

# How Should Evangelicals Think About Roman Catholics Today?

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## Introduction

I want to begin this essay on an autobiographical note since I think there is a growing number of evangelicals whose thinking about Roman Catholics, thanks to some similar personal experiences, has taken a turn similar to mine. I grew up in east-central Illinois in a strong evangelical home. Both of my parents were (and are) committed disciples of Jesus Christ and we always attended Baptist and Bible churches. What did I think about Roman Catholics during the first twenty years of my life? I rarely thought about them at all. They were a distant faith, a different religion, and I simply did not know any Catholics personally. If you had asked me what Catholics were like and what they believed, I probably would have said something like, “Catholics worship Mary, believe God will save them only if they do more good things than bad things, and most of them are not saved (they do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ). They are a lot like Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

I met a few Catholics in my twenties (they seemed hung up about needing to go to Mass every day) but it was not until I was 29 that my perspective began to change. After attending Regent College in Vancouver, and spending a year doing missions in Kenya, I joined the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. And there I met Vito, a freshman. Vito was an intelligent, Bible-loving, Christ-centered, deeply committed Chris-

tian—and he was also a Roman Catholic. He loved C. S. Lewis, was well versed in the Church Fathers and believed strongly in Christian unity. I was especially impressed with Vito’s compassion for, and action toward, the poor. He loved people better than most of the evangelical students did. In Bible study, I was humbled by the number of times Vito’s insights exposed certain blind spots and biases—“evangelical blinders,” if you will—that prevented me from seeing some Scriptural truths.

In 1990 I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts and for the next five years I ministered among graduate students at Harvard and M.I.T with InterVarsity. At Harvard I met some Roman Catholic doctoral students who, again, did not fit the “typical” Catholic mold. They knew and loved the early creeds, they reasoned well from their Tradition and from the Scriptures, they had deep, quiet lives of prayer, and they were theologically and culturally conservative. And then one day a frightening thought crossed my mind: I seemed to have more in common, on one level, with my Roman Catholic friends than I did with my liberal-leaning, culture-embracing, evangelical friends! But how could this be?

Since moving to Washington, D. C. in 1996 I have come to know many Roman Catholics. Not all are solidly orthodox and committed followers of Christ, but many are. I can no longer think of Catholics as members of a cult or as lukewarm, work-your-way-to-heaven, legalists. Many of

them love Jesus Christ, read their Bibles, and even actively share their faith with others. Such Catholics can no longer be squeezed into my old cookie-cutter stereotype. I need a fresh, new paradigm.

My own experience dovetails with what seems to be happening nationally. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics are breaking down the walls of ignorance and hostility that used to safely seclude them from one another, and they are actually swimming in the same streams. In 1994 the document ECT (“Evangelicals and Catholics Together”) was drafted and over the last decade literally dozens of books were written (I own about thirty) about this new mutual awareness (and often appreciation) between Catholics and evangelicals. From ministries like Promise Keepers and CareNet, to magazines like *First Things* and *Touchstone*, to conferences like those held by the C. S. Lewis Institute in Oxford and the Rose Hill gathering in South Carolina, Roman Catholics and evangelicals are increasingly finding themselves in each other’s lives. So how should we regard these Roman Catholics?

### **The Current Scene: Deepening Appreciation Yet On-Going Frustration**

I am both encouraged and concerned about the growing rapport between Catholics and evangelicals. I confess to having little patience with those conservative evangelicals who resolutely refuse to see anything good about this newly forming ecumenism, and who refuse to entertain the thought that God might be doing a new thing. Yet I also confess to a similar frustration with doctrinally lax evangelicals who naively believe that simply being in one another’s presence erases the divisions of the Reformation—as if

unity can be forged outside of truth. A proper response, I think, must be somewhere in the middle.

### ***Deepening Appreciation Common Social Commitments and Partners in the Culture Wars***

Up until the 1890s, conservative Protestants were on the front line of social reform, whether it was fighting against slavery or fighting for the poor, women’s rights, and the national observance of the Sabbath. Caring for men’s souls and caring for men’s bodies went hand in hand. But from 1900 to 1930 in what historians have christened, “The Great Reversal,” conservative Protestants began focusing exclusively on the “spiritual,” the personal and the private. To a large degree, they were reacting to the “social gospel” of liberal Protestantism. In addition, premillennial eschatology taught that the world’s end was imminent, leading churches to emphasize saving souls rather than perfecting society.

