

**EVANGELICAL FATWA:
Laying Down the Law in the Land of Grace**

Ergun Mehmet Caner, D.Theol.
President, Liberty Theological Seminary
Center for Global Apologetics
Liberty University • 1971 University Boulevard • CN 2500
Lynchburg, Virginia 24502
ecaner@liberty.edu • www.erguncaner.com • www.liberty.edu

...(E)vangelical theology is what might be termed a spiritual theology. It has a way of doing theology which...is part of a great theological tradition. It is 'live' orthodoxy. The Bible is not only central to the theological enterprise, but it is meditated upon and prayed over as well as studied. The goal of theological work is not so much to know theology as to know God...¹

Is Rennie correct? Does evangelicalism hinge more on practice than belief? Has evangelicalism descended into a world of mystical orthopraxis, or are we simply united so firmly that doctrine is a settled state from which our devotion springs? If the purpose of apologetics is to get people to follow God in a personal relationship, then why does this group even need to exist? Is it not enough to simply set a wide parameter for our core beliefs, and then monitor only the outcome of piety?

Certainly no one in the evangelical world, and more specifically this assembly of apologists, would argue that evangelicalism is only a system of orthodox thought. We pray to the only true and living God. We aspire to a deep and profound relationship with the triune Lord. We endeavor to reach others, not for a system, but for the Savior who is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lamb of God.

However, a brief glance at the state of evangelicalism would quickly assess that the state of affairs is not as rosy as one would presume. Doctrine and theology, it would

¹ I.S. Rennie "Evangelical Theology" in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 240.

seem, have been replaced with calls for cooperation at any cost. Openness of God theologians, reprobationists, theologians from once-considered fringe movements now populate our landscape. National magazines such as *Christianity Today* regularly fill with articles calling for social justice over and beyond orthodoxy. Those who cling to absolutes and parameters are considered quaint vestiges from our not-so-distant past. Within evangelicalism, truth has been sacrificed on the altar of peace.

Within that context, you and I are considered remnants. We are annoyances. When invited to “come and play in our reindeer games,” we cautiously look at the participants, who in turn scoff at our reticence. Conservative evangelicals who deeply believe in the necessity for apologetics are called polemicists, pugilists and theological racists. We are the last pariahs of the evangelical scene.

Yet our concern is in fact valid. The term “evangelical” has been so diluted that it no longer even has a consensus definition. Though most of us traditionally do not hold to a creed, we do believe in the essentials of the faith, to which Dr. Geisler will later speak. Yet to even state that evangelicalism has definite weight is considered antiquated. Many would prefer that the term remain fluid and descriptive, rather than prescriptive.

On a parallel plane, we find a similar quandary in Islam. Within the Muslim world, logic dictates that there is no *possible* reason why Islam would be growing and succeeding as it has over the course of the last two centuries. Indeed, the very nature of their sects suggests that they would never come to consensus, much less find traction in their cooperation. Consider the following:

1. In Christianity, while we are divided along sectarian lines in practice, we do not believe that the other sects are heretical. Presbyterians and Baptists may not agree on tulips or daisies (“He loves me; He loves me not”), but neither considers themselves the sole body of Christ. In Islamic theology, Sunni do not believe that Shi’a are true Muslims, and vice versa. The over thirty different Muslim sects, in fact, consider themselves only loosely aligned with one another. Saddam bombed Shi’a mosques, and only the media wonders why.

2. The Caliphate- the voice for a unified Islam- fell after World War I, and when Ataturk disassembled the movement, the Muslim *diaspora* became movements unto themselves. The subsequent splinter groups number in the hundreds, and there is no central grid through which Muslim theology filters. One would imagine that Islam would be reeling from the blow worldwide. Instead, one finds Islam oddly united. This citation was even found in the *Al Qaeda* manual, found in Manchester, England, during a raid in 2002:

After the fall of our orthodox caliphates on March 3, 1924 and after expelling the colonialists, our Islamic nation was afflicted with apostate rulers who took over in the Moslem nation. These rulers turned out to be more infidel and criminal than the colonialists themselves. Moslems have endured all kinds of harm, oppression, and torture at their hands.²

As ironic as it may seem, one solution for our dilemma may be found in the Muslim world. Though fragmented beyond repair, Islamic *ulema* worldwide found a

² *Al-Qaeda Manual*. U.S. Government Exhibit 1677-T. Discovered April 2002.

means by which they have united the Muslim voice. They found a common ground and, more importantly, a common method for measuring that common ground. This method of ascertaining Islamic truth is called *fatwa*.

