

EVANGELICAL CONFUSION ABOUT ROMAN CATHOLICISM

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THE ISSUE EXPLORED

One of the greatest shocks in the history of the Evangelical Theological Society occurred in May 2007 when the president of the organization, the respected Francis Beckwith, resigned his position and membership because he had become a Roman Catholic.¹ Beckwith, currently Associate Professor of Philosophy and Church-Studies at Baylor University (traditionally a Baptist school), had left the Catholic church when he was fourteen years old and was now returning to his roots after many years in evangelical churches.

The official response from the ETS Executive Committee was cordial, thanking Beckwith for his past work for the society, but highlighting the necessity of a parting of the ways largely because “we wholeheartedly affirm the distinctive contribution and convictional necessity of the work of the Evangelical Theological

¹ The definition of the term *evangelical* is up for grabs like many of the terms in the present cultural mix. Here and in the writings of this present writer it is generally assumed to stand for a high view of Scripture (inspiration and factual inerrancy), belief in a conversion experience for justification and salvation (born-again Christianity), an understanding that missions and evangelism is a high priority (attempt to persuade others to become born-again Christians), and a belief in basic Bible doctrine (such as the Trinity, incarnation, etc.). For a discussion of the nature of evangelicalism, see Robert P. Lightner, *Evangelical Theology: A Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986). Unfortunately, there are many who use the label *evangelical* for themselves when they have a broader understanding. The term has become somewhat of a moving target in the last one hundred years and especially in the last few decades.

Society on the basis of the ‘Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety’ as ‘the Word of God written and ... inerrant.’”² The response goes on to highlight that this distinction involves the use of a different Bible, the Catholic Bible which “posits a larger canon of Scripture than that recognized by evangelical Protestants.” Beckwith apparently affirmed that he could sign the ETS statement since it does not enumerate the particular books of its Bible (although its tradition does), but he decided not to pursue continuance with the society because it would have produced a major debate that could possibly hurt the organization.³

The return of Beckwith to the Roman Catholic tradition mirrors the earlier conversion of evangelical Franky Schaeffer, son of famous apologist Francis Schaeffer, to the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1990. Other examples would be the 1985 conversion of Thomas Howard of Wheaton College to Rome as well as singer and former evangelical John Michael Talbot who joined a Franciscan order in 1978.⁴ These examples stress in the minds of some an understanding that overall Roman Catholicism is making headway against evangelicalism, especially in America, or that a coming together is taking place.

One is reminded of ECT1 and ECT2.⁵ In 1994 the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” was produced by a group of evangelicals and

² I could not find this response posted any longer on the ETS website (etsjets.org). It is still posted at Collin Hansen, “ETS on Beckwith,” *Christianity Today*, 8 May 2007, <http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2007/05/ets_on_beckwith.html> (accessed 24 March 2008).

³ See David M. Howard, “Rome-ward Bound: An Evangelical Concerts to Catholicism, and Everyone Remains Friendly,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 May 2007, <<http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110010093>> (accessed 24 March 2008). I first saw this response through a link provided on the blog of Darrell Bock.

⁴ *Ibid.* See also the biography of John Michael Talbot at his personal website <<http://www.johnmichaeltalbot.com/Biography/>> (accessed 25 March 2008).

⁵ For a more thorough analysis of these issues, especially examining ECT2, see Mike Stallard, “Justification by Faith or Justification by Faith Alone?” *Conservative Theological Journal* 3 (April 1999): 53-73.

Roman Catholics headed up by Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus. This was an attempt to find some common convictions affecting faith and the mission of the church. Of more import perhaps was ECT2, the document entitled “The Gift of Salvation” (1998), issued by essentially the same group of evangelicals and Catholics. In this document they affirm agreement on the following doctrines:

- Justification is central and crucial to the Bible account of the doctrine of salvation.
- Justification is not earned by good works or merits on our part.
- Justification is a gift from God based on “sheer” graciousness out of love.
- The gospel (death and resurrection of Christ) forms the basis for our justification.
- Justification is basically forensic—we are “declared” no longer rebellious enemies.
- This declaration is on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone.
- Justification is received through faith (even quotes Ephesians 2:8).
- Justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*) in keeping with the Reformation tradition.

Such a list was quite surprising at the time since the same document left the following doctrines and issues as open questions to be discussed later:

- the meaning of baptismal regeneration
- the Eucharist
- sacramental grace
- the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness
- the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine
- the assertion that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that receives salvation is never alone (mentioned in the Westminster Confession of Faith)
- diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences

- Devotion to Mary and the assistance of the saints in the life of salvation
- the possibility of salvation for those who have not been evangelized

The thoughtful evangelical was left wondering how one could agree to both lists at the same time. For example, how could someone affirm *sola fide* while saying at the same time that baptismal regeneration is an open question that needs further exploration?

