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An Evangelical Vision of the Near Future
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It has become common in the media to use the term "Evangelical Christianity" as an equivalent of the religious right, meaning the portion of American Christians that support the policies and actions of the Republican Party. In many ways, this is apparently true -- a third of GOP members are Conservative Christians. James Dobson, the leader of Focus on the Family, revels in his access to the White House; and President Bush regularly sends video greetings to the annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In response to this situation, an alliance of evangelical leaders has released an "Evangelical Manifesto" that calls for a more centrist and flexible position for evangelicalism, one in which evangelical is defined in theological rather than political terms, where adherence to Christianity does not also require support of a political party.

This manifesto (<http://www.evangelicalmanifesto.com>) has been signed by a wide range of evangelical leaders, inviting others to read and sign it if they wish. Some of the more than 100 signatories include Mark Bailey, the president of Dallas Theological Seminary; Dean Hirsch, president of World Vision International; Walter Kaiser, president emeritus of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourner Magazine; and Frank Wright, president of the National Religious Broadcasters. Since evangelicalism is a movement rather than an organization, acceptance of the document is voluntary rather than coercive.

Without ever saying it in so many words, the manifesto is heavily critical of evangelical representatives involved in politics. This is made clear by its comparison between Constantine and Jesus, an analogy that most press reports missed.

The Roman Emperor Constantine created the Christian Church in 324 by organizing and funding the disparate Christian communities throughout the empire. According to the manifesto, by bringing them together for the first time at the Council of Nicea, he joined the Church with the state. In so doing, he established Christianity as the one religion supported by the Roman Empire. Although this picture smooths over many details, it is true that the empire helped Christianity become its dominant and ultimately its only fully legal religion, using force to exterminate paganism.

The manifesto argues that evangelicals should not ally themselves with the state and its power as the church did in the time of Constantine, but should instead follow the example of Jesus who participated in his society simply as an equal. He taught and debated those around him on even footing and spread his message with the same means available to others, even subjecting himself to the ruling authorities.

In modern America, the equivalent is the "civil public square," which the manifesto sees as the place where all citizens have an equal voice. It is not a "sacred square" where (certain) religious voices predominate, nor is it a "naked square" where secular voices stand privileged.

Rather than seeking special rights for evangelicals, the manifesto sees the Christian message as special, not its adherents. "Thus every right we assert for ourselves is at once a right we defend for others. A right for a Christian is a right for a Jew, and a right for a secularist, and a right for a Mormon, and a right for a Muslim, and a right for a Scientologist, and a right for all the believers in all the faiths across the wide land."

But this is not the manifesto's largest concern. "We are also troubled by the fact that the advance of globalization and the emergence of a global public square finds no matching vision of how we are to live freely, justly and peacefully with our deepest differences on the global stage." The future will intensify the "challenges of living with our deepest differences, "namely, the religious differences of people around the world.

The manifesto raises this as humanity's greatest concern, one which must be faced by everyone, not just Christians. While it offers no vision to overcome, it suggests to the evangelical community that it must change, approaching the future with the humility borne of equality and egalitarianism rather than striving for political dominance. The coercion that comes from such dominance, it argues, "leads inevitably to conflict."