From the 1930s to 1970s, a renewed concern for saving a “Christian America” brought conservative Protestants (many who changed their name from “Fundamentalist” to “Evangelical”) out of their separatistic hibernation, and social change was deemed important once again—but only *after* evangelism: personal conversion, which was hoped to lead to social transformation, remained front and center. It has only been since the 1970s that many evangelicals have embraced social action as part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian, and a worthy end in itself. Thanks to the influence of Francis Schaeffer, Ron Sider and others, evangelicals by the droves have re-entered the world of politics and contemporary culture, and have rolled up their sleeves to

care for the poor, fight abortion, lobby for support of the family, and push for the passing of just laws.

It is no secret that social action is second nature for most Roman Catholics. The dualistic body-soul split that has plagued evangelicals for decades is almost totally absent. But the typical rejoinder by evangelicals runs something like this: “Well, yes, Catholics eagerly care for physical needs, but they are motivated by guilt, thinking they will be rewarded by God for their good works.” Or, “Yes, but Catholics, like Protestant Liberals, focus on the physical to the exclusion of the spiritual—and social action apart from evangelism does no one any lasting, eternal good.”

We must leave it to God to judge Catholics’ (and our own) motives, and even if some actions towards physical needs fall short of holistic care, this should not prevent evangelicals from applauding and teaming with Catholics on the social front. It is true that evangelicals must always resist substituting social transformation *for* personal regeneration—but this is no excuse for rejecting social transformation. Happily Catholics and evangelicals *are* working side by side today in ways unparalleled in America’s history: Promise Keepers, Ethics and Public Policy, the Marriage Law Project, crisis pregnancy centers—the list of ministries that enjoy joint Catholic-evangelical support is long and growing.

The “culture wars” in America today are real indeed. It cannot be stated too strongly that more and more people today, consciously or unconsciously, are seeking to recreate America as a country whose mores, values and laws are relativistic, created by men and having nothing to do with God. Evangelicals can

and should increasingly team with Roman Catholics in insisting (as did the reformers!) that the first purpose of God’s Law is to restrain evil. It is good and right to strive with other God-fearers for a nation where murdering, stealing, and committing adultery are discouraged.

With ECT I we can join hands with Catholics to affirm the following balanced statement:

Christians individually and the church corporately... have a responsibility for the right ordering of civil society. We embrace this task soberly; knowing the consequences of human sinfulness, we resist the utopian conceit that it is within our powers to build the kingdom of God on earth. We embrace this task hopefully; knowing that God has called us to love our neighbor, we seek to secure for all a greater measure of civil righteousness and justice.... Together we contend for the truth that politics, law, and culture must be secured by moral truth.

#### *Importance of Reason*

One of the unfortunate consequences of evangelicals’ overreaction to Roman Catholicism has been that in our zeal to keep Holy Scripture central we have often downplayed, and at times rejected, the important role that our God-given reason plays in how we think about God’s world and our role in it. This anti-intellectual current is shifting among many evangelicals today, however. Thanks in part to new initiatives by the Pew Foundation’s Young Scholars Program, Mustard Seed’s Harvey and Bakke Fellowships, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s targeted ministry to doctoral students and faculty, and Campus Crusade for Christ’s Christian Leadership Ministries, evangelicals are being both encouraged and aided in bringing their

Christian minds to bear upon their academic disciplines in Higher Education. More articles and books are being written by Christians where the truths received from Scripture are combined with the insights gleaned from the social sciences, physical sciences, and humanities to craft a well-rounded mosaic of knowledge. All truth is indeed God's truth, whether it is obtained from God's special or general revelation.

There are at least three reasons for the hundred-plus year history of anti-intellectualism within large pockets of evangelicalism. First, we overreacted to Catholicism or, more particularly, to the Protestant Modernists of the 1900s. Second, we overemphasized the noetic effects of the fall. Our ability to reason accurately has been damaged by sin—but not obliterated. Third, we adopted an all-or-nothing mentality, which leads us either to speak the truth prophetically, with a large degree of certainty, or not to speak at all. We may not be able to say with the same degree of authority, "Light is both particles and waves," as we can, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," but this should not prevent us from asserting the former.

We evangelicals have perhaps been most naive in explaining the use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. No evangelical Christian, regardless of how pious, ever bases his life solely on the Bible alone. For the Bible must be interpreted, organized into some coherent theology, and made applicable to contemporary situations—and all these activities demand *reason*.

Evangelicals have much to learn from Roman Catholics here, for Catholics have a rich heritage of thinking deeply about the nature of things, the inter-connection

of things, the consequences of things, and so on. They make good philosophers. Furthermore, the strong heritage of a natural law philosophy has enabled Catholics to draw out important implications from obviously stated biblical truths. For instance, I continue to turn to the papal encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio* for some of the best thoughts on understanding the nature of truth, and the relationship of faith and reason.

