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OUR
EVANGELICAL
FAITH

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For
Caleb, Emma, Sam and Matthew,
grandchildren whom the evangelical faith
— owned, cherished and kept —
will find among “the great cloud of witnesses.”
(Hebrews 11:1)

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL?

What's the point of doctrine? Why do all evangelical organizations insist on doctrinal affirmations?

It's because Jesus Christ is *real*. This bedrock conviction has characterized Christians from the apostolic era to the present. Jesus Christ is true—better, He is *Truth*. What His followers confess about Him is encapsulated in brief statements known as “Christian doctrines.” The Christian community cherishes these doctrines zealously, knowing how important they are for its identity and nurture, and also announces them to the world as truths.

Crucial, plainly, is the relation between *Truth* and *truths*. Clearly *Truth* and *truths* are not the same. The living person of Jesus Christ is categorically different from pronouncements about Him. Nevertheless, He can be embraced as Truth only as the truths about Him are communicated, understood and (through the mysterious ministry of the Holy Spirit) rendered the means whereby He forges Himself within people, forms them as they come to bear His “stamp” and fits them for His service.

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Doctrines, then, are truths whose importance is determined by the service they render to Truth. Clearly to disregard them is to disregard Him. The Church cannot insist that its Lord is real and at the same cavalierly dismiss doctrine as unimportant, or the amusement of professional theologians or an abstraction that has nothing to do with the solidity of the One who, raised from the dead and thereby established as the Ruler of the cosmos, now "fills all things" (Ephesians 4:10).

As Truth, our Lord is also Way and Life. As Way, He guides us along that path which unflinchingly sees us home, having spared us the deadliness of swamp and storm, desert and quicksand. As Life, He quickens our trust in Him and enlivens our obedience to Him. Yet it must always be remembered that He does all of this precisely as we continue to immerse ourselves in the truths that point to Him, speak of Him, and distinguish Him from all other secular and religious "packages" that claim to be a substitute for Him.

Those who are eager to be "doers of the Word" (James 1:22) are frequently impatient with doctrine. To be sure, reading and discussing doctrine is never to be a replacement for "doing" of any sort. Still, it must always be asked how long the Word or Truth will be "done" if truths are trifled with.

Doctrine is needed if each generation is to be instructed in the faith. (From a human perspective, we should remember, the Church is forever a single generation away from extinction.) Doctrine is needed as well if the Church is to fend off the false teaching that is always on the point of infecting it.

And of course doctrine is needed if the Church is to be spared that spiritual and theological "amnesia" wherein it forfeits its identity. We must always recall that in everyday life amnesia, the disappearance of memory, doesn't mean simply that we've

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forgotten where we've left our umbrella. To be devoid of memory, rather, means that we don't know who we are. Lacking an identity, we can't be trusted. In short, doctrine—truth—is essential if the Church is to continue to know who and what it is; essential if it is to be trusted as witness to the Truth; and essential if it is to continue to be the God-appointed agent of the Saviour's work in the world.

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What is an Evangelical? Better, who is an Evangelical? Simply put, Evangelicals are those who glory in the cross of Christ. Our faith arises from it; our thinking converges on it; our life radiates from it.

Evangelicals are aware that the cross has made atonement for all humankind as God made "at one" with Himself disobedient, defiled sinners who were otherwise hopelessly separated from Him by a gaping chasm they were never going to be able to bridge.

Evangelicals know that while God *is* love (1 John 4:8) and can therefore do nothing but love, when God's love encounters human sin his love "burns hot," as Martin Luther liked to say. God's anger or wrath, then, is never the contradiction or denial of his love. (Indifference is always the antithesis of love. After all, the people with whom we are angry we at least take seriously; the people to whom we are indifferent we've already dismissed as insignificant.) God's anger "heats up" only because He loves us so very much and so very relentlessly that He can't remain indifferent to us and won't abandon us. Profoundly He loves sinners more (or at least more truly, more realistically) than we love ourselves, since our self-love, perverted by sin, issues only in self-destruction. And as the cross on which He "did not spare

his own Son but gave Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32) makes plain, He longs to spare us torment more than He longs to spare Himself.

We must make no mistake. Because God is holy, sin breaks His heart. More than merely breaking His heart, however, sin also mobilizes His anger and provokes His revulsion. What, then, is God to do with men and women whose ingratitude and insolence have grieved Him, angered Him and disgusted Him? One option is to resign them to what they deserve—except that it's no option at all, since love is all God is. For this reason He sets about recovering and restoring those who were created in His image. Meant to mirror his glory, they now glorify themselves, therein rendering His image unrecognizable.

