

Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern

Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern (1973)

As evangelical Christians committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and the full authority of the Word of God, we affirm that God lays total claim upon the lives of his people. We cannot, therefore, separate our lives from the situation in which God has placed us in the United States and the world.

We confess that we have not acknowledged the complete claim of God on our lives.

We acknowledge that God requires love. But we have not demonstrated the love of God to those suffering social abuses.

We acknowledge that God requires justice. But we have not proclaimed or demonstrated his justice to an unjust American society. Although the Lord calls us to defend the social and economic rights of the poor and oppressed, we have mostly remained silent. We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines. Further, we have failed to condemn the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system.

We affirm that God abounds in mercy and that he forgives all who repent and turn from their sins. So we call our fellow evangelical Christians to demonstrate repentance in a Christian discipleship that confronts the social and political injustice of our nation.

We must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistribution of the nation's wealth and services. We recognize that as a nation we play a crucial role in the imbalance and injustice of international trade and development. Before God and a billion hungry neighbors, we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of living and promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources.

We acknowledge our Christian responsibilities of citizenship. Therefore, we must challenge the misplaced trust of the nation in economic and military might – a proud trust that promotes a national pathology of war and violence which victimizes our neighbors at home and abroad. We must resist the temptation to make the nation and its institutions objects of near-religious loyalty.

We acknowledge that we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity. So we call both men and women to mutual submission and active discipleship.

We proclaim no new gospel, but the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, frees people from sin so that they might praise God through works of righteousness.

By this declaration, we endorse no political ideology or party, but call our nation's leaders and people to that righteousness which exalts a nation.

We make this declaration in the biblical hope that Christ is coming to consummate the Kingdom and we accept his claim on our total discipleship until he comes.

November 25, 1973, Chicago, Illinois

Historic Context for the Declaration

As recounted by Dr. Ron Sider:

“At the first Calvin College conference on politics that Paul Henry organized in the spring of 1973, half a dozen folk, including David Moberg, Rufus Jones, and Paul Henry, decided to call a weekend workshop over Thanksgiving, 1973. We invited a broad range of evangelical leaders to come and talk about the need for strengthening evangelical social concern. About forty came—older evangelicals like Carl Henry, Frank Gaebelein; younger evangelicals like Jim Wallis, John Perkins, Sharon Gallagher, Rich Mouw, and myself. 1973 was a common year starting on Monday. ... Evangelical has several distinct meanings: In its original sense, it means belonging or related to the Gospel (Greek: euangelion – good news) of the New Testament. ... Carl F. H. Henry (January 22, 1913 – December 7, 2003) was an evangelical Christian theologian, who founded the magazine *Christianity Today* as a scholarly voice for evangelical Christianity and as a challenge to the liberal *Christian Century*. ...

We wrote and signed the now famous Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern, confessing our failure to confront injustice, racism and discrimination against women, and pledging to do better. Looking back, the Chicago Declaration sounds pretty tame, but it was new and powerful in 1973.

Dick Ostling of *Time* magazine said that he thought it was probably the first time in the 20th century that forty evangelical leaders spent a whole weekend discussing social action. And the *Chicago Sun Times* said that some day church historians may write that “the most significant church-related event of 1973 took place” at this gathering.”

As *Christianity Today* magazine records the event:

“The conferees gathered to commit to social justice. The conference's concern would not be so unusual today. Now evangelicals left, center, and right agree that social justice is one of the central callings of all Christians. Thirty years ago, only a frustrated minority—like those at the Chicago meeting—thought so. Today evangelicals may disagree about what policies will get us there, but they agree about the need to pursue “the righteousness that exalts a nation.” Three decades ago, a lot of evangelicals would have called this political meddling, if not selling out the gospel.

The radical shift in modern evangelicalism began when these assembled delegates met amid the violence of inner city Chicago. They represented a wide array of traditions and viewpoints, and they found that they had to confront each other if they were to assure that the declaration they were crafting would be truly comprehensive and speak prophetically. Their manifesto had to address economic justice, peacemaking, racial reconciliation, and gender concerns within a biblical framework, and in ways that honored an evangelical passion for others' salvation in Jesus Christ.

The historic moment was not lost on two journalists who covered the Chicago meeting and saw some "man bites dog" value to the story. Evangelical Protestants at the time tended to be seen as Richard Nixon's Silent Majority, the solid backers of the social status quo. But in Chicago they were speaking out against injustice. Marjorie Hyer of *The Washington Post* wrote at the time that the November weekend's discussions "could well change the face of both religion and politics in America." And *Chicago Sun-Times* religion writer Roy Larson wrote, "Someday American church historians may write that the most significant church-related event of 1973 took place last week at the YMCA hotel on S. Wabash."