Perhaps this is nowhere more obvious than in sexual ethics. We evangelicals know directly from Scripture that God commands sexual relations to occur only within marriage between a husband and wife. But what about birth control? What about in vitro fertilization? What about cloning? How should evangelicals respond to the current stem cell research debate? Evangelicals can say that homosexual relations are sinful—but can we also say, equally strongly, that they are unnatural? Many questions about sexuality simply cannot be answered by looking for proof texts from Scripture.

Or take gender issues. Conservative evangelicals may agree that the Bible teaches that men, not women, are to hold positions of leadership in the church, and that in marriage the man is to be the "head" of his wife. But what are the implications of this for dating and courtship, for masculinity and femininity, for the nature of gender? How strongly can evangelicals speak out on these issues without appealing *directly* to Scripture in their reasoning?

Or take social sin. Evangelicals will agree that all sin is personal and begins in the human heart. But are there also patterns of personal sin that show up in social institutions? Can we speak at all of "systemic evil"? Are there better and

worse ways of ordering society where certain sins are discouraged from developing and spreading?

Or take popular culture. How ought a biblically-saturated, Christ-centered mind think about notions of leisure, entertainment, the writing of good books, and the producing of good movies? How ought an evangelical think about America's growing dependence upon technology? Are there any standards for what makes art "good" or "bad"? What cultural ingredients are needed today to encourage a fertile and edifying Christian imagination? And why is it that, with few exceptions, the best twentieth century Christian fiction writers are Catholics?

We evangelicals rightly stop short of giving extra-biblical truth claims the same authority as Holy Scripture. For example, even evangelicals who largely agree with *Humanae Vitae* regarding the wrongness of birth control, distinguish the clearly taught biblical injunction against extra-marital sex from the humanly deduced prohibitions against birth control. Still, we should reason alongside and learn from Roman Catholics. More and more evangelicals today are reading and learning from papal encyclicals, attending conferences where both evangelicals and Catholics are the speakers, and subscribing to ecumenical orthodox magazines. These are steps in the right direction.

#### *Importance of Tradition*

A few years ago two Jehovah Witnesses knocked on my door and for a change I invited them in for a robust theological discussion. I decided to mince no words but go right for the jugular: who exactly is Jesus Christ? They chose the usual Scriptures to try and prove to me that Jesus was but a creature and not divine,

and I chose the usual Scriptures to try and show them that Jesus was (and is) divine. We argued back and forth for over an hour. Although I personally think that I won the debate, to be fair (these guys were really good), if a totally objective judge were present, he may very well have called it a draw. Finally, admittedly a bit exasperated, I blurted out, "But look here. Ever since the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 Christians everywhere have considered your Arian position to be heretical." Their immediate reply (a rather evangelical one!) got me thinking for days: "Well, but it doesn't matter what this or that church teaches. We must go back to the Bible itself for our doctrines." As I reflected later over this conversation I realized that I had been basing part of my argument for Christ's divinity on Tradition—and I somehow knew that it was legitimate to do so.

For the evangelicals among us who want to claim that we never need or use Tradition (Baptists especially often make this no-creed-but-the-Bible claim), I think we are not being fully honest. If I were to ask you why you believe that the Nicene Creed is true you would probably answer, "Because it's biblical." But then if I were to ask you in what way exactly, say, the phrase, "very God of very God" was biblical, you might answer, "Well, I've never looked up the Scriptures on that one ... but I will, and I'll get back to you." To this I might say, "You mean you recite a creed in church as affirming what you believe and yet you yourself have never personally checked out the biblical orthodoxy of each phrase?" And then you might respond, "Yes, because others whom I trust *have* done the research..." Exactly! You affirm the creeds because they are biblical, but you trust other Christians (the

Church?!) in making the decision as to what phrases are or are not biblical.

None of us reads the Bible in a perfectly neutral way. We are all influenced by traditions—good ones and bad ones—to help us “see” certain truths. No one verse in the Bible categorically states that God is three Persons and one God, yet all evangelicals will agree that the Bible does indeed teach this. Many evangelicals read the Bible within the Reformed Tradition and we find, if we are honest, the following circular reasoning: we affirm the Reformed Tradition because we think it is biblical, and we affirm certain interpretations of the biblical text because they in turn are in line with the Reformed Tradition. There is an interweaving among most of us, even if it is an unconscious one, between Bible and Tradition.