If the predicament of sinners is to be relieved, then those living in the "far country" (so very far from the Father as to be pronounced "dead, lost" in Luke 15:24) have to be reconciled to Him. Since they are currently in the far country, why don't they just get up and "go home"? There's more to it than this. In point of fact they are where they are not on account of their sin (a misunderstanding heard too often) but on account of God's judgment. Our foreparents, we should recall, didn't cavalierly sashay out of the Garden of Eden or confusedly stumble out or defiantly parade themselves out. They were *driven* out. Who drove them out? God did. He expelled them by a judicious act.

Sin, contrary to much popular thought, does not estrange us from God. Sin mobilizes God's judgment, and God's judgment ensures our alienation from Him. Therefore the invitation to be reconciled to Him can't be issued until His judgment has been dealt with. The cross is that love-fashioned deed of mercy wherein the just Judge absorbs His righteous judgment upon sinners, thereby allowing them to "come home" without in any way "fudging"

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His holiness or compromising His integrity or submerging His truth. Only because “in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself” can the apostle urge, “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

God’s tireless pursuit of people who persist in fleeing Him culminates in the cross, wherein He finally overtakes them and wraps them in the arms of the crucified. But of course the cross doesn’t appear out of nowhere and insert itself in the year 27 C.E.—it was anticipated through the God-appointed sacrificial system of the Older Testament. For centuries God had been schooling a people, Israel, in the necessity, meaning and ethos of sacrifice, always preparing for the advent of Israel’s greater Son.

Reflecting the outlook of the Older Testament, the Newer reflects the priority of the cross on every page. One-half of the written gospels is given over to one week of Jesus’ life, the last week wherein His cruciform earthly ministry (John Calvin maintained that the shadow of the cross fell on Jesus’ life and ministry from the day He was born) crescendos to the climax of the cross. The first half of the epistles announces the gospel of the cross; the second half unfolds the nature and pattern and rigour of Christian discipleship in the light of the cross. All evangelical understanding, then, emanates from the cross, as do all evangelical faith and obedience.

Evangelicals, then, are those who cherish the “word of the cross,” grounded in the atonement, as the “word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (1 Corinthians 1:18; Ephesians 1:13).

THE PLACE OF PROCLAMATION AND THE NECESSITY OF DECISION

Evangelicals characteristically find themselves constrained to *proclaim* this message because the message is inherently

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missiological. In other words, the proclamation isn't an "add-on" or an afterthought. Proclamation remains an aspect of the message itself: "gospel" defines itself as "gospel *announced*." So, far from resembling proselytizing or even propaganda, the proclamation of the gospel belongs to the logic of the gospel. Evangelicals, then, are aware that mission is to God's people as burning is to fire. Burning characterizes fire; apart from burning, fire has no existence. Mission establishes the Church and characterizes it, for God's people are created by the revelation of the cross. We cling to it. We exist for the purpose of announcing a crucified and risen Lord who "fills all things" (Ephesians 1:23; 4:10). Indeed, since Christ "fills" every nook, crevice and corner of the universe, since Christ therefore laps everyone's life at all times, Evangelicals understandably continue to point others to the One whose coming to them spells only blessing.

Such proclamation, needless to say, isn't announced in a "Who cares?" attitude, as if the hearer's response were of no significance, or at least of no *eternal* significance. What's at stake in any announcement of the gospel is always more than a "response" of whim or preference or even prejudice. What's at stake is nothing less than the hearer's salvation. For this reason the declaration of the gospel always elicits a particular decision from the hearer, that "U-turn" which Scripture labels repentance. Such a decision—for which sobriety, solemnity and unrestrained joy are all appropriate simultaneously—is a life-changing "about-face" from darkness to light, from indifference or hostility to love, from death to life. The lattermost point must be given its full weight: the decision to which the gospel summons the hearer has everything on earth and in heaven hanging on it.

Such a decision need not be made in an instant; in fact more often than not it isn't made in an instant. The fact that the

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process of deciding is protracted in most cases doesn't detract in the slightest from its veracity. Nevertheless, at some point the decision *needs* to have been made as the rebel surrenders, the icy heart is thawed, the spiritually inert is resurrected and Love is loved.