There appears, however, to be a growing sentiment that the difference between evangelicals and Catholics is not that big a deal. Notice Beckwith's personal statement:

I still consider myself an evangelical, but no longer a Protestant. I do think I have a better understanding of what sometimes the Catholic Church is trying to convey. Protestants often misunderstand. The issue of justification was key for me. The Catholic Church frames the Christian life as one in which you must exercise virtue—not because virtue saves you, but because that's the way God's grace gets manifested. As an evangelical, even when I talked about sanctification and wanted to practice it, it seemed as if I didn't have a good enough incentive to do so. Now there's a kind of theological framework, and it doesn't say my salvation depends on me, but it says my virtue counts for something. It's important to allow the grace of God to be exercised through your actions. The evangelical emphasis on the moral life forms my Catholic practice with an added incentive. That was liberating to me.⁶

Notice that Beckwith argues that the Roman Catholic view of sanctification with its pro-virtue mentality has more to offer the believer as an incentive to right living than does the evangelical way of thinking about the issues of justification and sanctification. What may be quite a surprise to many evangelicals is his belief that the Catholic framework does not constitute a salvation based upon the individual and what he does. Furthermore, he seems to believe that it is quite natural to be an evangelical Roman Catholic.

Beyond these doctrinal assessments is the reality that many evangelicals today are adopting various practices from the Catholic

⁶ “Q & A: Francis Beckwith,” interview by David Neff, *Christianity Today*, 9 May 2007, <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-33.0.html>> (accessed 24 March 2008).

Church within their own lives and in their evangelical churches. For example, some evangelical churches are embracing some form of reflection and cleansing during the season of Lent. Others are offering confession and weekly communion while still others are following Ash Wednesday and light Advent candles during the Christmas season.⁷ Such developments in the minds of some experts indicate disillusionment “with the contemporary, shopping-center feel of the megachurches embraced by baby boomers, with their casually dressed ministers and rock-band praise music.”⁸ Within this trend, variously labeled as *worship renewal* or *ancient-future worship*, appears to be a genuine desire, even if misguided, to add richness, depth, and beauty to the experience of worship.⁹ One could add to these observations the outright claim that there is a revival of Roman Catholicism in America. The television show *The Journey Home* (shown on Monday nights at 8:00 pm EST) on The Global Catholic Network EWTN states its purpose on its website in this way: “This exciting call-in program examines why so many people, including fallen away Catholics and individuals from other denominations, are being drawn home to the Catholic Church.”¹⁰

Support for a revival of Roman Catholicism comes from some analyses of the Emerging Church. Gendron sees a clear tie between

⁷ Jacqueline L. Salmon, “Feeling Renewed by Ancient Traditions,” *Washington Post*, 8 March 2008, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/03/07/ST2008030703113.html>>(accessed 25 March 2008).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* According to this source, “First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D. C. follows the liturgical calendar observed by Catholic churches. It lights candles at Advent, and observes Epiphany Sunday and the remainder of the traditional cycle of liturgical celebrations.” The same article quotes the pastor of that church as saying, “We find that following the seasons of the Christian year adds a lot of richness to our experience of worship.... We wouldn’t want the Catholics to get all the good stuff.”

¹⁰ *The Journey Home*, EWTN Prime, <<http://www.ewtn.com/journeyhome/index.asp>> (accessed 25 March 2008). The acronym *EWTN* stands for Eternal Word Television Network which claims to be the largest religious media network in the world.

the Emerging Church's focus on tradition and a stream back to the Catholic Church:

One of the major influences that is paving the road back to Roman Catholicism is the Emerging Church movement. Proponents say its time for Christianity to be reinvented for a new generation. It must become more relevant to a postmodern generation. They say the best way to reinvent Christianity for the present generation is to reintroduce ideas and experiences from the past. Emergent leaders say God's Word no longer holds the answers to life's questions. Experience must become the key factor to encounter spiritual reality. The experiential attractions which are being promoted by the Emerging Church include: statues, prayer stations, incense, liturgy, candles, icons, the sacraments and calling communion the Eucharist. It is easy to see how this movement complements and encourages the Vatican's "new evangelization program" to win the "separated brethren" back to the "true church."¹¹

Such an analysis is certainly correct relative to some forms of the Emerging Church, making Gendron's conclusions relevant.

