

What We Believe and Teach

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These have been momentous days in the life of Fuller Theological Seminary. Our curriculum has expanded markedly with the addition of a new degree program in Christian Leadership and new programs for ethnic pastors. To staff, to supervise, to house and to support these burgeoning programs has proved both exciting and demanding. Of special encouragement has been the deep trust placed in us by our students, as well as those who have encouraged our ministry by praying, giving, and calling our graduates to serve in their congregations, mission fields, psychological clinics and other areas of Christian ministry.

We do not want to take the goodwill of these friends for granted. Occasionally we need to make clear what we stand for and why we can continue to ask for the interest and support of the evangelical community worldwide.

Furthermore, we cannot leave the interpretation of our theological stance or our educational ministry to others who may misunderstand what we are about. What it means to be evangelical is under pressing discussion in many places, and rightly so. The issue is a key one. Students choosing a place to study, congregations seeking a pastor, donors weighing their stewardship, alumni/ae recommending their alma mater -these and other constituencies have a right to know how firmly Fuller Theological Seminary, in all its schools and programs, is committed to our evangelical faith and mission.

Our Statement of Faith expresses eloquently where we, as evangelical Christians, stand. As our trustees and faculty renew in writing their commitment to it annually, we are reminded that to be evangelical has always meant, along with a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, affirming a cluster of doctrines. Even in the Reformation, three such affirmations were pivotal: Scripture, not the church, was the final authority for Christian faith and practice; faith in Christ, not good works, was the means of salvation; and all believers, not just monks or clergy, were the church's true priesthood.

Not long after the great evangelical awakenings, the Evangelical Alliance, led by Thomas Chalmers in 1846, stated its faith in a cluster of nine affirmations: 1) the inspiration of the Bible; 2) the right and duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures; 3) the Trinity; 4) human depravity; 5) the meditation of the divine Christ; 6) justification by faith; 7) conversion and sanctification by the Holy Spirit; 8) the return of Christ and judgment; 9) the ministry of the Word.

Still later, in 1910, five fundamentals were identified to distinguish evangelicals from the liberalism that threatened the church: 1) the miracles of Christ; 2) the virgin birth of Christ; 3) the satisfaction view of the atonement; 4) the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures; and 5) the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Following this evangelical pattern, the Fuller Statement of Faith includes ten central affirmations which we "hold to be essential" to our ministry: 1) the existence, perfection and triune nature of God; 2) the revelation of God in creation, history and in Jesus Christ; 3) the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures; 4) God's creation of the world and humankind, with humanity's rebellion and subsequent depravity; 5) the person and work of Jesus Christ, including his deity, virgin birth, true humanity, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and ascension to heaven; 6) the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and justification; 7) growth in the knowledge of God and Christian obedience; 8) the church

as the creation of the Holy Spirit; 9) the worship, mission and service of the church; 10) the return of Christ to raise the dead and to judge the world.

Any examination of the Fuller Statement will indicate how careful we have been to include all the basics of the historic faith, from God's creation of the world out of nothing to the separation of the wicked from God's presence in final judgment. No central doctrine of Scripture as highlighted in the Reformation and reemphasized in the great

Evangelical Awakening has been omitted. Beyond that, our faculty and trustees "acknowledge the creeds of the early church and the confession of the Protestant communions to which they severally belong."

This doctrinal commitment is built on a submission to the authority of Scripture, which must stand as teacher and judge of all that we think and do. It both inspires and corrects our doctrine and our conduct. It must always be clear that for us as evangelicals, the Scriptures outrank all of our doctrinal statements, even statements as carefully written and as strongly believed as those in the Statement of Faith.

It was for this reason that the Fuller Bylaws appropriately provided for the possibility of changing the Seminary's Statement of Faith. The current Statement, approved by our trustees and faculty in 1972, is our attempt to hear and obey the Scriptures as they teach us their basic truths. Any changes made had as their intent a more -not less-biblical expression of Christian truth. We see this move not as a shift but as a corrective.

At times, some Christians have become unduly attached to the precise wordings of doctrine-whether of events in the last days, the meaning of baptism, or the use of a catch phrase like "the inerrancy of Scripture." But it is well to remember that all our formulations of Christian truth must ultimately conform not to some preset statement but to the Scriptures, all parts of which are divinely inspired. Thus, sloganeering can never be a substitute for the careful, patient analysis of what God's Word teaches, including what it teaches about itself.

This being true, when it comes to a loyalty to the trustworthiness, the inspiration, the authority and the power of Scripture, we at Fuller are convinced that our commitment matches anything to be found in contemporary evangelical Christianity. As for a doctrine of Scripture, which is always pivotal to evangelical faith, we have only one aim: to believe and to teach precisely what the Bible teaches about itself. We seek to be thoroughly biblical in our view of the Bible and have phrased as follows our understanding of what the Bible says about itself:

"Scripture is an essential part and trustworthy record of divine self-disclosure. All the books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, are the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. They are to be interpreted according to their context and purpose and in reverent obedience to the Lord who speaks through them in living power."