Why do I believe women should not hold positions of spiritual authority in the church and why do I believe wives should submit to their husbands? Without question my first and strongest answer would be, “Because this is what the Bible teaches”—and I would seek to persuade you accordingly by pointing you toward some key texts. But if you then responded by saying, “But look: ever since the 1960s, card-carrying evangelicals have come up with new interpretation that overthrow the traditional interpretations,” I then would reply, “Does it not strike you as curious that the majority of Christians over hundreds of years have agreed together on the ‘traditional’ interpretations, and it has only been since the feminist-fueled 1960s that these novel interpretations have been promulgated? I will trust the nearly two thousand years of biblical interpreters over those of the last forty years.”

Now, I remain a Protestant, so what I

must say (and do so without hesitation or embarrassment) is that it is theoretically possible that the interpretations of the 1960s are right and the Church has been wrong for nearly two thousand years. For I believe that Luther and Calvin actually did rediscover some central biblical truths in the sixteenth century that had become fuzzy and dormant for nearly a thousand years. It is theoretically possible that the Feminist Revolution of the 1960s is as radically earth-shattering as was the Reformation of the 1520s. But we should be very leery and hesitant of making such a claim, understanding how the full weight of history and tradition leans against us.

Evangelicals need to know and appreciate Tradition so that we will not quickly succumb to the strong temptation (very prevalent in contemporary culture) that the latest is always best. C. S. Lewis wisely urged his correspondents to try and read one older book for every contemporary book since we all have our blindspots.

We must not think that we are being unfaithful Protestants by standing on the shoulders of the great saints before us rather than feeling the need always to quote the Bible alone. Luther and Calvin quoted extensively from the Church Fathers, especially Augustine. And they did more than quote them—they referred to them as authorities. In making a point in the *Institutes*, Calvin assumed that his readers would regard a citation of Augustine as supporting orthodox doctrine. In his theological works Thomas Goodwin, the brilliant seventeenth century English Puritan divine, quotes Augustine 51 times, Aquinas (!) 23 times, the Western Church Father Tertullian and the Eastern Church Father Chrysostom 11 times each.

Evangelicals today are helping lay Catholics rediscover the Bible, and Catho-

lics are helping evangelicals learn about and appreciate tradition. Historical theology is a burgeoning field of study at many evangelical seminaries today, and more evangelicals are doing Ph.Ds in the study of Patristics (the Early Church Fathers) at top universities in America and England. Evangelicals will always stop short of giving divine status to any tradition (for while the Bible is inerrant, no tradition is) but, as with the case of Reason, this should not mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

### *Historical Orthodoxy*

We must never forget the number of important doctrines evangelicals share with Roman Catholics. In their helpful book, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Disagreements*, Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie show that substantial agreement between Catholics and evangelicals exists over the following subjects: Revelation, God, Human Beings, Christ, Salvation, The Church, Ethics, and Last Things. (They also state eight areas where we disagree.)<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago I was sharing a pizza with two friends, one a liberal Methodist and the other a conservative Roman Catholic. We discussed the nature of man and what it means to be created in God's image, and I found my Catholic friend to be an ally. His comments were fully biblical and completely in line with Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. As I minister at secular universities I have found Catholics to be kindred spirits when it comes to battling relativism. They expose the dangerous consequences of trying to build a worldview on the sandy foundation of relativism, and they do so in a way that any evangelical could embrace.

I have more confidence in the knowl-

edge of, and commitment to, historical Christian orthodoxy among my committed Roman Catholic friends than I do among many of my I-love-Jesus-and-I-think-the-Bible-rocks evangelical brethren. For to be a good Catholic *means*, implicitly if not explicitly, that one affirms the creeds, whereas a "good" evangelical usually means a commitment to the gospel and the Bible—but not necessarily an affirmation of the orthodox historical doctrines of Christianity! Though I will often disagree with my Catholic friends, I confess that I often trust their doctrinal instincts more than those of many evangelicals.

### *On-Going Frustration*

When my Catholic friends discover that I believe what is written above, they (metaphorically) rub their hands and lick their lips, certain that a Catholic convert is in the making. They seem convinced that all the major mechanisms have been set in place that will inevitably lead the consistent Christian into the Roman Catholic fold: how can one value social action, appreciate reason and tradition, and affirm an historical orthodoxy, and *not* become Catholic? Nevertheless, my reasons for not converting run deep.

I honestly think that all of my reasons for not becoming Roman Catholic can actually be summarized under two headings: *gospel* and *authority*. If evangelicals and Roman Catholics could ever see eye to eye in these two areas, I think Christian unity would not be far off. But both headings carry a major amount of baggage in their train. There are significant presuppositions that precede, and convictions that flow out of, these two subjects.