Beyond the issue of the Emerging Church, however, there is within evangelicalism a current focus on tradition on many fronts. Bible-believing Protestants have usually criticized the Roman Catholic penchant to endorse tradition as somewhat authoritative. However, this should never be taken as a complete disdain for church history or contempt for the church fathers. Such mammoth projects as the current multi-volume series edited by the evangelical Thomas Oden entitled *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* demonstrate a lively and healthy interest in the words of those who have gone before us.¹² No evangelical needs to be afraid of such a trail since the historical evidence shows that the Roman Catholic presentation of a monolithic beginning centered in Rome can never be substantiated. Furthermore, as Oden notes, the current interest in the church fathers draws Protestants back to

¹¹ Mike Gendron, "Emerging Church: Leading Protestants Back to Rome," Proclaiming the Gospel Ministries, <http://pro-gospel.org/x2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=1> (accessed 25 March 2008).

¹² Thomas Oden, gen. ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 25 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001-2008). Twenty-eight volumes are intended in the final collection.

Luther, Calvin, and Wesley who knew the church fathers well and can be seen more as an unfettering from Enlightenment and higher critical thinking than a movement back to Roman Catholic faith.¹³

It remains to be seen, however, if the suggestion that there is a large movement of evangelicals back to Catholicism can be validated. It is the contention of this present writer that there is a better explanation for what is happening, especially in North America. The postmodern impulse, with its intensified stirring of the theological pot, has led many to seek an authentic religious experience that goes beyond what is actually occurring in church life. In virtually every confessional group there are those who are dissatisfied with the level of their experience. It seems that the religious heart of many is searching for something *different* because different may be better—at least it is worth a try. So those disenchanting souls within evangelicalism, for example, seek for a deeper beauty to express the meaning of their experience and some “find” it in the path to Rome.

On the other side, there are the disillusioned Catholics for whom the ritualistic ardor of their upbringing rings empty and hollow with no substance. Notice the following statistics and comments from a 2005 *National Review* article:

In 1965 there were 58,000 priests in the U.S.; in 2002 there were 45,000, of whom 16% come from other countries. In 1965 there were 1,575 ordinations to the priesthood; in 2002 there were 450. In 1965 there were 49,000 seminarians; in 2002 there were 4,700. In 1965 there were 180,000 sisters; in 2002 there were 75,000, with an average age of 68. In 1965 there were 1,556 Catholic high schools; in 2002 there were 786. In 1965 there were 10,503 Catholic grade schools; in 2002 there were 6,623. In 1958 weekly Mass attendance was 74%; in 2000 it was 25%. In 1968 there were 338 annulments; in 2002 there were 50,000. And now 53% of Catholics believe you can have an abortion and still be considered a good Catholic. And the above does not include all the parish closings, or the outrageous clerical sex scandals and episcopal cover-ups. It's time to stop pretending that Vatican II has "renewed" the Church. Amid the ruins,

¹³ Thomas Oden, general introduction to *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, gen. ed. Thomas Oden; Volume I: *Old Testament I – Genesis 1-11*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), xx.

orthodox Catholics have been rolling up their sleeves in order to save the Church in America.¹⁴

These facts do not match the optimistic spirit of EWTN and the current portrait of large numbers of evangelicals marching home to Rome. Perhaps a few evangelicals have taken the places of Catholics who have fled toward secularism or other religious affiliations. The testimony of many evangelistic Bible-believing churches in highly Catholic areas is that there is an increase of conversions from Roman Catholicism to evangelical faith or a large number of Catholics who are open to a new and different religious experience of authenticity.¹⁵ Such Catholics want more than a vacant mystery that has not moved them closer to God. Thus, the claim that there is a large return to Rome is overstated. The road may not be busy but the traffic on it seems to be going in both directions. The most traveled road and bigger North American flow may be toward hedonism. That is the spirit of the age. High profile conversions and good marketing should not be extrapolated to a different conclusion. Both Catholics and evangelicals must be honest about the current reality.

AREAS OF AGREEMENT

Another area in which honesty is needed and which is sometimes a stumbling block for evangelistic outreach to Roman Catholics is the fact that Catholics and evangelicals really do agree on quite a few theological points. So here a review of some of the

¹⁴ “The Calamitous Decline of the Catholic Church in the U.S.,” *National Review*, 31 January 2005, BNET, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1282/is_1_57/ai_n13610441> (accessed 25 March 2008).

¹⁵ This is the current situation in the region of Northeast Pennsylvania in general and the city of Scranton, Pennsylvania, in particular. Consolidation of Catholic schools and churches is occurring frequently. New Life Baptist Church, a church plant associated with Project Jerusalem, the church planting educational arm of Baptist Bible Seminary, as well as other Bible-believing churches in the area could attest to a growing number of Roman Catholics who have converted to a Protestant faith or who are coming to evangelical congregations looking for hope.

most important agreements will be given before the areas of disagreement are brought forward.¹⁶

First, Roman Catholics and evangelicals agree on the *nature of God*. At the most basic level, both view God in the sense of classical theism. What is meant by classical theism is that there is one Creator God¹⁷ who is personal, transcendent, and immanent. Note the following declaration from the Vatican I council (1869-70) which is still official church dogma:

The holy, Catholic, apostolic Roman Church believes and professes that there is one true and living God, the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth. He is almighty, eternal, beyond measure, incomprehensible, and infinite in intellect, will and in every perfection. Since he is one unique spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, he must be declared really and essentially distinct from the world, perfectly happy in himself and by his very nature, and inexpressibly exalted over all things that exist or can be conceived other than himself.¹⁸

Thus, one can see agreement between Catholicism and evangelicalism by marshaling the traditional attributes of God as taught in the two camps—characteristics like omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. One could also put forward the acts of God in history, namely creation and redemption, although in redemption the means of attainment would be different between the two groups. The classical view of the Trinity is also evident in both traditional Roman Catholicism and biblical evangelicalism. In short, in both there is a robust belief in a supernatural Trinitarian God that is in harmony with the Scriptures.

¹⁶ The discussion on agreements assumes traditional and conservative understandings of both Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism and does not entertain liberal notions. I will highlight Catholic teaching in the various areas of agreement. Sometimes I may assume my reader is fully aware of the evangelical and biblical positions.

¹⁷ For example, see John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 69-83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55. The full text of the Vatican Ecumenical Council I can be found at <http://www.intratext.com/X/ENG0063.htm>.

Second, Roman Catholics and evangelicals agree on the *person of Christ*. In both movements, Jesus is believed to be God in human flesh. From the Roman Catholic side an appeal is sometimes made to John's Gospel as would be made in any evangelical church:

John begins the fourth Gospel with a Prologue that leaves nothing to the imagination. His triad is a close-knit testimony to the person of Jesus Christ. The Logos, therefore, is *God*; the Logos became a *human* being; and this Logos as a human being lived among men and was *witnessed* by them. Language cannot be clearer, as John intended to leave no doubt who Jesus Christ really was (italics original).¹⁹

Thus, the incarnation is definitely approved. Along with this comes a commitment to the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ, although there would certainly be some divergence on the nature and role of the Virgin Mary in that birth.

Third, Roman Catholics and evangelicals agree that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world and that he was physically raised from the dead—the death and resurrection of Christ is affirmed. Much is made of the shed blood of Christ in both Roman Catholicism and in biblical evangelicalism. Note the following teaching from a Catholic catechism: “After man had sinned, he was obliged to repair the injustice committed against God, which God took upon himself to expiate in the person of Jesus Christ...what the Church has always held, that Christ by his sufferings and death rendered vicarious atonement to God for the sins of men.”²⁰ There is some debate about the meaning of the cross, but not its fact in history. The same could be said for the resurrection of Jesus: “From Peter's Pentecost homily on through the apostolic age, Christ's bodily resurrection was the primary evidence offered to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124. See also Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 932. On my cursory reading of the Vatican II documents it seems that the humanity of Christ is emphasized more than his deity, but his deity is not denied. The incarnation is fully endorsed.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 168. Interestingly, this basic understanding is couched in a context in which Mary's role in the redeeming process is also emphasized as the Mother of Christ cooperates with the atonement. This aspect would decidedly be rejected by biblical evangelicals.

the Mediterranean world that there is no other name than Jesus by which men are to be saved.”²¹

Fourth, traditional Roman Catholics and biblical evangelicals affirm the existence of a real heaven and a real hell. Concerning the truth of hell, albeit a mystery, the claim is made that “the Catholic Church has never flinched in communicating this truth from Christ along with the Savior’s assuring promise that his words would never fail.”²² Concerning the existence of heaven, multitudes of Catholics pray to a Father who is “in heaven.” The term refers to the abode of God and the future home of the just.²³ Such an understanding in its basic outline is comparable to the understandings of evangelicals.

Fifth, Roman Catholics and evangelicals possess strong ethical commitments in marriage and life such as opposition to abortion and the gay agenda. In fact, political activism on the part of both groups has brought them together in common cause during the last thirty years. This common work has perhaps fed to some degree the two-way highway as some leave one group for the other.

AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

In spite of numerous agreements in doctrine and outlook, the differences between Catholics and evangelicals remain many and are of such a character to suggest a total lack of compatibility. In fact, it will be seen that the two groups diverge at the most important points of theology and life. In light of the current situation and evangelical confusion on the matter, a review of these significant differences must once again commence. It is as if we must revisit the days of the Reformation in the early twenty-first century.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²² *Ibid.*, 268.

²³ Joseph Hontheim, “Heaven,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07170a.htm>> (accessed 26 March 2008).

