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Whose 'Evangelical Manifesto'?

Warren Smith - Guest Columnist - 4/17/2008 6:00:00 AM



If all goes according to plan, on or about May 7, a group of evangelical leaders -- including the Rev. Rick Warren (of Saddleback Church and "Purpose Driven Life" fame) and Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals -- will publish a document to be called "An Evangelical Manifesto: The Washington Declaration of Identity and Public Commitment."

Though the document has been circulating around the Internet for a month, it has been "embargoed." For purposes of our discussion here, I will honor the embargo and not delve here into the contents except to say this: it contains, like other documents of this kind, both virtues and flaws. It's better than most, worse than some. But the contents are not my main concern here: In the end, I fear that the contents, however worthy, will be overshadowed by the process of its writing and gathering signatories for it.

Os Guinness, one of the "Manifesto's" primary authors, told me that a "representative group" has been asked to sign it, and that "scores of people have given input." In defense of his assertion, I will say that in my investigating, I have determined that, in addition to Warren and Anderson, theologians Timothy George and Richard Mouw have been a part of the drafting process. Jesse Miranda, Richard Ohman, and John Huffman also reportedly had a hand. The involvement of long-time Billy Graham PR guru Larry Ross suggests that Graham might end up a signatory. (Ross would not confirm or deny that.) Best-selling author Dallas Willard and *Christianity Today's* David Neff were also involved.

Guinness claims the document is not political in the sense that it says "Christians are not to be defined culturally or politically" and that it is first and foremost a "charitable call to reform." Nonetheless, the timing of the document's release, during the "home stretch" of the presidential election season and during a week when many states will be holding primaries, makes the claim disingenuous.

So let's be plain: Despite Os Guinness's protestations, this is -- unavoidably -- a political document. Also, it's important to be plain about another unfortunate reality: There is an unseemly power struggle going on in the evangelical world these days. It is a struggle for leadership and dominance, for the right to be the unofficial spokesperson for evangelicals. The "religious left" has put forth men such as Jim

Wallis. Rick Warren has had everyone from Bono to Barack Obama in his pulpit to help him assert his claim. The Emergent Church is putting forth Tony Jones and Brian McLaren, among others. And, of course, there are the "traditional" leaders of the so-called "religious right," including Gary Bauer, Tony Perkins, Chuck Colson, and James Dobson.

This unfortunate and unseemly power struggle should not be ignored in evaluating this "Manifesto." The list of people who have not been asked to sign it, or who have chosen not to, is as revealing as the list of those who have, or will. Former presidential candidate Gary Bauer and Family Research Council President Tony Perkins both told me they had not seen the "Manifesto." Tom Minnery, executive vice president of Focus on the Family and the organization's "point person" on public policy issues said neither he nor James Dobson has signed the document.

Other conservative evangelical leaders who often speak out on political issues have been kept out of the process. That list includes Rick Scarborough of Vision America, and former White House speechwriter and Beverly LaHaye Institute senior fellow Janice Crouse.

Also shunned, at least so far: the Southern Baptist Convention's Richard Land, Ohio-based Phil Burress of Citizens For Community Values, Faith2Action's Janet Folger, homeschool guru Michael Farris, and Concerned Women for America president Wendy Wright.

There is also a growing list of evangelical heavyweights who have been asked to sign but have (so far) refused -- due either to flaws in the document or, as one prominent evangelical leader told me, to the "exclusivity" of the list of signatories.

So a reasonable question remains: What is the true purpose of this document? If it really is, as Os Guinness maintains, a "charitable call to reform," why not let voices from the "conservative" or so-called "pro-family" wing of the evangelical movement have input? The worst that could happen is this: the drafters could ward off a nagging concern that they are backroom schemers, attempting to assert an exclusive claim to leadership over a sometimes (regretfully) fractious, though still powerful, evangelical movement. And what is the best thing that could happen? The signatures of Jim Wallis, Rick Warren, Billy Graham, and Jim Dobson on the same carefully crafted document. Now that would be truly historic.

It seems to me that this is a goal worth striving for -- unless, of course, the assertion of power and control, and not a "charitable call to reform," is what this document is really all about.

Warren Smith (warren.smith@thecharlotteworld.com) is the publisher of the Evangelical Press News Service. This column, printed with permission, was originally published at BeliefNet.com.

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