

## A Conservative Christian Declaration

### **Preamble: On the Need for Conservative Christianity**

In his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, Paul declared that he was “innocent of the blood” of all, because he had not shrunk from delivering to them “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27). At its core, conservative Christianity aims to follow Paul’s example in successfully transferring the whole counsel of God to the next generation.

Historically, Christians have committed themselves to perpetuating biblical Christianity by pursuing absolute truth, goodness, and beauty. These transcendent realities, which are grounded in the character of God, are expressed through his works and his Word. In every age, Christians have determined to believe God’s truth, live out God’s goodness, and love God’s beauty, preserving these transcendentals by nurturing expressions, forms, and institutions capable of carrying their weight.

More recently, many Christians have abandoned their commitment to these ideals and are therefore failing, in one respect or another, to pursue fully-orbed biblical Christianity. The result is a shrunken creed, a waning piety, and a worship that has become irreverent and trivial. We object to this religious reductionism and desire to reclaim the entire heritage of Christian doctrine, obedience, and adoration. We equally object to those movements attempting to preserve traditions that are not biblical Christianity but rather a progressivism from the past. An innovation is not made less an innovation because of its antiquity. Humanly invented doctrines, objects of piety, and elements of worship will never be part of a truly Christian tradition.

The following declaration reaffirms a historic commitment to fully orb-ed conservative Christianity. We believe in transcendent, absolute principles of truth, goodness, and beauty; we are confident that such principles are knowable; and we are determined to align ourselves and our ministries to those principles in our pursuit of the whole counsel of God. We also pledge to conserve those institutions and forms that best reflect a recognition and respect for this transcendent order. Since culture is nurtured within systems of values and is not created in a vacuum, every culture-maker builds upon what has come before. Consequently, we choose to build on those forms that have been nurtured within the community of Christian faith, affirming that they best express the transcendent character and nature of God.

We offer this document out of a deep love for Christ, his gospel, his inerrant Word, and his church, and from a humble desire to help churches conserve and nourish historic, biblical Christianity by affirming the teachings of the Bible concerning truth, goodness, beauty, and rightly ordered affections in life and ministry.

## **Articles of Affirmation and Denial**

### **Article 1: On the Gospel**

We affirm that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the boundary of Christian faith (1 Cor. 15). We also affirm that to ignore this boundary by granting Christian recognition to those who deny the gospel is to demean the gospel itself (2 John 1:10).

We deny that Christian fellowship is possible with those who deny the fundamentals of the gospel, including (among others) the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, his sacrificial atonement, and justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

### **Article 2: On the Whole Counsel of God**

We affirm that the center and apex of Christian faith and fellowship is the whole counsel of God, including right belief, right living, and right affection (Deut. 6:1–9). We further affirm that the transmission of biblical Christianity necessarily involves the preservation and cultivation of the entire system of faith (Acts 20:27).

We deny that belief in the gospel alone is adequate for healthy Christian worship, fellowship, and devotion.

### **Article 3: On Transcendentals**

We affirm that truth, goodness, and beauty are transcendent realities rooted in the nature of God and ultimately inseparable from each other (Phil. 4:8). Beliefs are true when they correspond to God's understanding; acts are good when they correspond to God's understanding of virtue; objects are beautiful when they are fulfilling their God-intended purpose in a God-pleasing way in accordance with their God-given nature. Nevertheless, right beliefs, morals, and affections are not always transparent, such that their relative truth, goodness, and beauty require careful judgment to discern.

We deny that right belief is sufficient to please the Lord. We also deny that truth, morality, or beauty become different things relative to different perceiving subjects (though we grant that humans never perceive in a detached and absolute way). We further deny that right beliefs, morals, and affections are always easy to discern.

### **Article 4: On Ordinate Affections**

We affirm that Christians are able to speak of orthopathy, or rightly ordered affections and appropriate worship (Deut. 6:5, Matt. 22:37, Heb. 12:28). As the doctrines of the gospel are fundamental to Christianity, so is rightly ordered love for God.

We deny that Christianity is merely assent or commitment to a set of doctrinal propositions that explain

the gospel.

#### **Article 5: On the Appetites**

We affirm that manipulation of the visceral appetites is dangerous to rightly ordered worship and Christian piety (Phil. 3:19).

We deny that the transmission of biblical truth can be rightly administered through the use of methods that appeal to the appetites. We further deny that holy affections can be expressed in worship employing aesthetic forms that by design stir the appetites.

#### **Article 6: On Beauty**

We affirm that beauty exists in reality and is to be the pursuit of every believer (Phil. 1:9–11). We also affirm that the recognition of beauty is fundamental to worship and devotion, and a right approach to God entails both a recognition of and a proper response to God’s beauty (Ps. 29:2).

We deny that beauty is imposed upon an object by the beholder and that it is nothing more than the beholder’s pleasure. We also deny that people of twisted judgments and perceptions can rightly know and love God.

#### **Article 7: On Scripture-Regulated Worship**

We affirm that the worship of God is regulated through his Word. Innovation, however well-intentioned, is “will-worship” (Col. 2:23), violates the free consciences of individual Christians (Rom. 14:5, 23), and is therefore displeasing to God (Matt. 15:9). We affirm that the circumstances of worship are matters of prudence, informed by the sound judgment that comes through ordinate affection (Prov. 9:10).