THE ESSENCE AND HISTORY OF *FATWA*

It would be an oversimplification to define *fatwa* as a call for jihad. A *fatwa* is a legal ruling, based on core Islamic principles, issued by an Islamic scholar (*mujtahid*). It is issued when *fiqh* (“jurisprudence”) and *shari’a* (“law”) are unclear. True, the most famous *fatawa* (plural in Arabic) were calls for the death of infidels, but that is the danger of Islamic theology, based on the Qur’an, Sunnah (“teachings or beliefs”) and the Hadith (sayings of Muhammed). The system of *fatwa* itself enables Muslims to clearly define themselves. It is in this narrow confine that we consider our task.

Most *fatwa* are issued on topics that are unbelievably routine and mundane. One search discovered a number of *fatawa* on the issue of answering the phone with the Muslim greeting salaam, only to discover the caller was not a Muslim³. Other *fatawa* rule on issues of brushing one’s teeth and using mints during Ramadan.

This tedium is due to the nature of Islamic soteriology. As the scales excruciatingly measure every action, motivation and thought (surah 23: 103), the average Muslim must be as diligent as possibly to ensure his hope of forgiveness. In common parlance, he is “hedging his bets.” However, the use of *fatawa* in issues of theology does have some winsome features. In our Western context where religious movements spring up like weeds among vegetables, a common voice- even one that is

³ One English *fatwa* outlet is <http://www.fatwa-online.com/>. Accessed on 21 May 2006.

non-binding- would be helpful. I would even suggest it is biblical, and was long before Muhammed ever borrowed the idea.

A number of parameters limit the issuance of *fatawa*:

1. A *fatwa* must be issued with the context of the *ummah* (brotherhood). In other words, only a Sunni can rule on a Sunni question.
2. A *fatwa* is only binding on those within that particular ummah.
3. A *fatwa* is based foremost on belief, not action. In Islam, tawhid (the absolute nature and dictates of Allah) demands first proper belief.
4. It is in line with relevant legal proofs, deduced from Koranic verses and hadiths;
5. It is issued by a person (or a board) having due knowledge and sincerity of heart;
6. It is free from individual opportunism, and not depending on political servitude;
7. It is adequate with the needs of the contemporary world.

Even such non-academic sources as *Wikipedia* understand *fatwa* as an attempt by Islam to maintain orthodoxy, while still contemplating context and culture.⁴

THE EVANGELICAL NEED OF FATWA

In light of the above definition, consider our present evangelical crisis. During an unprecedented period of global spiritual interest, we are consumed instead with the influx of traditionally-defined heretical movements into our courts. Thus, any statement of “evangelical truth” is mitigated against the possibility that those who are speaking for us may not biblically be of us.

To further state the issue, we are becoming increasingly driven by feeling and ethic over belief and truth. Those of our world are often called “heresy hunters,” and are viewed as dangerous to the sovereignty of unity. When J.K. van Baalen referred to cults

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatwa>. Accessed 25 May 2006.

as the “unpaid bills of the church⁵,” he was placing the blame for millions descending into hell due to their allegiance to faulty Christologies squarely on our shoulders.

Without theology- proper orthodox theology that carefully defines its definitions- we allow for heresies to grow. Without our work, lies about the Person and Work of our Lord go unchecked, with eternal consequences.

Bear in mind, van Baalen wrote this in 1938, almost seventy years ago! This was long before the explosion of new religious movements such as Scientology, Branch Davidians and Heaven’s Gate. As George W. Cornell wrote, some estimate that there are now over 5,000 cults with over 150 million adherents. “New religions,” he concluded, “that have proliferated in America in the last two decades aren’t fading away as they had been...expected to do, but instead are growing and multiplying.⁶” Does Evangelicalism not bear the burden for this partially? Have we not allowed these cults to expand because of our reticence to stand for the Truth of Scripture?

