly his own, which he achieved apart from us, in and by his perfect obedience. This righteousness is counted, reckoned, or imputed to us by the forensic (that is, legal) declaration of God, as the sole ground of our justification.

We deny that any works we perform at any stage of our existence add to the merit of Christ or earn for us any merit that contributes in any way to the ground of our justification (Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

14. We affirm that, while all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and are in the process of being made holy and conformed to the image of Christ, those consequences of justification are not its ground. God declares us just, remits our sins, and adopts us as his children, by his grace alone, and through faith alone, because of Christ alone, while we are still sinners (Rom. 4:5).

We deny that believers must be inherently righteous by virtue of their cooperation with God's life-transforming grace before God will declare them justified in Christ. We are justified while we are still sinners.

15. We affirm that saving faith results in sanctification, the transformation of life in growing conformity to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Sanctification means ongoing repentance, a life of turning from sin to serve Jesus Christ in grateful reliance on him as one's Lord and Master (Gal. 5:22-25; Rom. 8:4, 13-14).

We reject any view of justification which divorces it from our sanctifying union with Christ and our increasing conformity to his image through prayer, repentance, cross-bearing, and life in the Spirit.

16. We affirm that saving faith includes mental assent to the content of the Gospel, acknowledgment of our own sin and need, and personal trust and reliance upon Christ and his work.

We deny that saving faith includes only mental acceptance of the Gospel, and that justification is secured by a mere outward profession of faith. We further deny that any element of saving faith is a meritorious work or earns salvation for us.

17. We affirm that, although true doctrine is vital for spiritual health and well-being, we are not saved by doctrine. Doctrine is necessary to inform us how we may be saved by Christ, but it is Christ who saves.

We deny that the doctrines of the Gospel can be rejected without harm. Denial of the Gospel brings spiritual ruin and exposes us to God's judgment.

18. We affirm that Jesus Christ commands his followers to proclaim the Gospel to all living persons, evangelizing everyone everywhere, and discipling believers within the fellowship of the church. A full and faithful witness to Christ includes the witness of personal testimony, godly living, and acts of mercy and charity to our neighbor, without which the preaching of the Gospel appears barren.

We deny that the witness of personal testimony, godly living, and acts of mercy and charity to our neighbors constitutes evangelism apart from the proclamation of the Gospel.

Our Commitment

As evangelicals united in the Gospel, we promise to watch over and care for one another, to pray for and forgive one another, and to reach out in love and truth to God's people everywhere, for we are one family, one in the Holy Spirit, and one in Christ.

Centuries ago it was truly said that in things necessary there must be unity, in things less than necessary there must be liberty, and in all things there must be charity. We see all these Gospel truths as necessary.

Now to God, the Author of the truth and grace of this Gospel, through Jesus Christ, its subject and our Lord, be praise and glory forever and ever. Amen.

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The Drafting Committee

John N. Akers	Maxie Dunnam	Thomas Oden
John Ankerberg	Timothy George	J.I. Packer
John Armstrong	Scott Hafemann	R.C. Sproul
D.A. Carson	Erwin Lutzer	John Woodbridge
Keith Davy	Harold Myra	
	David Neff	

Confirmed Endorsing Committee (as of May 19, 1999)

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