

Ecumenical admonitions

Evangelical essentials? Reservations and reminders

by [Gabriel Fackre](#) in the [August 25, 1999](#) issue

Recently a group of conservative evangelical theologians put together a self-consciously “evangelical” summary of the Christian faith—a confessional document that aims to provide a point of unity for evangelicals. The statement was published under the heading “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration” in Christianity Today (June 14). Since the document offers a window on currents in evangelical thinking, and since evangelicals are a significant part of American religious life (and of “mainline” life, since many evangelicals inhabit mainline denominations), we invited two veteran observers of the evangelical scene to offer their reflections on the document. Read [Roger E. Olson's essay here](#).

The attention to theological basics by evangelicals is welcome. Popular evangelical preoccupation with the therapeutic, seduction by the sensational and accession to cultural fads have imperiled evangelicalism's theological identity—as has been noted by many of its own internal critics. And evangelicals' absorption in culture-war issues has led them yet further from focus on first principles. Like parallel attempts to return to the fundamentals in current ecumenism, and also in the developing “center” movements in the mainline churches, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ” echoes the 1934 call of Germany's Synod of Barmen to resist cultural captivity.

Stiffening the spine for that resistance is the premise that “Jesus Christ, as attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear . . . trust and obey in life and in death” (Barmen). In a culture suffused with popular and academic relativisms, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ” declares the “scandal of particularity”—christological, trinitarian and biblical.

A centerpiece of recent ecumenical agreements is justification. That we are saved by Christ alone, through grace alone as received by faith alone—with due regard for varying interpretations and accents—has been a remarkable common affirmation.

"The Gospel of Jesus Christ" strikes these same notes, doing so with its own characteristic evangelical emphases on personal appropriation, sanctification and a substitutionary view of the atonement. While grounded in scripture, its interpretation of the gospel also takes account of the classical tradition, an acknowledgment of the importance in biblical interpretation of "the patristic rule of faith, the historic creeds, the Reformation confessions"—symbols not always associated with evangelicalism.

Along with affirming commonalities, an ecumenical sensibility must also be ready to receive admonitions from other charisms in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12-13). Specifically, ecumenical Christianity has something to learn from the evangelical accents on the personal and the penal found in this statement. Not so long ago, H. Richard Niebuhr reminded his own mainline constituency of its flirtation with "a God without wrath who brings humans without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross." Evangelical emphasis on the cross as the vicarious suffering that receives the judgment on sin of the holy God is a word that needs to be heard by today's adherents of "sloppy agape." Mainline church members might also note that evangelical piety is far more christocentric than the exotic spiritualities making inroads into too many of their own congregations.

But ecumenicals have admonitions for evangelicals as well. The accent on the penal and personal so dominates the text that other classical Christian teachings are muted or missing. Perhaps that is why none of the five orthodox "new theologians" touted by *Christianity Today* (in its February 8 issue) appear as drafters or initial signers of the document.

"Jesus paid our penalty in our place on his cross, satisfying the retributive demands of divine justice . . . [a] mighty substitutionary transaction. . . ." While passing allusion is also made to other aspects of Christ's work, the penal view pervades the document. However, the classical atonement teaching on "the threefold office," while putting the priestly work of Christ on Calvary at its center, joins it to his prophetic and royal ministries. The threefold office, which is a refrain in ecumenical theology (though not a consensus), with acknowledged debt to Calvin's formulation, makes a place for the prophetic life and teachings of Jesus and his royal victory over death and the demonic as integral to the work of reconciliation.

The absence of a full-orbed understanding of the atonement affects ethics. The challenge of Jesus to the political, social and economic powers and principalities, and the confidence in resisting them based on a resurrection faith, appear nowhere in

this declaration. More's the pity, for some of its signatories are known for their faithful witness to that evangelical essential.

Also troubling in this too-simplistic substitutionary view is the missing New Testament premise of the work of Calvary: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world . . ." (2 Cor. 5:19). The atonement presupposes the incarnation. It was God, "in Christ," who suffered for our sins. The divine and human natures cannot be severed, nor the Father and Son divided. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Jesus to God—"Jesus . . . satisfying . . . divine justice"—invites the standard complaints against the teaching of vicarious atonement (most recently the "child abuse" theory) that fail to see on Golgotha the trinitarian being and act of the "crucified God." Ecumenical theology insists on a multidimensional understanding of the at-one-ment of God and our fallen world, effected in Galilee, at Calvary and on Easter morning.

