

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 of them, because he had not failed to deliver 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 cultivating biblical Christianity by pursuing absolute truth, goodness, and beauty. These transcendent realities are grounded in the character of God and are expressed through his works and his Word. In other words, Christians determined to believe God’s truth, live out God’s goodness, and love God’s beauty, preserving and nurturing these ideas by upholding forms and institutions capable of carrying their weight.

Yet more recently, many Christians have abandoned a commitment to some of these ideas and are therefore failing, in one respect or another, to pursue fully-orbed biblical Christianity. We have preserved little more than a shrunken creed, our piety has waned, and our worship is irreverent and trivial. Furthermore, we equally object to those movements attempting to preserve traditions that are not biblical Christianity, but rather a progressivism from the past.

The following declaration reaffirms a historic commitment to fully-orbed 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, and so we choose to build on those forms that have been nurtured within the community of faith to 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 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 affections (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 all that is necessary for healthy Christian worship, fellowship, and devotion.

Article 3: On Transcendent Absolutes

We affirm that truth, goodness, and beauty are absolute realities rooted in the nature of God and inseparable from each other (Phil 4:8). For something to be true, it must also be good and beautiful; for something to be good, it must also be true and beautiful; for something to be beautiful, it must also be true and good. Matters of right beliefs, morals, and affections are not always transparent and require careful judgment and discernment.

We deny that right belief is all that is necessary to please the Lord. We deny relativism in matters of truth, morality, or beauty. We further deny that right beliefs, morals, and affections are always easy to discern.

Article 4: On Ordinate Affections

We affirm that it is possible for Christians to speak of orthopathy: rightly ordered affections and appropriate worship (Deut 6:5, Matt 22:37, Hebrews 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 may 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 response to God entails both recognizing and rightly responding to God's beauty (Ps 29:2).

We deny that beauty is imposed upon an object by the beholder and is nothing more than the beholder's pleasure. We also deny that one twisted in his 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 affections (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 implementation a matter of indifference.

Article 8: On Works of the Imagination

We affirm that expressions and vehicles of ordinate affections are usually works of imagination, expressed in metaphor: 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 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 a heart of disordered loves. We affirm that expressions of orthopathy are so because of their harmony with God's absolute truth, goodness,

and beauty, revealed in Scripture and observed in the created order. We also affirm that the expressions of ordinate love to God have been different between ages and civilizations. We further affirm that these 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 deny that harmony with the created order will lead to complete uniformity of expression, or to a lack of variety. We also deny that the variability of cultural expression 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 are gained from both Scripture and from sources outside Scripture: correct judgments about the created order 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 and meaning outside of Scripture compromises its final authority or denies its sufficiency.

Article 11: On Popular Culture

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

We deny that a 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 exists 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 cherry-pick elements of historic Christian practice to suit personal

taste. We deny that this pursuit is racist. We further deny that Christendom represents pure and unmixed Christianity.

Article 13: On Today's Congregational Music

We affirm that twenty-first-century churches must worship God in their own words, with their own voice. We add the qualification that these expressions must be expressions of ordinate affection and build on the tradition that represents such, while answering to the twenty-first-century imagination. We further affirm that every man is 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 music 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 will learn rightly ordered worship and have their imaginations and affections shaped appropriately only through observation and participation.

We deny that regularly segregating our children into their own church services contributes to their spiritual growth and maturity.

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 as godly elders patiently teach God's Word and model right belief, living, and loving (1 Tim 3:15, 4:16). We further affirm that such efforts are 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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