

Identity check

From the Editors in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

Mainliners are not the only ones worrying about an eroding theological identity. A group of evangelical theologians recently produced a 3,000-word document designed to present the evangelical understanding of the gospel and to identify some of the ways evangelicals have distorted or misconstrued the good news. "We are living in a time when evangelicals choose their churches based on music style or specialized ministries rather than doctrine or biblical content," laments David Neff of *Christianity Today*. "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration," which appeared in *CT* earlier this month along with a preface by Neff (titled "A Call to Evangelical Unity"), seeks to articulate with some precision the understanding of the Christian message that unites evangelicals.

The document is clearly the work of theologians who think the experiential, activist, pragmatic, entrepreneurial side of American evangelicalism needs to be more firmly grounded in Reformed doctrine (or at least a selective reading of Reformed doctrine). Since American evangelicalism has always been a diverse quilt, a stitched-together movement of Pentecostals, charismatics, pietists and revivalists, as well as defenders of Reformed orthodoxy, it will be interesting to see whether the document indeed serves to rally the troops or whether it brings to the surface some old and perhaps some new conflicts.

Neff notes that "some parts of this document sound like a reprise of themes from the 16th century." Indeed they do. So much so that one wonders whether the statement has any deep resonance with contemporary evangelical concerns.

Much attention is given, for example, to the substitutionary theory of atonement—Christ's death as a "propitiatory" sacrifice which vicariously satisfies the retributive demands of divine justice, a penalty that would otherwise have been meted out to humans. The penal, substitutionary theory of atonement has, of course, been a classic theme in evangelical theology and piety. But Bible scholars are not convinced that the biblical writers who referred to Christ as a sacrifice "for us" were necessarily thinking of Christ's death as the payment of a penalty to God.

Nor do they think it is the only or the most significant framework in the New Testament for understanding the death of the God-man. Theologically, the substitutionary penal theory has long been unsatisfying for logical reasons—it raises such questions as, How can God pay a debt to God?—and because it makes Christ's death part of an abstract, inner-trinitarian drama. Indeed, the primary problem with the penal theory is that it locates the problem of sin with God, not us—as if it's mainly God's honor that needs satisfying, not humans that need rescuing from sin.

Presumably such concerns have occurred to some evangelicals—otherwise the statement would not be so keen on articulating the doctrine. But believers with such questions about the atonement, or about other evangelical landmarks such as infallibility of scripture and the lost state of non-Christians, will not find their questions addressed or acknowledged by the document, either on biblical or theological grounds. They will only find the old claims reasserted.

Christians certainly need markers of identity and summaries of basic beliefs, such as the "Evangelical Celebration" attempts to supply. But as the document also reveals, such a summary of doctrinal claims can be a rather empty gesture if not accompanied by a deep engagement with the real questions that are on people's minds. And it's the latter kind of engagement that makes for really good news.