We deny that God desires or is pleased by innovation in matters of faith. We deny that silence from God’s Word on the circumstances of worship renders them amoral, or their mode of implementation a matter of indifference.

#### **Article 8: On Works of the Imagination**

We affirm that ordinate affections are often expressed and evoked through works of imagination, which function through simile and metaphor. Among these are music, poetry, literature, and other arts. The Word of God itself is a work of imagination. At least two works of imagination are commanded for worship: poetry and music (Col. 3:16).

We deny that God can be known and rightly loved solely through cognition and the intellectual understanding of objective propositional statements about God.

#### **Article 9: On Harmony and Variety in Ordinate Expression**

We affirm that inordinate expressions of worship often arise from hearts that are entangled in disordered loves. We affirm that expressions of orthopathy are grounded in harmony with God's ultimate perception of truth, goodness, and beauty as revealed in Scripture and observed in the created order. We also affirm that the expressions of ordinate love to God have varied between ages and civilizations. We further affirm that these different expressions are nonetheless *equivalent*, representing the same orthopathy.

We deny that inordinate expressions toward God, although inconsistent with true Christian love, always or necessarily betray inordinate affections. We also deny that harmony with the created order will lead either to complete uniformity of expression, or to a lack of variety. We further deny that the variability of cultural expressions makes these expressions without meaning, and therefore without morality.

#### **Article 10: On Meaning**

We affirm that expressions toward God, be they prayers, preached sermons, poems, or music, may be parsed for their meaning and judged for their appropriateness for worship. We affirm that understanding of meanings is gained both from Scripture and from sources outside Scripture: correct judgments about natural meaning can be made by believers and unbelievers alike (Acts 17:28).

We deny that the subjective nature of these expressions makes it impossible to render a true judgment. We deny that seeking knowledge of meaning outside of Scripture compromises its final authority or denies its sufficiency (Ps. 19, Rom. 1:20ff).

#### **Article 11: On Popular Culture**

We affirm that much of popular culture is formulaic and sentimentalized, and that it tends toward banality and narcissism. We affirm that much popular music, through its stereotyped form, lacks the ability to communicate transcendent truth, virtue, and beauty, which are central to worship. We further affirm that the modes of expression which have emerged from eras shaped largely by the secularizing forces of popular culture are often incompatible with ordinate affection.

We deny that a selective rejection of popular culture is tantamount to elitism or a disdain for the average believer. We also deny that there are no contemporary examples of orthopathy, or that orthopathy can be found solely in the past.

#### **Article 12: On the Cultivation of Christian Tradition**

We affirm the importance of beginning our pursuit of sound worship and holy living within the bounds of traditions that we have inherited from the saints of the entire church age (2 Tim. 2:2, Phil. 3:17). Many of these believers, even the ones with whom we would have significant theological disagreements, have had a clearer understanding of what it is to love God rightly than we do. We affirm the value of learning from the culture that developed around and in response to the growth of Christianity.

We deny the chronological snobbery that ignores the past, the naïve longing for some past golden age, and the postmodern inclination to isolate and select elements of historic Christian practice to suit personal taste. We further deny that Christendom represents pure and unmixed Christianity.

### **Article 13: On Today's Congregational Music**

We affirm that twenty-first-century churches, like the churches of every age, must worship God in their own words, with their own voice. We add the qualification that these expressions must both embody ordinate affection and build on the tradition that represents it, while also answering to the twenty-first-century imagination. We further affirm that all people are to sing with understanding (1 Cor. 14:15) and that good music or poetry may be simple. Finally, we affirm that church music ought to be beautiful.

We deny that musical choices should be made to appease or attract a particular constituency in the church. We deny that the average Christian is capable of appreciating only the simplest kind of music. We deny that good music or poetry worth loving can be shallow, trivial, banal or clichéd. At the same time we also deny that Christians should worship with forms that are incomprehensible to them.

### **Article 14: On Our Children**

We affirm the necessity of passing these values to our children through regular catechesis, in faithful family worship, and by welcoming all ages into the corporate worship of our churches (Deut. 6:7, Eph. 6:4). Children learn rightly ordered worship and have their imaginations and affections appropriately shaped largely through observation and participation. Thus churches should encourage families to worship together in the corporate gatherings of the church as much as possible or practical.

We deny that the family is more important than or replaces a local church. We further deny that we can adopt a model of children's ministry which aims to entertain our children and still expect them to learn the grace of meaningful worship.

### **Article 15: On Local Churches and the Sovereignty of God**

We affirm the primacy of the local church in the conservation and nourishment of historic, biblical Christianity. We affirm that godly elders must patiently teach God's Word and model right belief, living, and loving (1 Tim. 3:15, 4:16). We further affirm that such efforts must be fully dependent upon the sovereign will of God, which will ultimately be accomplished (Dan. 4:34–35).

We deny that the transmission of the Christian faith will occur primarily by individuals alone, in families disconnected from local churches, or through parachurch ministries. We further deny that the preservation of Christianity is ultimately dependent upon the meager efforts of finite people and especially any pragmatic methodology or programs.

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