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An Evangelical Response to “An Evangelical Manifesto”

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Who are the Evangelicals? The issue of Evangelical identity and definition has been central to the Evangelical project from its very beginning in America. Given the nature of the movement, definition is elusive and constantly contested.

The release of “[An Evangelical Manifesto](#)” on May 7 caught the attention of the national media, and thus it represents yet another opportunity for evangelical definition. The document, released May 7, also represents a challenge, for its framers hope to redefine the movement in the context of our unsettled times.

The Manifesto, released at a press conference at the National Press Club, represents an agenda. The [press release](#) offered by the organizers makes that clear:

Such dynamics prompted a group of theologians and Christian leaders of considerable academic wisdom to carefully draft ‘An Evangelical Manifesto.’ This three-year effort has sought to reclaim the definition of what it means to be an Evangelical – a term that, in recent years, has often been used politically, culturally, socially – and even as a marketing demographic.

Recognizing that many people outside the movement now doubt that Evangelical is ever positive, and many inside now wonder whether the term any longer serves a useful purpose, they organized a core committee to draft a document that reclaims the term and the calling for both the culture and community of faith. The theological root traces back to the Greek word “euangelion” for ‘good news or Gospel.’

An identity crisis is the diagnosis, and the framers intend to “reclaim the definition” even as many “now wonder whether the term any longer serves a useful purpose.” The framers of “An Evangelical Manifesto” clearly believe that the term remains useful. Redefining its use is their aim.

I did not sign the Manifesto, though I find many elements of the document to be very appealing and elegantly composed. I have friends among those [who signed](#) the Manifesto, and friends among those who will not sign. In the end, I cannot sign the document for several reasons. These reasons are rooted in my own concern for Evangelical identity, and my belief that this document says far too much on the one hand, and far too little on the other.



Dr. Os Guinness,
Author

The authors of the document include [Timothy F. George](#) of Beeson Divinity School and author [Os Guinness](#). They certainly make their case in lamenting the subversion of the term “Evangelical.” I join them in concern that “the confusions and corruptions surrounding the term *Evangelical* have grown so deep that the character of what it means has been obscured and its importance lost.”

The document says a great deal about this confusion, and much of it is helpful and prophetic. I am in total agreement with the argument that Evangelicals “should be defined theologically, and not politically, socially, or culturally.”

But when the Manifesto presents a theological definition of Evangelicals, it turns out to be a

rather minimal definition. Evangelicals, the document asserts, “are Christians who define themselves, their faith, and their lives according to the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth.”

Those are wonderful words filled with Christian content, but they are also words that would be claimed by many who would never claim to be Evangelicals. The definition is just not sufficient. The document proceeds to identify several defining beliefs of Evangelicals. Among these convictions is the belief that “the only ground for our acceptance by God is what Jesus Christ did on the cross and what he is now doing through his risen life, whereby he exposed and reversed the course of human sin and violence, bore the penalty for our sins, credited us with his righteousness, redeemed us from the power of evil, reconciled us to God, and empowers us with his life ‘from above.’”

That is a substantial statement of the Gospel, but it leaves out the question of the exclusivity of salvation to those who have come to Christ by faith. The use of the phrase “for us” in strategic sentences makes one wonder if room is left for some manner of inclusivism or universalism? The door is certainly not adequately closed. Do all of the signatories announced on May 7 affirm that sinners must come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved? This is one of the most crucial questions for Evangelical identity.

The framers make clear their concern to define *Evangelical* over against Fundamentalism and Protestant Liberalism. Would they include inclusivists as Evangelicals?

Another complication on this score comes from the fact that Evangelicals are identified as “one of the great traditions that have developed within the Christian Church over the centuries.” There is a sense in which this is true, of course, but relegating the Evangelical understanding of the Gospel to just one among many Christian traditions undercuts our witness and sows seeds of confusion.

“An Evangelical Manifesto” is, at least to a major extent, an exercise in public relations. The document was released at the National Press Club — not a usual venue for theological discussion. The stated aims of the document are also directed to public relations. The sense of attempting to convince the public that Evangelicals are not what many think them (us) to be pervades the Manifesto.