## *The Gospel*

It is next to impossible to stress strongly enough how important a right understanding of the gospel is to evangelicals. Everything else pales in comparison. If two people agree on the gospel but disagree on eschatology, evangelicals will say that eschatological differences are unfortunate but understandable since all Christians do not agree on everything. But if two people agree on eschatology but disagree, fundamentally, about the gospel, evangelicals will say it is a matter of heaven and hell—and you cannot get any more serious than this. As Saint Paul said, “If we or an angel from heaven should preach to you another gospel, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8).

Evangelicals’ negative attitudes toward Roman Catholics can be summarized as follows: “What difference does it make if we agree on all these doctrines—the nature of truth, God, man, ethics, the last things—if we disagree on the nature and significance of the gospel? What good is it if you cleanse the outside of the cup while the inside remains dirty? Who cares if you are doing good works, if your actions are not springing from a motivation of gratitude for and from the gospel? For let us be honest now: are Roman Catholics truly Christians?! Have they been saved?! Do they have a relationship with Jesus?!”

Before getting to the heart of this issue, two prior points need to be restated to clear away some unnecessary roadblocks. First, we must remember that no human being is able to see definitively into another person’s soul. No evangelical can authoritatively, with the voice of God, declare whether this or that person is or is not trusting Jesus Christ. We do not know Roman Catholics’ hearts, and we do

not even know other evangelicals’ hearts; the only heart we can dare to know with some certainty is our own. Our Lord does exhort us to take note of one another’s fruit—“By their fruit ye shall know them”—but even here we cannot know the eternal destiny of any soul but our own. This is an important point to make because many evangelicals quickly decide that some people are not Christians. When we get to heaven there will be some surprises: some we were sure should have been there, will not be, and vice versa. At the same time, we need to assume that certain truths must be believed in order to be a Christian. If someone says, “I believe Jesus is dead and gone and did not rise from the dead—and I am a Christian,” we are not to treat him as a brother in Christ but as an infidel. We must be sure that our grounds for excluding a particular Roman Catholic from fellowship are biblical. Second, evangelicals can and do disagree among ourselves concerning *various aspects* of the gospel yet still acknowledge one another as a brother or sister in Christ. For example, both Arminians and Calvinists think the other is badly mistaken regarding his understanding of the relationship between God’s grace and our wills, but few in either group believe those in the other camp are heading for hell. Billy Graham does not believe in a “limited atonement” but few evangelicals would say he is not a Christian. Pentecostals think non-Pentecostals are missing out on God’s intended Second Blessing, and non-Pentecostals think Pentecostals are confused about how the Holy Spirit works—but again, rarely does either group accuse the other of not being Christian. These are intra-familial squabbles.

So are our debates with Roman Catholics about the gospel intra-familial or

inter-faith? Are the majority of Catholics putting their trust in Jesus Christ, knowing and clinging to the gospel, born again, growing disciples of Christ? Putting it bluntly: are Roman Catholics “Christians”?

Many evangelicals will answer, if pushed, “No, most Roman Catholics are not Christians. They do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They have never been born again. They do not *believe the gospel.*” Why this answer? Because many evangelicals were themselves once Roman Catholics. They were baptized into the Church, confirmed, attended Mass daily, and faithfully jumped through all the right hoops, yet did not “know” God personally. They had no idea that Jesus Christ’s death on the cross set them free from the penalty and power of sin. They never personally experienced the reality of existentially knowing that their sins were forgiven. They did not know it was possible to read the Bible for themselves, to pray on their own from their hearts, to sense that God the Holy Spirit actually resided inside them and was daily changing them to become more like Christ. They had had no faith—only duty and rote obedience to external rules.

When these former Catholics become converted, something like scales fell from their eyes. They “saw,” spiritually and experientially for the first time, that *their* sins were forgiven, and their awareness of Christ’s personal presence was enlivened. Moreover, the reality of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling them, changing them, and giving them joy and peace was for the first time palpable. Such a convert is often angry with the Roman Catholic Church:

How could I attend Mass for so many years and never hear the gospel?! I feel betrayed. I have lost so many years. I never understood before why evangelicals sang so vibrantly those hymns about their chains falling off and their hearts becoming free—but now I understand! But the Catholic Church actually *kept* me from seeing the gospel because she stressed the fruits, not the root, of faith. They told me all the things I needed to *do* ... without showing me what I first needed to *believe* about the gospel. Consequently I was actually trying to *save myself* for those many years, and I was engulfed in guilt and fear.

Yes, true faith always will lead to obedience; but when obedience is stressed without the prior faith, one becomes hardened, proud, legalistic and a law-keeper. The focus is on Law, not Grace, in such a system.