COVENANT FAITHFULNESS AND LIFELONG REPENTANCE

The God who has promised ever to be our God, *God for us*, never rescinds His covenant with us. In turn He longs for us ever to be His people as we own our covenant with Him. Finding us to be covenant-breakers with Him, however, He gives us His Son and directs us to the Nazarene as the one instance of human covenant faithfulness to the Father. For this reason the decision of faith and obedience that we make is not made once only; rather the decision has to be renewed every day. Every morning we must recommit ourselves to our Lord, to His truth, to His way, and—no less, even perhaps hardest of all—to His people. In Luther's famous tract, *The 95 Theses*, which he nailed to door of the Wittenberg church in 1517, the first thesis sets the tone for all that follows. Luther's first thesis will ever remain the "bass note" for all of us: "The Christian life consists of *daily*, lifelong repentance." In other words, every morning we have to reorient ourselves to our Lord, determined to identify ourselves with Him and follow Him *today* amid all dangers, deceptions and distractions.

Yet the decision we make, while it's unquestionably the inception of the Christian life, isn't the termination of that life. Much arduous discipleship lies between commencement and completion. More than a few trials will have to be encountered and temptations resisted. Barnabas and Paul, eager not to

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misrepresent the rigours of discipleship, are found “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith . . . saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). If Evangelicals uphold justification by faith as the beginning of the Christian life and its stable basis, no less ardently do they insist that sanctification, holiness of heart and life, must be pursued at all times and in all circumstances.

HOLINESS

Holiness is simply the believer’s conformity to the will and way of the Master. Holiness is God’s purpose for His people. While the word-group in Scripture that refers to election or predestination occurs approximately 15 times, the word-group pertaining to holiness occurs 833 times. Plainly the category of holiness dominates Scripture and should therefore be the Christian’s preoccupation.

Cherishing the Great Commandment as well as the Great Commission—“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” (Mark 12:30) and “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19)—Evangelicals remain convinced of the “Root” Commandment: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). This “root” commandment reverberates like a bell throughout the Bible. Like all commandments, however, the predominant commandment is at the same time the predominant promise: not only *must* God’s people be holy; God will see to it that His people *are* holy. God will guarantee for people consecrated to Him everything that He requires of them. Then God’s people may and must obey Him in matters great and small as they are conformed to that “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 14:12).

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Such holiness, John Wesley liked to say, pertains to “heart and life.” Holiness of heart (i.e., a supposedly grace-wrought disposition) not giving rise to holiness of life is no more than a religious self-indulgence, a pietistic trip “inward” that skeptics rightly see to be rationalized selfism. Holiness of life not grounded in holiness of heart, on the other hand, is no more than self-righteous legalism, and exhausting as well. Holiness of heart and life together attest a simple yet glorious truth that Evangelicals will never surrender: God can do something with sin beyond forgiving it. *What* can He do? Not only can He relieve us of sin’s guilt; He can also release us from sin’s grip. Deliverance from both the guilt and the power of sin remains a vivid conviction in the evangelical consciousness.

CONSTANT CONVERSION

The decision for faith, then, with concomitant inner and outer holiness, might appear to be an end in itself. In truth it is and it isn’t. It’s an end in itself in that faith binds us to Jesus Christ, and our union with Him is an end in itself. Any utilitarian consideration or motive here merely attempts to use Him, rendering Him a means to an end, a tool we can exploit for some “goody” apart from Him. *He* is our greatest good, our eternal good. He gives us His unique gifts only in the course of giving us *Himself*. Therefore He can never be a means to anyone’s end.

At the same time, the decision for faith invariably binds us not only to Jesus Christ but also to that body of which He is head, namely, the Church. Since believers are bound to Jesus Christ, head and body, we must daily renew our commitment to Christ’s people even as we admit with our Puritan ancestors that the Church is a “fair face with an ugly scar.” And since in Christ

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God has "so loved the world" (John 3:16) as never to abandon it, the conversion of which Evangelicals speak must be a daily-renewed conversion to Christ, His people and the world.

KINGDOM OF GOD

To say we must love the world as Christ loves it is to say that we shan't adulate it uncritically or fawn over it or seek to profit from it; rather we shall long for the full manifestation of its redemption. To this end Christians understand that they have been commissioned to render visible that kingdom which Jesus Christ brought with Him in His resurrection from the dead. When we pray "Thy kingdom come" we are praying for the coming manifestation of a kingdom that has to be in our midst just because the King is in our midst. A king without a kingdom is no king at all. Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and present with His people, meets us again and again, not infrequently startling us as He acquaints us with Himself afresh. Since He has promised to abide with us until history is concluded, His kingdom has to have arrived. While it is discerned through the eyes of faith to be sure, it remains invisible to all others.

