

A Reply to the *Evangelical Manifesto*

The recent release of the *Evangelical Manifesto* has brought evangelicals from around the world to a discussion of what it means to be “evangelical”. Below, we explore some of positive aspects of the document, and then highlight some concerns that should be considered prior to a consideration of whether the document should become ours.

A Wonderful Affirmation of Religious Liberty

One area of affirmation seemed to sound more like the historical precedent set by Baptists concerning religious liberty and the desire expressed for a “naked public square.”

Let it be known unequivocally that we are committed to religious liberty for people of all faiths, including the right to convert to or from the Christian faith. We are firmly opposed to the imposition of theocracy on our pluralistic society. We are also concerned about the illiberalism of politically correct attacks on evangelism. We have no desire to coerce anyone or to impose on anyone beliefs and behavior that we have not persuaded them to adopt freely, and that we do not demonstrate in our own lives, above all by love. (pg. 16)

Thus every right we assert for ourselves is at once a right we defend for others. A right for a Christian is a right for a Jew, and a right for a secularist, and a right for a Mormon, and right for a Muslim, and a right for a Scientologist, and right for all the believers in all the faiths across this wide land. (Pg. 17)

This statement, if read today by men like Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus, or John Leland, would be lauded as the basic Baptist understanding of religious liberty that was promoted first by Baptists in the formation of our country.

I also appreciate their take on the lifelong effect of regeneration by stating, “Third, we believe that new life, given supernaturally through spiritual regeneration, is a necessity as well as a gift; and that the *lifelong conversion* that results is the only pathway to a radically changed character and way of life” (emphasis mine).

Whatever Happened to Inerrancy?

Essentially, there is not a lot to disagree on the theological side in the first part of the document. What raises a red flag is what is not affirmed. For instance, consider the doctrine of baptism by immersion. But one to be discussed here is the doctrine of inerrancy. Yes, they did use the term, “total truthfulness,” but why did they shy away from the term “inerrancy” or possibly “true without any mixture of error”? I thought inerrancy is what made evangelicals “evangelical” in the mid-twentieth century!

In the fall of 1978 a body of over 200 evangelicals formed the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy. As reported [here](#), it was signed by nearly 300 evangelical scholars, such as Paige Patterson, Roger Nicole, Norman L. Geisler, Carl F.H. Henry, Harold Lindsell, J.I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, R.C. Sproul, and James Montgomery Boice. As recent as 2006, the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) affirmed and adopted the Chicago statement, which helped to clarify what ETS meant by “inerrancy.” These are bold and necessary affirmations of inerrancy, which is what most Southern Baptists have understood to be basic to the definition of being evangelical.

And, as Southern Baptists discovered during the Conservative Resurgence, alternative terms such as “total truthfulness” or “infallibility” leave wiggle room for those who desire to still hold that the Bible contains errors while affirming matters indicative of salvation through Christ. This leaves this Baptist with this question: Why did we spend twenty years battling for the doctrine of inerrancy only to be asked to sign a document that will not affirm a cornerstone belief that is precious to conservative Baptists? Some Baptists did sign this manifesto, but a question remains about the validity of one signature, which I will reference later.

Are Environmental and Global Warning Concerns of Equal Importance with Roe vs. Wade?

The manifesto takes a hard stand against the focus of the past thirty years on abortion and the sanctity of marriage with statements such as these:

All too often we have concentrated on great truths of the Bible, such as the cross of Jesus, but have failed to apply them to other biblical truths, such as creation. In the process we have impoverished ourselves, and supported a culture broadly careless about the stewardship of the earth and negligent of the arts and the creative centers of society (p. 12).

We call for an expansion of our concern beyond single-issue politics, such as abortion and marriage, and a fuller recognition of the comprehensive causes and concerns of the Gospel, and of all the human issues that must be engaged in public life. Although we cannot back away from our biblically rooted commitment to the sanctity of every human life, including those unborn, nor can we deny the holiness of marriage as instituted by God between one man and one woman, we must follow the model of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, engaging the global giants of conflict, racism, corruption, poverty, pandemic diseases, illiteracy, ignorance, and spiritual emptiness, by promoting reconciliation, encouraging ethical servant leadership, assisting the poor, caring for the sick, and educating the next generation (pp. 13-14).

