

Evangelicals lament politicization of faith: An Evangelical Manifesto

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Evangelical Christians should be defined by their theology—and not their politics—to avoid becoming “useful idiots” of a political party, a group of prominent leaders said May 7 in a joint statement.

Released in Washington, the document, “An Evangelical Manifesto,” reflects the frustration of some within a movement that claims about one in four Americans over how they are perceived by others and who speaks for them. The 19-page statement declares that evangelicals err when they try to politicize faith and use Christian beliefs for political purposes.

“That way faith loses its independence, the church becomes ‘the regime at prayer,’ Christians become ‘useful idiots’ for one political party or another, and the Christian faith becomes an ideology in its purest form,” the document reads. But it resists calls to privatize or personalize the faith, saying there is an important place for evangelical voices in the public square.

“Called to an allegiance higher than party, ideology and nationality, we evangelicals see it our duty to engage with politics, but our equal duty never to be completely equated with any party, partisan ideology, economic system, or nationality,” the document states.

The manifesto, which at times upbraids evangelicals for contributing to their own image problems, comes about six months after a poll showed that many young people view Christianity as judgmental and hypocritical. Drafters of the new document said they know other evangelicals who are “ashamed” or “reluctant” to describe themselves as evangelical.

A nine-member steering committee spent three years working on the manifesto. The document’s initial 75 signatories are evangelical leaders from major coalitions, educational institutions and denominations. They include National Association of

Evangelicals president Leith Anderson; best-selling author and megachurch pastor Max Lucado; Jack Hayford, president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel; and Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary.

Critics point out that some key names—including conservative leaders such as Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and Southern Baptist public policy executive Richard Land—are missing from the list of signatories.

“The select group drafting the manifesto apparently excludes traditional conservative, pro-life and pro-family evangelical voices,” said Janice Shaw Crouse of Concerned Women for America, who also questioned the timing of the document’s release near the end of the primary election season.

Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said he had not seen the statement before it was released. “People have a right to invite who they want to to their party,” Land said, but he added that the question about religious involvement in politics is a “false dichotomy.” “It’s not an either/or,” he said. “It’s both.”

The statement calls for a reaffirmation of evangelical identity—including the importance of sharing the belief that Jesus is the only Savior of humankind. It expresses concern that “a generation of culture warring” has created a backlash against religion in public life. It also calls for an openness to work with people of good will, including those of other faiths or no faith.

Others among the 75 initial signatories are Nueva Esperanza USA president Luis Cortes; Wheaton College president Duane Litfin; Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine; and Frank Wright, president of the National Religious Broadcasters. *-Religion News Service*