
Gospel- Centered Ministry

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The Gospel Coalition Booklets
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The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of churches and Christians from many different denominations that are united not only by belief in the biblical gospel but also by the conviction that gospel-centered ministry today must be strengthened, encouraged, and advanced. What follows gives a bit of the history of how and why we have come together.

Several years ago a number of us began to meet together annually. That group became The Gospel Coalition's Council. For the first three years we sought to do two things.

The Confessional Foundation

First, we sought to identify and strengthen the center of confessional evangelicalism. We believe that some important aspects of the historic understanding of the biblical gospel are in danger of being muddied or lost in our churches today. These include the necessity of the new birth, justification by faith alone, and atonement through propitiation and the substitutionary death of Christ. We sought to maintain and strengthen our hold on these doctrines, not merely by citing the great theological formulations of the past but also through continued, fresh interaction with the Scripture itself, and so we worked together to produce The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement.

Biblical-Theological Categories

Many members told me afterward that working on the Confessional Statement was one of the most edifying and instructional experiences they had ever had. About four dozen experienced pastors worked it over line by line. One of our goals was to draw our language as much from the Bible as possible rather than to resort too quickly to the vocabulary of systematic theology. Systematics is crucial, and terms such as "the Trinity," which are not found in the Bible itself, are irreplaceable for understanding and expressing large swaths of the Bible's teaching. Nevertheless, to maintain unity among ourselves

and to persuade our readers, we sought to express our faith as much as possible in biblical-theological categories rather than drawing on the terminology of any particular tradition's systematic theology.

Beginning with God

We also thought it was important to begin our confession with God rather than with Scripture. This is significant. The Enlightenment was overconfident about human rationality. Some strands of it assumed it was possible to build systems of thought on unassailable foundations that could be absolutely certain to unaided human reason. Despite their frequent vilification of the Enlightenment, many conservative evangelicals have nevertheless been shaped by it. This can be seen in how many evangelical statements of faith start with the Scripture, not with God. They proceed from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis in order to build (what they consider) an absolutely sure, guaranteed-true-to-Scripture theology.

The problem is that this is essentially a foundationalist approach to knowledge. It ignores the degree to which our cultural location affects our interpretation of the Bible, and it assumes a very rigid subject-object distinction. It ignores historical theology, philosophy, and cultural reflection. Starting with the Scripture leads readers to the overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth.¹ This can create pride and rigidity because it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason.

We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1) that without knowledge of God we cannot know ourselves, our world, or anything else. If there is no God, we would have no reason to trust our reason.

Evangelical

Also, as part of this process, we gave some time to the question, "Is the term 'evangelical' useful anymore?" A good case can be made for the position that it is not. Within the church, the word conveys less and less theological content. The word almost means "all who are willing to use the term 'born again' to describe their experiences." Outside the church, the word has perhaps the most negative connotations it has ever had.

Nevertheless, the term describes our churches and association.