The outcry by many evangelicals, then, over ECT II (“The Gift of Salvation”) was understandable because it seemed to make too many assumptions about Catholic and evangelical beliefs regarding the gospel. It claims that we evangelicals and Catholics “have been able to express a common faith in Christ and so to acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters in Christ,” when in fact the jury is out whether in fact we *are* brothers and sisters in Christ.

What *is* the gospel, then, that all must believe? The gospel is the Good News that God sent Jesus Christ to die for sinners. Our sin has created a gulf between God and us, and we are helpless to make things right. Our sin has left us in bondage and we are unable to break free. Our sin has led us into rebellion, a clinched fist toward God, and the words, “Not thy will but mine be done” is our life’s motto (we say this dozens of time each day through the ways we attempt to live out a life of

autonomy and independence from God). The person who sees Jesus Christ with eyes of faith sees his sin for what it is—and he repents. He knows that his only hope for being made right—right with God, right with others, right in his own person (coming under New Management where God, not himself, is the Master)—is through casting himself upon Jesus Christ for mercy. Jesus Christ alone can save us because He alone is fully God and fully man, the one and only Mediator between holy God and sinful man.

The gospel, in a word, is Jesus Christ. One believes the gospel when one believes Jesus is the Christ who takes away the sin of the world—specifically, one's own sin—through his death and resurrection.

Do Roman Catholics believe the gospel? The correct answer is: some do and some do not. The Roman Catholic who does good works out of a response of faith in Christ, knowing that trusting someone also means obeying him, believes the gospel; whereas the Roman Catholic who does good works out of fear and guilt, somehow hoping that God will love him because of those good works, does not believe the gospel. The Roman Catholic who cannot set a time and day when he "asked Jesus into his heart" but has humbly been seeking to trust and obey Christ as long as he can remember, believes the gospel; whereas the Roman Catholic who assumes that he is made right with God because of being born and baptized into the Church, and who has no desire to trust and obey Christ throughout his life, does not believe the gospel. Any person who in any way thinks he has put God in his debt ("God is so lucky to have me on His side!") demonstrates that he does not believe the gospel—whether Catholic or evangelical.

Good evangelicals insist that the gospel's effects are past-perfect: "I have been saved." They revel in the finished work of Christ on the cross and love to rejoice in the victory, past tense, that God has won on their behalf. Good Catholics understand the gospel's call to a present tense, ongoing, process salvation: "I am being saved." They understand the importance of obedience that involves sacrifice and service. The evangelical who understands the gospel as only referring to past sins that need forgiveness and who only understands the righteousness that he needs to be an imputed one, does not understand the gospel—for true saving faith will, *must*, lead to good works. The Catholic who understands the gospel only as process, as commands for us to obey rather than (or prior to) promises to trust, does not understand the gospel.

I believe evangelicals have erred by making too strong a distinction—sometimes even a separation—between justification and sanctification. And I believe Roman Catholics have erred in the opposite way by so melding justification and sanctification that salvation is never seen as secure, definite or finished (everything is always "process").

Evangelicals need to help Roman Catholics see that the gospel is not just one of dozens of things that Christians believe and live out but the very centerpiece, that one Relationship out of which everything else flows. Evangelicals must be careful not to push some sub-cultural brand of gospel-centered Christianity on Catholics (for example, the Bible nowhere equates faith with "asking Christ into your heart"; the Bible nowhere says the sign of true conversion is being able to set a date of when one "became a Christian"; the Bible nowhere says it is wrong for followers of

Jesus to want to do good works—in fact, quite the contrary), and we should not assume that all Catholics are not believing the gospel. Nevertheless, it is right and important for us never to tire of insisting on the gospel’s non-negotiable importance.

Evangelicals also must firmly point out to Roman Catholics the folly of a creeping universalism that is often heard among their leaders. We are right to react to Peter Kreeft’s “ecumenical jihad” where he draws Muslims within the ecumenical circle. We are right to react to Richard John Neuhaus when he implies that Jews can be saved outside of faith in Christ the Messiah. We are right to react to any and all mention of “theism” as the crucial factor in the culture wars, insisting instead that building a “theism” without Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone is a wobbly edifice. Saint Paul was “not ashamed of the gospel” and neither should we be; he reminds us that Jesus Christ is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, and so He is; and he could boldly say, “For me to live is Christ”—and so should we!