In our attempt to discover what the Bible says about itself we have clearly distinguished our position from non-evangelical approaches. When we affirm, for instance, that "Scripture is an essential part and trustworthy record of this divine self-disclosure," we separate ourselves from the typical view of neo-orthodoxy that sees Scripture not as a revelation but as a witness to the revelation that took place when God encountered his people in the course of history. Similarly, our belief that "All the books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, are the written Word of God ..." stands in sharp contrast to the usual neo-orthodox affirmation that the Bible only becomes the Word when the Spirit brightens its truth for the eyes of a believer.

The gap between our view and theological liberalism is even wider. Our confidence in the trustworthiness of the basic facts of biblical history -like Christ's virgin birth and bodily resurrection - moves us miles from where liberals are, as do our doctrinal affirmations about human sin, Christ's redemption and the final separation of the wicked from God's presence. Our statement on the inspiration

of both Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God puts a wide gulf between us and those liberals who have customarily held that the Bible merely contains the Word of God.

Were we to distinguish our position from that of some of our brothers and sisters who perceive their view of Scriptures as more orthodox than ours, several points could be made: 1) we would stress the need to be aware of the historical and literary process by which God brought the Word to us; 2) we would emphasize the careful attention that must be given to the historical and cultural contexts in which the various authors lived and wrote, as well as to the purposes which each had in mind -convinced as we are that the Spirit of God used the human abilities and circumstances of the writers in such a way that the Word which results is truly divine; 3) we are convinced that this investigation of the context, purpose and literary genre is essential to a correct understanding of any portion of God's Word; 4) we would urge that the emphasis be placed where the Bible itself places it -on its message of salvation and its instruction for living, not on its details of geography or science, though we acknowledge the wonderful reliability of the Bible as a historical source book; 5) we would strive to develop our doctrine of Scripture by hearing all that the Bible says, rather than by imposing on the Bible a philosophical judgment of our own as to how God ought to have inspired the Word.

We recognize the importance that the word inerrancy has attained in the thinking of many of our scholarly colleagues and the institutions which they serve. We appreciate the way in which most of them use the term to underscore the fact that Scripture is indeed God's trustworthy Word in all it affirms. Where inerrancy refers to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches through the biblical writers, we support its use. Where the focus switches to an undue emphasis on matters like chronological details, precise sequence of events, and numerical allusions, we would consider the term misleading and inappropriate. Its dangers, when improperly defined, are: 1) that it implies a precision alien to the minds of the Bible writers and their own use of the Scriptures; 2) that it diverts attention from the message of salvation and the instruction in righteousness which are the Bible's key themes; 3) that it may encourage glib and artificial harmonizations rather than serious wrestling with the implication of biblical statements which may seem to disagree; 4) that it leads those who think that there is one proven error in the Bible (however minor), to regard its whole teaching as subject to doubt; 5) that too often it has undermined our confidence in the Bible by a retreat for refuge to the original manuscripts (which we do not possess) whenever problems cannot otherwise be resolved; 6) that it prompts us to an inordinate defensiveness of Scripture which seems out of keeping with the bold confidence with which the prophets, the apostles and our Lord proclaimed it.

The Bible is absolutely crucial to our evangelical stance, and so is our participation in Christ's worldwide mission. As evangelicals, we believe men and women are lost without Jesus Christ; we believe that terrible judgment awaits all who reject Jesus as Lord and Savior.

There is, therefore, an urgency about the way we go about our work. We resent unnecessary distractions; we resist unbiblical diversions. Can anyone believe that all other activities should be suspended until all evangelicals agree on precise doctrinal statements? We certainly cannot. Hundreds of missionaries are looking to us to help them get the gospel to those who have never heard it. Scores of pastors count on us to analyze the mission of their congregations so that their growth will be encouraged. And, thousands of students look to us each year to equip them for ministry in churches, in cross-cultural overseas mission and in counseling clinics.

To be truly evangelical surely means more than debating about what evangelicals are and who deserves the name. It means getting on with the evangelical task. We are not a lodge carefully screening its members and briefing them with secret information. We evangelicals are part of the church, grateful for our salvation and obedient to Christ's calling.

We at Fuller want to spend as little time as necessary defending who or what we are. But we do want to make sure that we are understood.

We stand in full fellowship with the apostles, the reformers, and the evangelical missionaries of the centuries. None of us denies the infallibility of the Bible; none of us claims the infallibility of our faculty. We are not perfect. We do not have to be. We have God's sure Word to guide and correct our steps; we have Christ's sure grace to forgive our errors; we have the churches' continued goodwill as, to the glory of God, we fulfill our mission and theirs.

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