What these statements do is put the murder of the unborn and homosexual marriage on an

equal ground of importance with the stewardship of the earth or being negligent of the arts and the creative centers of society, literacy, and ignorance. I agree with [Denny Burk](#) when he states, “But the document also seeks to raise other ‘public square’ issues as if they have the same moral urgency as abortion and marriage. I for one am unwilling to tell evangelicals that they should treat the Kyoto Protocols with the same moral urgency with which we address the abortion issue—especially when it comes to evangelical engagement in electoral politics. Abortion and marriage are transcendent moral issues, and evangelicals should treat them as such.” No doubt, the framers of this document have made a mistake by treating some of these moral issues with the same sense of urgency that is required of abortion and the sanctity of marriage. Ultimately, the steering committee of this document fail to answer the question, “How far do we need to pursue this moral and social agenda before we become like the liberals from which evangelicals once separated?” I can’t also help but think of what Dr. Russell Moore stated at Southwestern Seminary last July in reference to the evangelical concern about being hip or cool so that others will hear our message. There is no doubt that, “green talk” seems to be the hip thing from homebuilding to vehicle manufacturing. It seems that all this green talk is an effort to be relevant in an image conscious society. While I don’t discount the need for conservationism and breaking away from our dependence on foreign fuel, I do not equate their importance with the killing of the unborn.

Criticism of the Religious Right

Another red flag is the criticism against the religious right. While they also criticize the left, I find beneath the surface some statements of disparagement against leaders like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson. The framers of the manifesto made this statement,

The other error, made by both the religious left and the religious right in recent decades, is to politicize faith, using faith to express essentially political points that have lost touch with biblical truth. That way faith loses its independence, the church becomes “the regime at prayer,” Christians become “useful idiots” for one political party or another, and the Christian faith becomes an ideology in its purest form. Christian beliefs are used as weapons for political interests.

[Richard Mouw](#), one of the framers and signers of the manifesto, on his blog, recently offered criticisms about Dr. Jerry Falwell and the religious right on his blog with various statements including this one, “The shortcomings of the Religious Right have been due in large part, to my way of thinking, to a lack of careful theological reflection.”

If Dr. Falwell was still here on earth today, I wonder if he would think that he was nothing but a “useful idiot” or that his engagement in the political process was because of “a lack of careful theological reflection.” I wonder if Dr. Mouw has visited Thomas Road Baptist Church and witnessed the ministry they perform to teenage mothers, the homeless, those who have been forgotten

in nursing homes, divorced, homosexuals, or countless other ministries. Or perhaps he has witnessed how many people that church has prepared to plant churches with the gospel of Jesus Christ or the work that was done to birth Liberty University. I am also curious if Dr. Mouw noticed how the church grew from a handful to a congregation with tens of thousands of converts? I wonder if Dr. Mouw would believe those ministries mentioned were birthed with a lack of careful theological reflection? I do not believe Dr. Falwell's success was based on a concern for single-issue politics, but living out the gospel in many areas of his Christian life.

The discussion of Dr. Falwell leads to a sticky side note. Dr. Ergun Caner, President of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, has his name affixed to the document. Upon investigating this strange event, I found out from sources close to Dr. Caner that he was contacted when they were first working on the document. He told them then that he would not sign it if it repudiated the past leaders. He even spoke publicly about that, calling the young evangelicals a "Reheboam Generation," that only listens to its friends but not its elders (Georgia Baptist Convention, February 2008). Before the manifesto was presented, according to sources, he did not read it nor give approval to have his name attached to it. On Friday, Caner was said to have been sickened by the National Press Club presentation, and was shocked when his name was on the document.

Evangelical Elitism

One final issue with the document concerns this statement and who participated (or did not participate) in this manifesto's formation, "All too often we have gloried in the racial and ethnic diversity of the church around the world, but remained content to be enclaves of separateness here at home" (p. 13). From what I can gather from the various names, as the framers of the document, there was little to no involvement from the African American side of evangelicalism, or any other ethnic group, for that matter. There is one Hispanic on the steering committee, but little involvement from our diverse ethnic evangelical heritage.

Does this not smack of hypocrisy when evangelicals are criticized for separateness along racial lines, yet in the very document that does this criticizing, there is little to no participation from the rich diversity in evangelical traditions that come from our brothers and sisters of color? I believe whether in evangelicalism, the Southern Baptist Convention, or any other denomination, there needs to be a yielding to God's Holy Spirit to bring forth leaders of ethnic diversity in God's way and in His timing. I just find it disparaging that at this time, that more ethnic diversity is not seen in the framers of this document who seem to be critical of this very issue. This is a major shortcoming of the document.

Why This Baptist Cannot Affirm The Evangelical Manifesto

As stated in the beginning, while there are many areas of agreement in the manifesto, the issues presented in this article prohibit this Southern Baptist from affixing his name to it.

As a result, rather than seeking others of various beliefs to help me define who I am and what I believe about God's revelation of Himself through his book, I will continue to look to the church and associated churches to maintain the definition of the faith I cherish. I will continue to look to the churches rather than to a group of men, with all of whom we are not intimately familiar, but who as a group are not subject to discipline by the church as they officiously disseminate their decrees.

In other words, if this document really reflects evangelicalism, there may be no longer any place there for me. Perhaps I will stick with the old truths that I learned in Baptist churches. Of course, then I guess they will call me a fundamentalist or a Landmarkist or a separatist. However, I prefer to be called a free, believing, baptized according to the command of Christ Christian, or simply, a Baptist.