

Evangelical document tries to present more nuanced social position: A landmark statement

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In a self-defining paper for the broad spectrum of U.S. evangelicals, a landmark document nearing completion warns against close alignment with one political party and endorses government-aided social policies that are fair and just for all.

While saying patriotism is commendable, the statement also says Christians “must be careful to avoid the excesses of nationalism.” The document was three years in the making under the aegis of the National Association of Evangelicals.

The NAE includes 52 denominations, independent churches and special ministries from a variety of evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, though the large Southern Baptist Convention has never been a member. The draft being reviewed by 100 church leaders comes from a committee cochaired by Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, and Diane Knippers, president of the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy. The NAE board will consider it at its October meeting.

The draft adheres to traditional evangelical support for families, including opposition to same-sex marriage, abortion and the use of human embryonic stem cells for research. The content of the working paper was first reported by the *Los Angeles Times* on June 20.

Evangelicals who say they are moderate or liberal on some social issues have expressed discomfort with broad-brush assessments in the media or with some Christian Right leaders who link themselves to Republican Party goals. The paper cautions that evangelicals “must guard against overidentifying Christian social goals with a single political party, lest nonbelievers think that Christian faith is essentially political in nature.”

Sider told the *Times* that the framework tries to debunk some stereotypes and present a more nuanced common ground. “What we haven’t done is a very good job of thinking through a sophisticated, integrated, comprehensive framework that is grounded in biblical values but takes in the complexities of the world,” he said.

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, said the public has been confused about who evangelicals are. “Some evangelicals sounded like conservative Republicans with a slight religious gloss to it.” Others, he told the newspaper, “sounded like left-wing liberals who quoted the Bible more than others.”

The framework was designed to guide the NAE, which has a Washington, D.C., presence, in its dealings with the White House and members of Congress when moral and political issues seem to coincide.

In one of its more daring statements, in light of traditional evangelical antipathy toward government programs for the poor, the draft says: “When social structures result in such gross disparities and suffering, the Bible writers envision structural solutions, such as periodic land redistribution so that everyone can have access to productive resources and be dignified members of their communities.”