Using the parameters of *fatwa*, look at our present “Evangelical” calamity. First, a *fatwa* is designed to be a clear statement on belief, not behavior. If theology was once the “Queen of the Sciences,” then the “Queen” is dead. Orthodox Christian theology is bemoaned as divisive. We watch such men as Joel Osteen stand and misrepresent Christian teachings on sin and salvation in horror. When we state such, we are called “hateful.” Truly, we must be emphatic, truth is more important than tolerance. It matters not how many people have gathered in his auditorium, how many purchase his books, or how many watch his television show. This is only laudable if he is actually preaching true salvation in that context.

⁵ J.K. van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults* (New York: Kessinger, 1938).

⁶ George W. Cornell, “New Religions,” in Associated Press, 26 November 1988.

Secondly, a *fatwa* is clear. There is no vague or cloudy thinking in a *fatwa*. The only basis for a ruling is the context of their sacred teachings. They do not “bend” or “widen the tent” for the purposes of growth. Sadly, it seems Islam is more concerned with truth than present evangelicals, who would rather speak of our “emerging community,” rather than our absolute fundamentals. Said another way, a group hug is only biblical if those in the group are actually *part* of the Body of Christ.

Thirdly, *fatawa* are clear on *ummah*. They do not suffer Islamic cults. The right of individual interpretation (*ijtihad*) does not overrule Islamic theology. In our context, we should not allow the teaching of the “priesthood of the believer” to include the individual’s right to define himself as a believer if he is not! Cults are defined as those who believe they are “correcting” Christianity. This is an unwelcome inversion to the mandate of Scripture.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL AS *FATWA*

In this context, the author believes that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was the prototype for *fatwa*. It was a gathering during a crisis that desired to clarify doctrine, which in turn would govern deed:

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. **7** After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. **8** God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. **9** He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. **10** Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? **11** No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." **12** The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles

through them. **13** When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. **14** Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. **15** The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: **16** "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, **17** that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' **18** that have been known for ages. **19** "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. **20** Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. **21** For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. **23** With them they sent the following letter: **23** The apostles and elders, your brothers, **23** To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: **23** Greetings. **24** We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. **25** So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15: 6-25 NIV)

Please note the following parameters for the evangelical *fatwa*:

1. They met voluntarily but expediently.
2. The basis for their ruling was Scripture, cited by both Peter and James.
3. They spoke privately, but issued their *fatwa* publicly.
4. They were emotional, but not driven by emotion.
5. Their ultimate aim was the proper propagation of the Gospel- the highest calling.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE NEED FOR A CLEAR EVANGELICAL VOICE

I close with a call for the need for a new voice in evangelicalism. Given the present context of our culture, and the paucity of the present evangelical absolutes, the following issues demand our attention:

1. Evangelical Uncertainty is a Corrosion- when we cannot even find the strength to exclude “Openness” theology, we have become too polite for Truth.
2. Cults are an Evangelical Corruption- for they view themselves as the correction of orthodoxy. When we do not define clearly that their teachings are false and heretical, we become guilty ourselves.
3. World Religions are the Evangelical Commission- and my people are sweeping the land, spreading their lies unabated by a clear voice of Christianity.
4. Western Culture is the Evangelical Cross to Bear- and we are faced with “cafeteria” religions and “designer systems.

By the millions, people are being deceived by the lies of this “buffet” approach, that embraces foggy “spirituality.” They are increasingly “emerging” with systems that look vaguely familiar, but dangerously positioned. If we are not emphatic concerning the absolutes of Scripture and the nature of our Lord, I am afraid we shall have blood on our hands. In taking such a stand, we shall face charges of “hate speech,” because we will not accept lies as truth. The “bigots of diversity” will call us intolerant. This is acceptable, since Jesus Christ was called much worse. We must stand- and we cannot be silent. Otherwise, we shall join all those in the “group hug,” who will be loving people into hell and cuddling them into damnation. I cannot imagine a worse sin.