Different View of History

One starting place in this discussion is to see how each camp views the past two thousand years of church history. Catholics will acknowledge many doctrinal developments over time, but they consistently affirm that the “mother church,” so to speak, is their church and that all other Christian religious groups have departed and spun off from them in error. Even Vatican II, with its alleged softer stance toward Protestantism, is viewed as reinforcing the centrality of the Roman Catholic Church in history:

For the first time in conciliar history, this issue was squarely faced and answered. The issue in question was not *whether* the Church is one. No believer in Christ would say otherwise. The issue was *where* this one Church of Christ can be found. The Second Vatican Council’s answer is unequivocal. That which constitutes the one true Church—its churchness, so to speak—not merely exists but it subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Behind the carefully chosen verb “subsists” stands the affirmation that the objective fullness of Christ’s heritage to the Church—totality of his revelation, totality of his sacraments, and totality of authority to rule the people of God in his name—resides in the Catholic Church, of which the bishop of Rome is the visible head.²⁴

This universally received view of Roman Catholics about their own history is well summarized by Knox: “The modern Christianities [Protestants & others], be they what they may, are the relics of schism; not one of them dares to represent itself as the one Church of Christ. Consequently, in appealing to the early Church, with its instinct of inviolable unity, they are appealing to an arbiter who has already given the award against them.”²⁵ Again, the main theme of Catholic understanding of history is that all other churches have broken away from the “mother church” of Rome.

The biblical and evangelical understanding follows the traditional Protestant response to such claims. Boettner, in his classic work *Roman Catholicism* (1964) written during the time of Vatican II, posits a clear evangelical viewpoint:

²⁴ Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, 213.

²⁵ Ronald Knox, *The Belief of Catholics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 112. This is an older work but it is well worth the read.

Roman Catholics often attempt to represent Protestantism as something comparatively new, as having originated with Martin Luther and John Calvin in the sixteenth century. We do indeed owe a great debt to these leaders and to the Reformation movement that swept over Europe at that time. But the basic principles and the common system of doctrine taught by those Reformers and by evangelical churches ever since go back to the New Testament and to the first century Christian church. Protestantism as it emerged in the 16th century was not the beginning of something new, but a return to Bible Christianity and to the simplicity of the Apostolic church from which the Roman Church had long since departed.²⁶

Discussions of the details of history are beyond the scope of this work. It is important at this juncture, however, to note that there have always been Christian groups who were not aligned with a Roman-centered visible, church organization. In fact, Catholic analysis of the early church fathers often overzealously appeals to the catholicity and oneness of the church in their writings. However, on many occasions the church fathers are speaking of a spiritual oneness that has nothing to do with Rome.²⁷ Even if a visible unity is being asserted, it is still a giant leap to jump to the conclusion that the one church is organizationally being run by the bishop of Rome. Instead, it is best to see Romanism as an age-long development.²⁸

Moreover, it is doubtful that a case can be made for a true Pope, that is, a bishop of the church in Rome, who organizationally controlled a wide number of churches scattered throughout the

²⁶ Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964). The dates on Vatican II were 1962-65. Boettner writes in the religious environment of its ongoing discussions. Boettner as a Reformed theologian would not parse every detail of history the same way that a Baptist would. However, in the broad sweep of things, he is on target in his summary of the non-Catholic position of how to view history. The reader will find some of his analysis a bit strange such as his insistence that Roman Catholicism's resurgence would help America become communist (4-7). Pope John Paul II, the Polish Pope, had a rather strong say in the decline of communism in Europe.

²⁷ For example, see the Alexandrian fathers: Clement, *Stromata* VII.17; Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.48.

²⁸ Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, 7-10.

world, until Pope Gregory I (590-604) or some other point in church history. Marsden, using the example of Jonathan Edwards, notes that

one conventional Protestant interpretation of prophecies concerning “the beast” in Daniel and the Apocalypse, for example, was that Antichrist or the papacy would be defeated 1,260 years after the rise of the papacy. Edwards followed those who said that A.D. 606 marked the Pope’s ascendancy, so that meant the decisive blow against papal power was likely to occur around 1866.²⁹

One must note clearly, in light of this historical understanding, that Catholicism and evangelicalism do not hold the same view of church history.

Different View of Ultimate Authority

Related somewhat to one’s understanding of church history is one’s viewpoint of ultimate authority as quotations above suggest. From the Catholic side there is the general sentiment that since Christ formed the church (a single church) it inherently carries his authority. Perhaps the general Catholic thought is summed up with these words: “They [Protestants] are not clear-headed enough to perceive that a proper notion of the Church is a necessary stage before we argue from the authority of Christ to any other theological doctrine whatever.”³⁰ Adding some intensity, the same writer goes on to claim that “the Protestant had no conceivable right to base any arguments on the inspiration of the Bible, for the inspiration of the Bible was a doctrine which had been believed, before the Reformation, on the mere authority of the Church; it

²⁹ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), 89. These facts about the beliefs of Jonathan Edwards come from Edwards two writings “Notes on the Apocalypse” and *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer* (1747). Perhaps the best place to find these writings is Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, vol. 5 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977). Note that Edwards was a postmillennial historicist who accepted the erroneous view, common to his day, that one day in a prophetic passage means one year.