It follows that one of the Church's tasks is to render indisputable and undeniable that kingdom which is simply the entire creation of God *healed*. Not surprisingly, then, Evangelicals have been at the forefront of the abolition of the slave trade, the amelioration of working conditions in factories and mines, the expansion of literacy, the providing of medical assistance, ministries to the incarcerated, the elevation of women and the relief of human distress of every kind. Believers' holiness of heart and life lends visibility to a world from which Christ's victorious cross has already seen "Satan fall like lightning from heaven," heaven being the invisible dimension of the creation (Luke 10:18).

EVANGELICALISM'S VULNERABILITY

Honesty compels us to admit that evangelicalism is susceptible to distortion and prone to unravel. Rightly emphasizing Christian experience as the gospel “opens the heart” (as happened with Lydia in Acts 16:13), the evangelical consciousness is always in danger of confusing *experience of the Spirit* with *experience-in-general*, especially where experience-in-general is riddled with romanticism or nostalgia or religious sentimentality.

In other words, despite evangelicalism’s insistence on *orthodoxy* (*correct* thinking about God and the proper glorifying of Him), evangelicalism remains susceptible to *heterodoxy* (false belief and erroneous glorifying of an other-than-Christ). Evangelical zeal must always be balanced by the tested wisdom of Christians who lived and learned, suffered and witnessed before us. This great weight of Christian wisdom, found in the Church’s tradition, is commonly known as “catholicity.”

EVANGELICALISM AND CATHOLICITY

Two things are to be noted here. First, the word “catholicity” is spelled with a lower case *c*. An upper case *C* normally refers to *Roman Catholicism*. Roman Catholicism is one denomination within the Christian family. Second, the catholicity of the Church, however, is the accumulated wisdom of Christian memory that is found in all denominations.

Catholicity preserves both identity and universality.¹ Identity is that which distinguishes the Church from the world; universality, that which impels the Church to give itself for

1. I am glad to acknowledge my debt to Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, and Donald Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelicalism*.

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the world. Needless to say, only that Church which is self-consciously different from the world can ever exist for the world.

The missionary enterprise of the early Church attests its catholicity. (We should note here that the missionary thrust of the Church isn't the Church's invention, the Church somehow arriving at an insight that the Church's Lord somehow lacked. While Jesus told the Canaanite woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" [Matthew 15:24], unquestionably the seeds of the Gentile mission are found in Jesus' ministry, particularly in His appearances to His followers during the "40 days" between His resurrection and His ascension.) At first Peter opposed this expression of catholicity, Peter maintaining that all Gentile Christians first had to become Jews. Plainly Peter thought that the Church's universality threatened its identity—and he had to be helped to a new perspective.

From a different angle of vision, it's evident that the unique message of the Church guarantees its identity; the assorted converts to the Church guarantee its universality. Both identity and universality have to be held in exquisitely fine balance if the catholicity of the Church is to be preserved. Evangelicals who are properly catholic balance evangelism with training in discipleship and Christian nurture. We balance outreach with worship. We balance contemplation of our reigning Lord and commitment to the world's grief.

Evangelicals who are aware of their catholic heritage balance justification (a new standing before God) and sanctification (a new nature from God); the decision for faith and growth in faith; the call to repentance and the call to sainthood; the Reformation (doctrinal restatement) and revival (the Spirit's flooding over large numbers of people who have not yet welcomed the gospel offer). Evangelicals who know the true meaning of "catholic" embrace

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both specially endowed leaders and ordered ministry; both spontaneous exclamations of praise and sacramental practice.

In all of this, theologians (including those who amplify the doctrinal statements of such bodies as the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada!) preserve catholicity by *defining* the faith so as to combat heresy arising from within the Church, and also by *defending* the faith so as to combat misinterpretation arising from outside the Church. By defining the faith, theological statements preserve identity; by defending the faith, theological statements preserve universality. The first sentence of the Apostles' Creed exemplifies both. "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth" plainly speaks of universality; "and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord . . . crucified under Pontius Pilate" speaks of identity. Doctrine, adequately articulated, always fulfils both purposes.

THE EVANGELICAL CONSENSUS

For decades now Christians of evangelical persuasion throughout the world have recognized that the seven doctrinal affirmations discussed in the following pages are the *foundational* "building blocks" of the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The World Evangelical Fellowship arose in 1950, with representatives from twelve countries. Subsequently renamed the World Evangelical Alliance, the organization now represents 200 million Christians in 123 countries. The following theological statements embody the essential convictions of the WEA and its member organizations internationally.