The same concern for catholicity must admonish the evangelical preoccupation with personal soteriology. "All who . . . experience reconciliation . . . enjoy access to the Father with all the peace and joy that this brings. . . . At death Christ takes the believer to himself (Phil 1:21) for unimaginable joy . . . [yet] believers enjoy salvation now." The subjectivities of individual salvation come center stage in this passage. Yes, reconciliation includes our personal destiny and the present "experience" of it. But the redemption of the world has vast corporate and cosmic dimensions. The biblical story is about the arrival of a new heaven and a new earth, swords beaten into plowshares, the coming of a new realm as well as the salvation of our souls. Further, scripture's turning of the eye of faith to the glory of God and away from our fallen self-absorptions should make us wary of a return ever and again to our "experience," our "peace, love and joy," our "born-again" credentials. And again, the stress on subjectivity makes little or no room for the sacramental objectivities, the baptismal and eucharistic means of grace that are surely essentials of Christian unity.

Regarding personal salvation, ecumenical theology these days strives to affirm the particularity of saving faith, but does it in the context of raised awareness of religious pluralism. There is an imperial ring when evangelicals say, "We deny that anyone is saved in any other way than by Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Bible offers no sign that sincere worshipers of other religions will be saved without personal faith in Jesus Christ." This imperial tone does not take into account the current exegesis of Romans 9-11 and its antisupersessionist import, the retrieval of patristic and petrine (1 Peter 3 and 4) themes of Christ's postmortem preaching to

the unreached, Barth's stress on the divine freedom in matters of ultimate salvation and evangelicalism's own internal debate on the question (see *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?*, edited by John Sanders, [InterVarsity, 1995]).

Soteriology and eschatology set the direction for both ethics and piety. On ethics: If the salvation God has enacted in Christ, and will finally complete in and with him at the End, includes Isaiah's wolf and lamb laying together, Revelation's flowering fields and the New Jerusalem, then there will be a partner ethics that seeks passionately to set up signs to that Finale here and now in response to the ecological and political mandates of the day. On piety: If the personal becomes all-consuming, then evangelical worship, prayer and hymnody will dwell on "my story" instead of God's story, and succumb to the very anthropocentrism it seeks to resist.

A few concluding comments and questions to the drafters and signers of "The Gospel of Christ":

1) References to the authority of scripture are carefully stated, and are interesting for what they do not say as well as what they do. No mention is made of "inerrancy," a litmus test associated with some of the declaration's well-known signatories. "Infallible Scriptures" and "written word" are expressions capable of varied interpretations, not the least by the "infallibilist" school of evangelicals, which holds scripture to be trustworthy in faith and morals but not inerrant in science and history.

2) Are the subscribers to this statement sure they want to make as a criterion of personal salvation espousal of a theological proposition about the "humanity of Christ, his incarnation, or his sinlessness"? There is a difference between maintaining doctrines such as these as essential to Christian faith and requiring an "A" in systematics of someone otherwise justified by grace alone and faith alone.

3) The several references to Peter Meiderlin's formulation "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity" are commendable. This formula for a "generous orthodoxy" that appeared during the Thirty Years War remains relevant in the midst of our own theological tribalisms. When this document falls here and there into a warlike "fortress mentality" in regard to other believers, it needs to remember its own commitment to "in all things charity."

4) In that same vein, where the document edges toward a call to circle the evangelical wagons, it forecloses the possibility of alliances with those of us who

care deeply about "ecumenical essentials," ones that converge at critical junctures with "evangelical essentials." Charity would suggest some recognition of the history of pioneering 20th-century ecumenical conversation (Lutheran-Reformed and Protestant-Catholic), and even consensus, on justification by faith not dissimilar to statements in "The Gospel of Jesus Christ."

One learning from the long ecumenical struggle with key doctrines is the place of mutuality. This is no surprise when we remember the coinherence of the persons of the Trinity. To get the fullest grasp of a Christian distinctive, we need the the wisdom of the whole body of Christ. Paradoxically, the unities, therefore, are a condition as well as a goal of the declared essentials. But the price of that kind of unity is readiness for "mutual admonition": "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21).

That means that an ecumenical ear must be opened to hear an evangelical admonition not to weaken the particularity of Christian confession or ignore the personal and penal dimensions of Christ's work. And likewise an ecumenical admonition for evangelical drafters is not to construe their reading of particularity, the personal and the penal as the fullness of biblical faith. Such might be said with a little Pauline editing of the wise words of Meiderlin: "In essentials unity, in charisms diversity, in all things charity."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Ecumenical admonitions."