Evangelicals sometimes have to make strong judgments, the authors assert, but only after clarifying that the “Good News” of the Gospel “is overwhelmingly positive, and is always positive before it is negative.” Further: “Evangelicals are *for* Someone and *for* something rather than against anyone or anything.”

This is a wonderful statement, and entirely true. Nevertheless, as a statement of public relations it will not get very far — not if any honest discussion or disclosure follows. As the authors recognize, to be *for* one principle is to oppose its opposite. Those holding to contrary principles will not be persuaded to cease stating that we are *against* their principles and aims.

Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of the document is its recognition that differences of conviction reach to the most fundamental questions of life. These differences “are not just between personal worldviews but between entire ways of life co-existing in the same society.” These differences “are decisive not only for individuals but for societies and entire civilizations.”

Another great strength of the document is its profound analysis of the cultural crisis and its challenge to Christians and the integrity of Christian faith. The Manifesto is prophetic in indicting Evangelicalism for its many sins, including:

All too often we have trumpeted the gospel of Jesus, but we have replaced biblical truths with therapeutic techniques, worship with entertainment, discipleship with growth in human potential, church growth with business entrepreneurialism, concern for the church and for the local congregation with expressions of the faith that are churchless and little better than a vapid spirituality, meeting real needs with pandering to felt needs, and mission principles with marketing precepts. In the process we have become known for commercial, diluted, and feel-good gospels of health, wealth, human potential, and religious happy talk, each of which is indistinguishable from the passing fashions of the surrounding world.

This is a statement worthy of the most serious reflection — as is this paragraph:



All too often we have attacked the evils and injustices of others, such as the killing of the unborn, as well as the heresies and apostasies of theological liberals whose views have developed into — “another gospel,” while we have condoned our own sins, turned a blind eye to our own vices, and lived captive to forces such as materialism and consumerism in ways that contradict our faith.

Again, this is a powerful statement. But what follows is a bit troubling. Just a few paragraphs later, the Manifesto reads:

All too often we have disobeyed the great command to love the Lord our God with our hearts, souls, strength, and minds, and have fallen into an unbecoming anti-intellectualism that is a dire cultural handicap as well as a sin. In particular, some among us have betrayed the strong Christian tradition of a high view of science, epitomized in the very matrix of ideas that gave birth to modern science, and made themselves vulnerable to caricatures of the false hostility between science and faith. By doing so, we have unwittingly given comfort to the unbridled scientism and naturalism that are so rampant in our culture today.

Who are these believers who represent “caricatures of the false hostility between science and faith?” The context would seem to implicate those who believe in a young earth cosmology. This represents millions of Evangelicals — perhaps by many surveys the vast majority. Are they (we) to be written out of Evangelicalism? If this paragraph does not refer to young earth creationists, to whom could it possibly refer? [Wheaton professor Alan Jacobs comes to the same conclusion in his analysis, published in *The Wall Street Journal*.]

This is one of the chief problems with the document. When it lets loose a salvo of criticism, it is never clear who the intended target really is. Reporters present at the press conference expressed some degree of exasperation at this point. When asked for specifics about who they were criticizing, the organizing committee refused to say.

The document points to the politicization of the faith as a main concern. In a crucial section of the text, the Manifesto reads:

Christians from both sides of the political spectrum, left as well as right, have made the mistake of politicizing faith; and it would be no improvement to respond to a weakening of the religious right with a rejuvenation of the religious left. Whichever side it comes from, a politicized faith is faithless, foolish, and disastrous for the church — and disastrous first and foremost for Christian reasons rather than constitutional reasons.

Called to an allegiance higher than party, ideology, and nationality, we Evangelicals see it our duty to engage with politics, but our equal duty never to be completely equated with any party, partisan ideology, economic system, or nationality. In our scales, spiritual, moral, and social power are as important as political power; what is right outweighs what is popular; just as principle outweighs party, truth matters more than team-playing, and conscience more than power and survival.