### *Authority*

Imagine if somehow evangelicals and Catholics were able to agree that though we emphasize different elements and use different terminology, we are in general agreement as to the essence of just what the gospel is—that the majority of evangelicals could actually feel theologically comfortable with calling Roman Catholics, “Christians”. Even so, a huge divide would continue to separate us. For the key element that distinguishes us and that affects so many secondary issues is the issue of *authority*. All conservative Christians agree that God has authority

and that God has communicated His will authoritatively to us in Holy Scripture. The question is: what kind of authority has God given His Church—or churches—to interpret and teach these Scriptures, and perhaps go further than them? Before answering this question, two common misconceptions need to be addressed.

First, evangelicals are simply naive to think that by saying, “I submit to the Bible, not the Church,” all disputes have been settled. For the Bible must be interpreted. Imagine that a John Smith joined one of our evangelical churches. The word quickly got out that John was attempting to have sex with various women in the congregation. When confronted, John replied, “But the Bible doesn’t forbid this—in fact, it encourages it! I’ve read a new book that shows definitively that the Greek words for ‘fornication’ and ‘adultery’ really refer to one’s heart, not actions. And the way I read 1 Corinthians 13, the goal in all relationships is LOVE. Well, I truly love these women!” I have little doubt that most evangelicals would respond, “No, John, you’re wrong. That is in fact not what the Bible teaches.” But we would not leave it at that. We would expect, indeed encourage, our church leaders to discipline John. He would not be allowed to enjoy fellowship with the brethren unless he repented. We would not allow for any and all individualistic biblical interpretations to pass muster, and we would expect that our churches would deal swiftly with John’s sin—with authority.

Or take another example. Imagine you have attended an evangelical Church X for twenty years now and Pastor Jones has been your pastor all these years. You know Pastor Jones well. He led you to Christ, performed your marriage ceremony, and

counseled you over the years. You have deeply appreciated and grown spiritually from his weekly sermons. Then one day Pastor Jones said something in his sermon that sounded off base. It was not heretical but it did not sit right with you (he in fact told the congregation that the Lord had opened his eyes to see some things in Scripture that he had never quite seen before). You go home and you study the particular passage in question. It enters your mind that perhaps Pastor Jones has gone a bit off track here ... but then you remember his character, his great possession of biblical knowledge, and his consistency over the last twenty years as a solid preacher. And so you find yourself willing to trust his interpretation over yours. Though we evangelicals agree that our pastor can err and that we submit ultimately to the Bible and not to him and his human interpretations, nevertheless, *in practice*, the line is thin that divides his teaching and the Bible's teaching. Many evangelicals would be hard pressed to find anything they strongly disagreed with that is written by Theologian X (fill in the blank with your favorite biblical author). What is going on here? Answer: we are choosing to give a certain degree of authority to our pastor (or denomination). We do not sit with arms crossed in questioning suspicion every time our pastor speaks, but we listen humbly and expectantly to God's Word preached and expounded, largely trusting our pastor's interpretations. So we must be aware that we evangelicals, just like Roman Catholics, make subjective choices to accept and reject certain interpretations of Scripture.

The second point is this: It is not true that evangelicals have no notion or appreciation of *positional* authority. In reaction to "apostolic succession," the notion that

authoritative leadership has been passed down through the ages from bishop to bishop such that Pope John Paul II should be listened to and (when speaking *ex cathedra*) obeyed *due to his position* as the vicar of Christ on earth, evangelicals have often thought that they must run headlong in the opposite direction, insisting that one's authority is only valid to the degree that his authority is under Scripture. And yet Scripture does tell us to submit to elders as those who have been given Christ's charge to care for the sheep. There is a certain "positional" authority that a husband has in his marriage and that parents have over their children. If a mother tells her son to stay out of the cookie jar, and he retorts, "Show me a Bible verse that tells me that cookies are bad for me," most evangelicals would agree that he should obey his mother *because* she is his mother. So it is not true that evangelicals must object to Roman Catholics' notion of a positional authority *per se*.

But with these two caveats aside, for evangelicals the key point is that all human authorities, whether positional or earned, and all traditions and communions, whether Baptist, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, must be in submission to Holy Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church, evangelicals would insist, does not have the authority from God to go beyond Scripture in declaring what is true and what must be believed and obeyed where the Bible is silent. This includes most of the Marian doctrines, indulgences, praying for or to the dead, penance, the Seven Sacraments, marriage annulments, purgatory, and so on. Was Mary bodily assumed up to heaven? It is possible, but we do not know: for God has not revealed it to us. Do saints in heaven hear us when we pray to them? It is pos-

sible, but we do not know: for nowhere in Holy Scripture has God spoken of this.

