

Civility Consultation Follow-up

Version April 14, 2018

At our consultation in New York on October of 2017, it was agreed that we would seek to prepare a brief document that addressed both the current problem of the lack of civility among evangelical American evangelicals and some of the issues out of which much incivility has recently flowed. (NOTE: Since our consultation, a major resource has been published; we have made use of this resource in the material below and we commend it to anyone who reads this document. The resource is the book *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning*, ed. Mark Labberton; InterVarsity Press, 2018.)

We submit this material in the form of “Affirmations,” “Laments and Confessions,” and “Commitments” and we then specify some of the areas where, in our present culture, we see the need for special emphasis.

We affirm that we are and continue to be evangelicals as that term has been historically defined.

We lament that many of us have failed to speak and live the fullness of the gospel—the *euangelion*, from which the term “evangelical” is derived. **We confess** that this failure has dishonored the name of the One whose life and death and resurrection are at the heart of that gospel. And **we commit** that, in both this small project and in all our words and deeds, we will energetically seek to embody the Lordship of Christ over all our thoughts, words, and actions.

We affirm that the *euangelion*, from which we take our name, has historically been and should always be focused on the *full* ministry and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We lament that, too often, we have narrowed our understanding of the gospel. **We confess** that we have allowed that narrowing to shape inappropriately both how we speak and how we act. And **we commit** that, going forward, we will intentionally focus our energies on embodying those areas of the gospel that each of us has individually neglected.

We affirm that the gospel involves unambiguous affirmation of at least the following theological truths: the full authority of the Old and New Testaments; the necessity for saving and personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; the sovereignty of our Creator and Redeemer over all creation; and the requirement that everyone calling themselves Christians seek, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live in obedience to *all* the commands of Scripture.

We lament that, we have frequently reduced Christian faith to mere intellectual assent. **We confess** that this is as much a violation of the essence of the gospel as any variation in our core doctrinal affirmations. And **we commit** that we will stand just as vigorously for *orthopraxy* as we have historically stood for *orthodoxy*.

We affirm that one central expression of the gospel is found in John 3: 16. However, **we lament** that we have not always emphasized fully and clearly enough that, for example, Matthew 25: 31–46—with Jesus’ call to care for “the least of these”—is an equally central expression of the gospel. **We confess** that we have thus dishonored the One who is quoted in this passage. **We commit** that *both* central expressions will be on our lips and in our lives.

We affirm that all the Ten Commandments remain equally authoritative for Christians today, not because obeying them earns us a specific standing before God but because obeying them brings appropriate honor to the One who gave them.

We lament that we have often prioritized these commandments, focusing primarily on observable public behavior. **We confess** that doing so minimizes the seriousness of *all* violations of *any* of the commandments. And **we commit** that we will, in our teaching and in our lives, seek to honor God by emphasizing and being equally obedient to *all* his commands.

In light of the above, **we commit** ourselves to the following special emphases in these days:

- 1) There is only one Name to which we must look for our salvation, the Name of Jesus Christ. “In Christ alone” may hope be found.
- 2) One necessary and legitimate purpose and goal of the Christian life is “being bound for the promised land” of heaven.
- 3) An equally necessary and legitimate purpose and goal of the Christian life is “to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.”
- 4) *All* men and women are created in the image of God and must be treated accordingly. Christians must ensure that *all* members of *any* group that has been for any reason the objects of discrimination *know* that we have, in our words and in our lives, renounced and repented of such discrimination and sought to make sure that it is fully eliminated from our lives and our churches.
- 5) Beyond non-discrimination, Jesus has commanded us to love our neighbors—*all* our neighbors—and he has made it clear, specifically in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) that often the neighbor we should be active in loving is precisely the one who is very different from us.
- 6) Because the Bible places special emphasis on care for the poor and the oppressed, Christians must do the same. God’s priorities (see Isaiah 58 1–12) must be *our* priorities.
- 7) While we must confront sin when we see it, the sin that we must be most diligent in confronting is that within our own hearts. (In the words of Jonathan Edwards, “Though Christian fortitude appears in withstanding and counteracting enemies without us; yet it much more appears in resisting and suppressing the enemies that are within us; *because they are our worst and strongest enemies and have greatest advantage against us.*”)
- 8) We must remember in-fighting among Christians has often led to tragedy for the church’s witness in the world. We must be gracious and civil in all our dealings with other Christians, *especially those brothers and sisters with whom we disagree.*
- 9) We must remember that the foundational documents of many Christian traditions interpret the Ninth Commandment to mean that we must always “seek to promote the good name of our neighbor.” Therefore, we must avoid inappropriate negative labelling of our theological opponents even as we seek to express our legitimate disagreements with them. As Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).