³⁰ Knox, *Belief of Catholics*, 104.

rested on exactly the same basis as the doctrine of Transubstantiation.”³¹ Karl Rahner, the famous Catholic theologian, says the same truth in a different way. He speaks of the two aspects of the faith of a Christian. Those two aspects are faith in Christ and faith in the church, not faith in God’s Word:

It makes no difference ... whether he believes in the Church first and then in the rest of matters proposed for his belief because these come from the Church, or whether he first attains to belief in Christ and his word, and goes on from there to belief in the Church as founded by Christ ... On the basis of faith in Christ the believer includes the Church too in his faith in such a way that it immediately becomes the direct medium and rule of faith as such.³²

Consequently, there can be no question that in Catholic understanding the church functions as final authority in life today. Demonstration of this belief was attempted during the Counter Reformation by officially changing the list of books in the approved canon of Scripture for Catholics. In this way, even God’s Holy Word is thought to be under the power of the Roman Church.

The biblical evangelical does not dismiss church tradition and church authority as if they have no role to play in life. Paul told the Thessalonians, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us” (2 Thess 2:15). Here the idea of tradition in the sense of apostolic teaching is clear. From the vantage point of our historical moment, we are talking about biblical teaching. It just does not include the concept of “Roman” authority and centrality. In addition, Paul commands Titus, who apparently serves as a church emissary from the apostle, to “rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). Elders are to be obeyed according to the author of Hebrews as they minister the Word of God to their flocks (Heb 13:7, 17). However, there is no passage of Scripture which actually conveys the notion of a global network of bishops headed up by one man who mediates the interpretation of this word.

On the other hand, there exists a host of passages which lead to the conclusion that the Bible is the final and ultimate authority or,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

³² Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 7:106-107.

in other words, *Sola Scriptura*. We will mention a few of them here. Christ himself taught the truth of the Bible in dealing with his adversaries (Matt 22:41-46). In fact, he told his enemies that they were wrong because they did not know the Scriptures or the power of God (Matt 22:29). In addition, Jesus eluded the temptations of the devil by using the authority of the word of God found in the OT (Matt 4:1-11). He taught us that the Scriptures can not be broken (John 10:35) and thus possess accuracy and authority. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded us by his own authority to interpret the Scriptures correctly. Christ taught us in the account of the rich man in hades that the authority of the Bible was sufficient to lead a person to believe in the resurrection when even the experiential witness of a real resurrection could not lead a person to faith (Luke 16:31). Similarly, the apostolic teaching is that the source of the Bible is God (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:19-21). When the Bible speaks, it is God speaking. Therefore, there is a better case to be made for the Bible as infallible, ultimate authority and not the church.³³

Different View of Bible and Canon

At the Council of Trent in 1547 the Roman Catholic Church added thirteen books to the list of canonical books.³⁴ These books historically have been called the Apocrypha or “books hidden away.” While some of the books in the Apocrypha and also in the Protestant canon of sixty-six books have been disputed going back to the early days of the church, Protestants have generally rejected the Apocrypha and not recognized it as part of Holy Scripture. However, is there a real basis for making the claim that the Protestant Bible is superior to the Catholic Bible? If one holds to the church as the ultimate authority and views that church as the Roman Church, the pronouncements of the Roman Church would hold sway. Biblical evangelicals, however, settle the question by

³³ More specifics about apostolic succession will hopefully be dealt with in a follow-up article to come.

³⁴ The thirteen books are Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, Song of the Three Children, Story of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasseh, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees.

pointing to the Bible itself and to the Catholic's traditional belief that the Scriptures reliably give us the words of Jesus.

What is important to note is that all of the books of the Apocrypha were written before the time of Christ and some of them are actually additions to existing OT books. They were generally written during the four hundred silent years before Jesus. Consequently, they were all in existence at the time of Christ. This presents a quandary for the Roman Catholic position. Which OT did Jesus use? What books did he consider part of the Word of God up to that time? All of the biblical teaching points in the direction that Jesus approved of the Jewish canon of his day, which was the OT minus the Apocrypha. In Luke 11:51 Jesus teaches that his contemporary Jewish generation will be held responsible for the shedding of the blood of the prophets from Abel to Zechariah. Interestingly, the expression from Abel to Zechariah is similar to our Christian statement "from Genesis to Revelation" to mean everything in the Bible. Here Jesus refers to Genesis where the first man was killed (Abel) and 2 Chronicles, the last book in the order of books in the Hebrew OT, in which Zechariah is mentioned. The statement clearly shows the commitment of Jesus to Jewish understandings of canon in his day. Similarly, in Luke 24:44 Jesus teaches the disciples that "everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Here the traditional three-fold organization of the Hebrew Bible is in view, which in Jesus' time did not include the Apocrypha. Consequently, Roman Catholics have the dilemma of having a different OT than the one Jesus used. In this matter, evangelicals believe themselves to be on higher ground in agreement with the direct teaching of Christ.