The obvious backdrop to this is the 2008 presidential race and the group’s assertion that Evangelicalism is too wedded to the Republican Party. Fuller Theological Seminary President Richard Mouw, one of the speakers at the press conference, explained this to [National Public Radio](#):

Well, I think that we have seen, in the last 30 years or so - you know, the evangelicals, really became prominent in American political life around 1980 with the formation of the Moral Majority, and I think that many of them have a vested interest in promoting and using their religious leadership to promote a certain kind of political agenda. And when there are those of us who want to say we claim the label, even though we don’t necessarily identify with that political agenda, that ideology, this obviously will create some tension.

That agenda surely is clarifying. There can be no doubt that far too many Evangelicals have confused the Gospel with a political agenda — and even with the Republican Party. This can be even worse than theological confusion — it can represent idolatry.

But what the document never makes clear is how to hold to deep moral and political convictions, based in biblical

principles, without running the danger of identification with a political agenda — at least to some extent. Does the Manifesto suggest a Gnostic form of political engagement?

Finally, the document is, in essence, a call to civility. Indeed, civility is perhaps the main thrust of the document. The Manifesto seeks to define a civil public space where persons from all belief systems are welcome to contend for their own beliefs and convictions. This public space is a “civil” rather than a “sacred” or “naked” public square.

This “civil public square” stands against the theocratic yearnings of the “sacred public square” and the secularism of the “naked public square.” In the Manifesto’s words:

In contrast to these extremes, our commitment is to a civil public square — a vision of public life in which citizens of all faiths are free to enter and engage the public square on the basis of their faith, but within a framework of what is agreed to be just and free for other faiths too. 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.

This is a good and helpful statement . . . as far as it goes. The Manifesto is brave in calling for an end to “culture warring” that threatens to unravel the society and shut down civil conversation and deliberation.

But its bravery does not extend to any specific proposals about how this can be done. The foundation for this part of the Manifesto appears to be Os Guinness’ book, *The Case for Civility*, which makes precisely the same arguments in precisely the same elegant language — and with precisely the same limitations. Guinness is a brilliant social analyst and should be counted among the most insightful thinkers in the Evangelical world. But the brilliant insights found in *The Case for Civility* are, in the main, the same brilliant insights found within an earlier project that was, by his own account, largely his conception — *The Williamsburg Charter* of 1988.

The limitations of both of his projects are found within “An Evangelical Manifesto,” and to devastating result. Civility is urgently important and is central to American order. Civility is a virtue rooted in the fact that Christians understand each human being to be made in the image of God. But neither Guinness nor the Manifesto can construct the framework for civility that Guinness brilliantly imagines. This is due to the fact that we are now dealing with the very fundamental questions of existence that the Manifesto acknowledges; the questions that, in the end, will shape the civilization. Issues such as abortion and marriage are not only important, but urgent. One gains the impression that the civility so prized in this document can only take the form of endless talk and dialogue. That may fit the culture of Washington think tanks, but it does not fit the culture of public policy or the lives most of us lead. The Manifesto is wonderfully prophetic in calling for civility, but it never explains how civility can survive a policy conclusion — or how civil parties to a conversation about ultimate things can speak the truth and always be considered civil.

When the document correctly states, “In a society as religiously diverse as America today, no one faith should be normative for the entire society, yet there should be room for the free expression of faith in the public square,” does it mean that there can or should be no normative morality for the public square? Or, one might wonder, would this normative morality (without which no society can survive) be as secularized as the framers of the Manifesto eloquently fear?

Where does a commitment to civility meet its limits? Can one speak truthfully of the Gospel, and of the fact that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, and be *considered* civil?

In the end, I must judge “*An Evangelical Manifesto*” to be too expansive in terms of public relations and too thin in terms of theology. I admire so much of what this document states and represents, but I cannot accept it as a whole. I want it to be even *more* theological, and to be far more specific about the Gospel. I agree with the framers that Evangelicals should be defined theologically, rather than politically, culturally, or socially. This document will have to be much more theological for it to accomplish its own stated purpose.

Now, perhaps we Evangelicals will all gain by a civil conversation about this Manifesto that calls for civility. That at least would be a good place to start.

