

Theology for the post-Graham era

Evangelical essentials? Reservations and reminders

by [Roger E. Olson](#) 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 [Gabriel Fackre's essay here](#).

In a time of great angst regarding identity, the evangelical theological community has begun to wrestle as never before with what it means to be “evangelical.” What exactly is the heart and core of the evangelical witness? What are the boundaries around authentic evangelical confession? Exactly what is it that one must affirm in order to be considered truly evangelical?

These questions are coming to the forefront for several reasons. What some wags have called the “Graham glue” is losing its binding power. That is, the powerfully unifying personality of Billy Graham is gradually but noticeably decreasing in effect. People and institutions that once gladly cooperated in evangelical endeavors in spite of fairly serious theological, liturgical and practical differences are beginning to look askance at one another.

Are dyed-in-the-wool Calvinists really “authentically evangelical”? Can one be openly and passionately Arminian—and at the same time “fully and truly evangelical”? Is it possible to be something other than an inerrantist with regard to scriptural authority and still be evangelical? What about all those varieties of specialized ministries and styles of worship? Can charismatics and pietists and Plymouth Brethren and

genuflecting Anglicans and Episcopalians and seeker-oriented megachurches all be counted equally evangelical? In many people's eyes, the confusing mix of Christian types that has met under the tent of evangelicalism has been held together for years by the personality and ministry of Billy Graham. What, if anything, will hold them together in the future?

That is the question that theologians have attempted to answer in offering a set of propositions (a favorite pastime of many evangelical thinkers) as a unifying expression of what evangelicals all affirm in spite of their myriad distinctives. The creedlike affirmation was composed by a committee of theologians that reads like a "Who's Who" of mostly Reformed evangelical thinkers. A few of the 15 members of the drafting committee are of the Wesleyan persuasion, but the majority are easily identifiable as leaning toward the Calvinist side of the spectrum. Published with the statement and the names of its drafting committee members was a list of 114 members of a "Confirmed Endorsing Committee" that includes a richly diverse assortment of evangelical notables from a variety of denominational backgrounds and theological orientations.

Surely one purpose of this impressive statement and the effort put into gaining its wide acceptance is to solidify evangelical theological unity in spite of the gradual loss of the unifying power of Billy Graham. Another purpose is no doubt to provide theological stability to the increasingly experience-oriented evangelical seeker-sensitive churches and parachurch ministries. Even those of us who were not invited to contribute to or sign this effort to define the gospel of Jesus Christ applaud the intention and effort of its formulators. We hesitate even to express our qualms about it because we agree so heartily with its basic thrust. The need to rally around a strong theological center of gravity is felt by all who are firmly planted within the evangelical community. If "evangelical" is compatible with anything and everything, it is meaningless. Defining the gospel of Jesus Christ that we all proclaim and live is much more important than precisely defining "scriptural inerrancy" or formulating a methodology for proper evangelism (as valuable as those efforts may be). Overall "The Gospel of Jesus Christ" is a magnificent effort and product.

But the devil is in the details. A basic principle overlooked by some of the formulators and signers of the statement is that a propositional statement may be true and yet not be necessary to the gospel itself. The statement is extremely wordy and unfortunately includes some doctrinal affirmations and denials with which one may agree and yet reject as essential components of "the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Problems arise mainly in the second half of the statement, which is headed "Affirmations and Denials" and is composed of 18 dual statements of the implications of the gospel. Each one begins with something that is affirmed ("We affirm . . .") and concludes with something denied or rejected ("We deny . . ."). One has to wonder why this section is even necessary, especially since it includes several strong affirmations of forensic images of salvation as essential to the gospel itself and corresponding rejections of infused righteousness. Are terms and concepts such as "propitiation," "forensic declaration" and "substitutionary satisfaction" (with reference to Christ's death) really essential to the gospel itself? The statement concludes with a remark that may indicate that they are: "We see all these Gospel truths as necessary." It also states that "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."

One problem with this is that even according to one of the statement's formulators, Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School (at Samford University) and senior theological adviser to *Christianity Today*, the great Anabaptist reformers such as Menno Simons and Balthasar Hubmaier "did not accept Luther's forensic doctrine of justification by faith alone" (see George's *Theology of the Reformers*). The clear implication of the statement then is that these Anabaptists were not saved Christians, let alone "evangelicals." I do not believe that such exclusion is what was intended by all of the statement's formulators or signers, but it is logically implied by the statement, perhaps in spite of the good intentions of most of its formulators and signers.

Among the affirmations and denials appended to the statement one finds that the gospel itself includes belief that "mental assent to the content of the Gospel" is necessary for saving faith. A rigorously logical interpretation of the entire statement—including all the affirmations and denials—would conclude that one must believe in and mentally affirm forensic justification, substitutionary satisfaction (of atonement), and exclusion of all unevangelized persons from any hope of salvation in order to be an evangelical Christian. I suspect that some of the statement's formulators and signers did not fully grasp or intend this logical implication. However, they should not be so naïve as to assume that the statement will never be used to exclude or marginalize many persons who do not use those legal images and concepts or restrict hope of salvation to those who have opportunity to give mental assent to a set of propositions.

The gospel itself should be short and sweet. Theologically correct interpretation of the gospel may be verbose and complex. This statement confuses the two. It begins with the former virtue and wanders into the latter. Better to stick with the economy of words used by Martin Luther himself when he stated: "The gospel, then, is nothing but the preaching about Christ, Son of God and of David, true God and man, who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death, and hell of all who believe in him" (*Preface to the New Testament*, 1546). While Luther allowed for a lengthier statement of the gospel, he also affirmed this minimal one as adequate. Theology is one thing; the gospel is another. It would be best to keep the latter short and simple enough to be easily memorized.