Different View of Justification

The most tragic difference between traditional Catholics and biblical evangelicals is that they disagree on how a person is justified before God. There is nothing more important than how an individual is declared not guilty before God so that he possesses forgiveness and acceptance by God. This issue was at the heart of the Reformation and drove Luther and Calvin perhaps more than all other issues. On the evangelical side is an array of passages, especially in John's Gospel (3:15-18; 5:24, etc.), Acts (16:30-31), Romans (1:17; 3:20-24; 4:1-5; 5:1, etc.), Galatians (2:15-21), and Ephesians (2:5-10). These texts demonstrate that justification and

salvation come to an individual by faith and faith alone apart from any good deeds or works of the law—what is called *Sola Fide*. These are not isolated and obscure teachings. These are major themes in the Bible. Many more passages could be added to the list. The clarity of the truth of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is one of the central doctrines in evangelicalism and certainly the most important experientially since souls are at stake.

However, the Roman Catholic position opts for a different approach. To be sure it says much about grace and gives the teaching that salvation is only by the merits of Christ. In a manner of speaking the Catholic participant of the sacramental system dips into these merits and receives the grace of God. It is in this sense Catholics can say they are trusting in Christ and his merits and grace for salvation:

We say that the sacraments are seven signs instituted by Christ to confer the grace they signify. And more broadly we hold that the Catholic Church is the great sacrament of the New Law that Christ founded to be the unique channel of grace to all mankind, with special title to those who are baptized and active members of the Mystical Body of Christ. But no matter how conceived, the sacraments are so far significant and membership in the Church so much more appreciated if we see the great mysteries of Christ in their true perspective as visible and human agencies for the transmission of invisible divine blessings to the human race.³⁵

Notice the mention specifically of the seven sacraments.³⁶ In general the participation of the individual in the Church brings grace to that person. The alert evangelical will understand that saving grace is what is meant. The sacraments cannot be subsumed under a category of “only” sanctifying grace as commonly understood in evangelicalism.³⁷

³⁵ Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, 172.

³⁶ The seven sacraments are baptism, penance, confirmation, communion, marriage, orders, and extreme unction.

³⁷ Roman Catholics often speak of “initial justification” at baptism and ongoing justification or final justification produced by participation in the sacramental system. While most evangelicals see a tie between justification and sanctification, they usually voice a greater difference between the two than does Roman Catholicism.

Evangelicals protest the assertion by Catholics that they are not “meriting” grace through their good deeds expressed in the sacramental system. Biblical evangelicals view this system as a works-salvation approach to receiving eternal life. Catholic denials will not assuage this concern. The Apostle Paul notes, in a context about the remnant of Israel, that good deeds and grace were mutually exclusive: “And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Rom 11:6). The evangelical stands in harmony with this apostolic teaching. Catholics speak of grace but do not practice it for salvation. If its transmission is by the actions of men in sacramental ways, then Paul’s teaching is violated.

Beyond the general contradiction between the Bible and Catholic teaching on justification are the specifics along the way. In Catholicism, water baptism (usually of infants) takes away original sin on the soul.³⁸ Yet the Bible is clear that the gospel which saves the soul (1 Cor 15:1-4) does *not* include water baptism (1 Cor 1:17). Thus, to participate in the practice in the Roman Church is to depart from biblical teaching. In Catholicism, penance is practiced as a precondition to communion. Simply understood, penance is doing something good to make up for something bad, usually in the form of repetitious prayers using a rosary. Certainly, restitution is a good thing. If a man steals from his neighbor, he needs to make things right by his neighbor. The idea of penance in the Catholic Church, however, is not the same and is sometimes substituted for the concept of repentance.³⁹

Perhaps the most egregious problem in Catholicism is the understanding of communion. The Roman teaching of real presence and transubstantiation—through the mediation of the priest the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ—undermines the biblical teaching of the memorial nature of the ceremony (1 Cor 11). Roman Catholicism heavily leans on a woodenly literalistic understanding of John 6. Of particular importance are the words “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he shall live forever;

³⁸ Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, 506.

