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The Evangelical Identity Crisis -It's Really About Integrity

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The evangelical movement is in the midst of a massive identity crisis that threatens the integrity of conservative Christianity in America. As in Lord Shaftesbury's time, the word is now applied to doctrinal positions, institutions, and organizations that bear little resemblance to the founding convictions of the movement—and to the core of doctrinal commitments central to evangelical identity.

A cadre of revisionists now seeks to redefine evangelical theology through a theological "megashift" that looks remarkably like the liberal theology evangelicals once rejected. Central doctrines such as Christ's substitutionary atonement, verbal inspiration, the exclusivity of the Gospel, the reality of hell, and justification by faith alone are rejected in favor of a new evangelical paradigm.

The Reformation foundations of the evangelical tradition are to be replaced with a new doctrinal platform complete with a wrathless deity and an unnecessary cross. This is no minor alteration.

Advocates of this "megashift" declare that the revolution is inevitable as younger evangelicals reject the old doctrines. The shift may be hidden by the continued use of traditional language, but the older words have been redefined. As one leading proponent of this new evangelical theology bragged, younger evangelicals already think this way, so the resisters will simply be replaced with the revisionists.

A prime example of this redefinition is seen in the new concept of God's omniscience promoted by those who champion the concept popularly known as the "openness of God." According to these theologians, God's omniscience has been wrongly understood throughout the history of the church. We are now to understand that God is truly wise and infinitely resourceful, but not all-knowing in any genuine sense. In this new understanding, God simply knows what can be known. Since the future hasn't happened yet—it cannot be known. God may know the general direction of the future, these theologians insist, but He cannot know the future decisions that will be made by human beings.

God is open to the future, they argue. He knows all that can be known, but even God cannot know what free creatures will choose in the future, and since these decisions determine the shape of the future, God is waiting with His creatures to see how it will all work out in the end. God knows all that can be known, and that is all there is to say.

This is an ancient heresy in a new guise. This limited deity is not the God of the Bible. This "openness theology" may fit comfortably with modern metaphysics and contemporary culture's idea of a relational deity, but the God of the Bible knows all things exhaustively, reigns over His creation, and is never depicted as a mere spectator—even an "infinitely resourceful" spectator.

The National Association of Evangelicals recently met in Colorado Springs—now something of a capital city for evangelical organizations. The highlight of the 2004 NAE convention, at least according to the media, was a speech by President George W. Bush delivered by teleconference. The President affirmed his determination to fight for the Federal

Marriage Amendment and repeated his pledge to protect human life from exploitation by embryo research. As expected, the President's speech was enthusiastically received by the convention.

Nevertheless, though the President's address took the headlines, another message did attract some attention. According to *The New York Times*, "One of the few discordant notes at the convention came from Robert Schuller, a televangelist and senior pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calif., who delivered an address gently criticizing some conservative evangelical Christians for acting as if they know the only possible route to salvation." The paper later interviewed Schuller and quoted him as saying, "What upsets me about religious leaders of all faiths is that they talk like they know it all, and anybody who doesn't agree with them is a heretic."

There was no news article dealing with Schuller's address posted on the NAE web site, but this is vintage Robert Schuller. A devotee of positive thinking and a disciple of the late Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, Schuller has never had much to do with orthodox Christian theology. He has routinely downplayed sin as nothing more than a lack of self-esteem, denied that we are threatened by the wrath of God as punishment for sin, and repackaged salvation as merely an acceptance of God's unconditional acceptance. He sees evangelical theology as unnecessarily narrow, and his denunciation of evangelicals for believing that Christ is "the only possible route to salvation" is consistent with his reformulation of Christian theology into "possibility thinking."

The real question is this: Why was Robert Schuller invited to address the National Association of Evangelicals? Given his theological beliefs and teachings, he does not qualify under any normative definition of historic evangelical identity. If evangelical now includes those who deny the exclusivity of the Gospel of Christ—a clear claim made by Christ Himself in the Scriptures—what does the word possibly mean?

Evangelicalism's identity crisis is an integrity crisis. If "evangelical" can mean anything or everything, it means nothing. If evangelicalism is divided over an issue as basic as God's omniscience and the exclusivity of the Gospel, it is headed into fatal confusion.

Every word requires a definition, and the definition limits how the word can rightly be used. As Charles Spurgeon once fulminated, "It is mere cant to cry, 'We are evangelical; we are evangelical' and yet decline to say what evangelical means."

The founders of modern evangelicalism sought to identify themselves with the faith once delivered to the saints, with the classical tradition of orthodox doctrine, with an affirmation of the total truthfulness and authority of the Bible, with the formal and material principles of the Reformation, with the exclusivity of the Gospel and the urgency of conversionist evangelism, and with the bold preaching that Jesus saves sinners.

None of these can now be taken for granted among those who call themselves evangelicals. We need a truth in advertising campaign if "evangelical" is to be saved from meaninglessness. A failure of evangelical nerve will lead to evangelical disaster.

As a movement, evangelicalism now encompasses a vast array of publishing houses, theological schools, colleges, magazines, mission societies, and parachurch organizations. The movement has been a mighty force for Gospel witness and a voice for righteousness in the culture. Will this continue? Only time will tell. This much is clear—if evangelicalism is to regain its witness and momentum, it must first regain its doctrinal convictions.