This does not mean that there is no truth outside of what has been revealed in Scripture, but it does mean that the truth revealed by God in Scripture sits in judgment and has priority over all perceived or humanly derived truths. For example, Scripture teaches that all sex outside of marriage is sinful, and many Christians derive from the biblical truths about sexuality that all birth control, even within marriage, is also sinful. Evangelicals will say that a Christian must believe the first truth and is free to debate the second one. One's conscience is to submit to God's Word and not to man's words. There inevitably must be development of doctrine, but it must be a development that clearly and consciously seeks to submit itself to Holy Scripture. Evangelicals can and should encourage Catholics to study and know the Bible and we must always be open to new (often "new" because historic and thus largely forgotten today) interpretations. Out of loyalty to our Lord, however, we must never give secondary sources the same weight that we give to God's Word itself.

Has God in fact given the Roman Catholic Church His authority to interpret and teach the Holy Scriptures in an infallible way? If so, many of the other concerns evangelicals have with Roman Catholicism would be dissolved. But evangelicals do not believe that Rome has been given this authority by God, which is a crucial disagreement.

Evangelicals are happily rediscovering the importance of the Church and acknowledging the wrong-headedness of individualism. We are rightly valuing community, tradition, and the important role that human authorities should have

in an ordered Church and in an ordered universe. We therefore have a growing range of shared convictions and practices with Roman Catholics. But until the Roman Catholic Church puts herself under Holy Scripture and holds more loosely areas where God has not authoritatively spoken, the chasm between evangelicals and Catholics will necessarily remain large.

### **The Way Forward**

Surely the first thing to say here is this: Evangelicals must *desire* unity with all Christians. We must long for it, pray for it, and grieve over the current lack of it. The Reformation was a tragic necessity—but woe to the evangelical who emphasizes "necessity" more than "tragic." Our Lord's longest, most passionate recorded prayer in the Bible is found in John 17, and here we find him crying out to God for unity among his people. Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians that "if there is any encouragement in Christ, incentive of love, participation in the Spirit, or affection and sympathy, they should strive after being of the same mind, having the same love and being in full accord" (Phil 2:1-2). Under the Old Covenant one of the worst curses on God's people Israel was to be scattered and divided. We must take no hidden, sadistic delight in friction with other Christians and we must strive to be peacemakers. When one part of the Body hurts, the whole Body hurts.

Second, grassroots efforts of ecumenism should occur in every city across our nation. Study groups, Bible studies, prayer meetings, social service projects, etc.—we must look for ways to be in the presence of Roman Catholics. Many stereotypes and caricatures dissipate when faced with a real flesh-and-blood person

from the other side of an argument (and of course some stereotypes will only be underlined since many of our differences are real).

I have personally found the common study of C. S. Lewis's writings to be a surprising, semi-unifying salve. Lewis helps different traditions see truths that have been hidden, and he exposes blindspots. When discussing our differences directly, I have found it helpfully disarming to begin a conversation with, "Please share one positive aspect of the other's perspective," and then ask, "What important truth in your own tradition are you wanting to preserve, and do you fear that the other tradition, if left unchecked, will weaken it?"

A third suggestion: Rome should call a Vatican III specifically to readdress the issues of the Reformation. (Perhaps this could occur in 2017, exactly five hundred years after Luther's 95 Theses!) The two themes of *gospel* and *authority* could be addressed, and leading evangelical theologians could be brought in to share concerns. The Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is a good start here, showing that real dialogue and some convergence is actually possible. Were Rome to make significant changes here, evangelicals would be hard pressed to refrain from reuniting.

Fourth, evangelicals must rediscover our Protestant heritage. Much of what I wrote above under the heading, "Deepening Appreciation" is not so much a sign that Roman Catholicism is the solution but that evangelicals have strayed widely from their Reformation roots. Historic Protestantism has always valued the social ramifications of the gospel, reason, tradition, and historical orthodoxy. However, in going back to our roots we must

also seek the Holy Spirit's help to open our eyes to our own Protestant weaknesses and blindspots. Maybe the Lord will use some grassroots "going back to our roots" initiatives by both evangelicals and Catholics to help both groups see, with five hundred years of hindsight, ways in which we may be closer to one another doctrinally than we ever imagined. We must go back not to ossify the past, but to see afresh ways in which the past was and was not faithful to the Scriptures.

May evangelicals and Catholics move forward together where our consciences will allow, and where we disagree, may we seek to persuade one another of the truth with humility and teachable hearts. There are thousands of American Roman Catholics who have been baptized and who go to Mass daily but who are not believing the gospel; and there are thousands of American evangelicals who have "asked Jesus into their hearts" but who are not believing the gospel. There is much work to be done—and my conviction is that much of this work can be done together.

May God have mercy on us all.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Disagreements* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).