³⁹ The New American Bible, a Catholic translation with extensive study notes, translates John the Baptist’s words to the Pharisees and Saducees as “Give some evidence that you mean to reform” when the usual wording is to show the works of repentance (Matt 3:8).

and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51) and “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (vv. 53-56). On the surface, the realists certainly have a case. They would strengthen their understanding of the passage by an appeal to context, namely, the fact that the previous verses speak of the literal feeding of the five thousand. There are several reasons, however, why their view cannot be held:

- A *previous chapter* in John’s Gospel (chapter 4) shows Jesus telling the woman at the well that he is the living water. A superficial reading of that passage might be used to reinforce the realist view of John 6. However, notice that the disciples’ misunderstanding of what is going on, namely their view that he is talking about literal food, is corrected by Jesus this way: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me” (John 4:34). In other words, he is using metaphorical or analogical language here. The question for the realist is why we must insist on literalistic language in John 6 when Jesus clearly uses analogical language in John 4 when invoking the same images.
- John chapter 6 contextually shows that the issue under consideration is believing in Jesus, not concretely eating his flesh and drinking his blood in a ceremonial way. Notice verses 29, 30, 35-40, 47, 64, 68-69. It is impossible to read the entire chapter in context and not see that belief is the main idea and that Jesus is speaking using figurative language when he appeals to eating his flesh. This is especially clear when both ideas are brought together in verse 35.
- The *next chapter* (John 7) shows Jesus using similar language to suggest that a man who is thirsty must drink of him (7:37). Yet in that context the explanation is given that spiritual things involving the Holy Spirit are meant, not a living drinking of Jesus in some fashion. Why is it not possible to see the same thing in John 6?

- We must also notice that the Lord's Supper has not been established yet in the gospels. The realist position is a reading back into the text. That is, it violates the progress of revelation in its handling of the text. There are no hints contextually in John 6 of the idea of a ceremony. It is better to stick to the major theme of the entire book, namely believing in him (see John 3 and John 20:31).

However, there is something more troublesome to biblical evangelicals about the Roman Catholic practice of communion than these interpretive debates about John 6. The Lord's Supper in Catholicism appears to be the "one mystery of faith around which revolves the whole Catholic liturgy."⁴⁰ It is the high point in many ways for all of Catholic experience. Thus, it is significant that the Catholic version of communion is turned into a righteous act on the part of the participant in which he maintains or continues his saving relationship with God. The real presence doctrine then becomes the vehicle for the *perpetual sacrifice* of Christ. The Roman Church sees this event, every time and place it is performed, as the continuing sacrifice of Christ over and over to assist the participant in the continued removal of personal sin.⁴¹

Such an approach has nothing of biblical value and flatly contradicts the biblical teaching. Hebrews 7:27 is quite clear: "Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices *day after day*, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins *once for all* when he offered himself" (italics provided for emphasis). One can also include Hebrews 9:24-28 in the discussion:

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself *again and again*, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face

⁴⁰ Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, 457.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 457-81.

judgment, so Christ was sacrificed *once* to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (emphasis added)

The text of Scripture could not be clearer. Christ has performed a once-for-all sacrifice for sin that is sufficient and complete. To practice otherwise through the perpetual sacrifice doctrine as the Catholics do is a denial of the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Calvary. This means that to participate in Catholic communion is a denial of the gospel itself and the sufficiency of the cross-work that it entails. That is why many evangelicals would encourage any so-called evangelical Catholic to leave the Roman Catholic Church and find a Bible-believing assembly where the practice would not lead to this denial.

RESPONDING TO A NEW REALITY: LOVING ACROSS THE BOUNDARIES

In conclusion, the words that have just been stated come across in the current postmodern context as somewhat harsh. It is inappropriate, the spirit of the world tells us, to preach a certain conviction about such things as the meanings of biblical texts and then apply them with confidence to our lives, including church practice. We are not allowed to say that one is absolutely wrong and the other is absolutely right. The biblical evangelical must strive not to breathe the air of this subjective mysticism and stand upon the faith once delivered to the saints. There are boundaries that need to be built and maintained. It is not an act of hate toward anyone for such boundaries to exist. It would be the absence of love not to have such borders between groups if the eternal destiny of souls hangs in the balance. Thus, it is quite appropriate to suggest that the Roman Catholic Church teaches a false gospel. In the Catholic versus evangelical debate, the biblicist should “love across the boundaries” rather than tear godly borders down. Today more than ever we need to hear the echoes of Luther’s words about the Bible: “Here I take my stand; I can do no other.”⁴²

⁴² This article is envisioned as the first in a series of articles about this issue. Altogether, the current writer has identified nineteen differences between Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism involving the following issues: church history, ultimate authority, Bible and canon, apostolic succession, salvation and justification, water baptism, communion,

penance, marriage, ordination, the Virgin Mary, saints, extreme unction, Second Coming and God's kingdom, worship, priesthood, assurance of salvation, purgatory, and material symbols (rosary, candles, statues, icons, etc.). Only a few of these have been dealt with in this first article.