

## Why Do They Sign?

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:14–17; Galatians 1:6–9; Galatians 2:16–21

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In the following article from 2010, John MacArthur reexamined the 1994 document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” or ECT. John referred to this article in his morning sermon on Sunday, 8/20/17, citing ECT as a prime example of the false teaching and doctrinal confusion that can “bewitch” believers (cf. Galatians 3:1). We think you’ll find the article a helpful refresher.

*[One of the questions we posed for discussion on the “Ecumenical Jihad” post was, “What drives evangelical leaders to compromise traditionally evangelical priorities in the quest for some form of unity?” John has provided some excellent insight into that question based on his personal interaction with some of the key signatories of the 1994 document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” (ECT).*

*Before you read what John said about that, you might want to reacquaint yourself with [his comments](#) about the most recent form of ecumenical cobelligerency—a document called “The Manhattan Declaration.” Admittedly, there are differences between ECT and “The Manhattan Declaration”—e.g., ECT is intentionally doctrinal; the Manhattan document is not. But for those of you old enough to have played music on vinyl, this ecumenical issue is going to sound like a broken record. Read on. —GTU Staff]*

March 29, 1994, saw a development that some have touted as the most significant event in Protestant-Catholic relations since the dawn of the Reformation. A document titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” was published with a list of more than thirty signatories—including well-known evangelicals Pat Robertson, J. I. Packer, Os Guinness, and Bill Bright. They were joined by leading Catholics such as John Cardinal O’Connor, Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla, and Catholic scholar Peter Kreeft.

The twenty-five-page document was drafted by a team of fifteen participants led by Richard John Neuhaus and Charles Colson. Neuhaus (1936-2009) was is a former Lutheran minister who converted to Catholicism in 1990, and had since been ordained to the priesthood. Like Colson still is, he was an influential author and speaker.

The document errs from the very beginning. The section that follows has the heading “We Affirm Together,” which includes this:

All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have not chosen one another, just as we have not chosen Christ. He has chosen us, and he has chosen us to be his together (John 15). However imperfect our communion with one another, we recognize that there is but one church of Christ. There is one church because there is one Christ and the Church is his body. However difficult the way, we recognize that we are called by God to a fuller realization of our unity in the body of Christ

(5).

Similar declarations of unity—and appeals for more visible manifestations of unity—are included in every section of the document.

ECT goes on to affirm that Roman Catholics and Protestants alike are “justified by grace through faith because of Christ” (5). Although that statement has been celebrated as a remarkable concession on the Catholic participants’ part, it actually says nothing that has not been affirmed by the Catholic Church since the time of the Reformation. The real issue under debate between Roman Catholicism and historic evangelicalism—justification by faith *alone*—is carefully avoided throughout “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.”

All that is bad enough, but the most troubling feature of the ECT document is this unthinkable prohibition: evangelicals are not supposed to proselytize active Roman Catholics (22-23). To do so makes one guilty of “sheep stealing” (22). Signers of the document believe that such “attempt[s] to win ‘converts’ from one another’s folds ... undermine the Christian Mission” (20). Besides, proselytizing one another is deemed utterly unnecessary, because “we as Evangelicals and Catholics affirm that opportunity and means for growth in Christian discipleship are available in our several communities” (22).

Much of the controversy regarding “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” stems from this statement: “In view of the large number of non-Christians in the world and the enormous challenge of our common evangelistic task, it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among active adherents of another Christian community” (22–23).

People who believe they are “born again” because they were baptized Catholic “must be given full freedom and respect” to remain Catholic (24). That is, they should not be approached by evangelicals and told that no amount of sacraments or good works can make them acceptable to God.

Having declined to address the profound difference between the evangelical message of justification by faith *alone* and the Roman Catholic gospel of faith plus works, the document here simply treats that difference as an optional matter of preference.

It is not. Catholicism places undue stress on human works. Catholic doctrine denies that God “justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5) without first *making* them godly. Good works therefore become the ground of justification. And Scripture says that relegates people to an eternal reward that is reckoned not of grace, but of debt (Romans 4:4). As thousands of former Catholics will testify, Roman Catholic doctrine and liturgy obscure the essential truth that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our own works (Ephesians 2:8–9). It has trapped millions of Catholics in a system of superstition and religious ritual that insulates them from the glorious liberty of the true gospel of Christ.

Adding works to faith as the grounds of justification is precisely the teaching Paul condemned as “a different gospel” (see 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6). It nullifies the grace of God. If meritorious righteousness can be earned through the sacraments, “then Christ died needlessly” (Galatians 2:21). “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28).

Furthermore, justification by faith *plus* works was exactly the error that condemned Israel: “Pursuing a law of righteousness, [they] did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works” (Romans 9:31–32). “For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3). Throughout Scripture we are taught that “a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus ... since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Galatians 2:16).

Yet ignoring the gravity of this defect in the Roman Catholic system, evangelical signers of the document in effect pledge that none of their evangelistic work will ever be aimed at guiding Catholic converts out of Roman Catholicism—with its daily sacrifices, meritorious sacraments, confessional booths, rosary beads, fear of purgatory, and prayers to Mary and the saints. The document insists that “opportunity and means for growth in Christian discipleship are available” in the Catholic Church (22). Therefore winning a Catholic to the evangelical faith is nothing but “sheep stealing”—a sin against the body of Christ.

Having declared all active Catholics “brothers and sisters in Christ,” and having given *de facto* approval to baptismal regeneration and justification by faith plus works, the accord has no choice but to pronounce Catholic Church members off-limits for evangelism.

So, here’s the million dollar question: Why would knowledgeable evangelicals sign this accord?

I wrote to the men I know personally who signed the accord and asked them to explain their position. Most responded with very gracious letters. Virtually all who replied explained that their signatures on the document do not necessarily indicate *unqualified* support, and they admitted they have concerns about the document. Most said they signed anyway because they wanted to express support for evangelical-Catholic alliances against social and moral ills. Some said they hoped the document would open the door for more dialogue on the pivotal doctrinal issues.

I must confess that I find all such explanations unsatisfying, because both the public perception of the accord and the language of the document itself send the signal that evangelicals now accept Roman Catholicism as authentic Christianity. That grants an undeserved legitimacy to Roman Catholic doctrine.

Moreover, the document confuses Christendom with the true church. It makes the unwarranted and unbiblical assumption that every breach of unity between professing Christians wounds the body of Christ and violates the unity Christ prayed for. The reality is that the true body of Christ is far less inclusive than the document implies. The document wants to include “many other Christians, notably the Eastern Orthodox and those Protestants not commonly identified as Evangelical.” Who could this latter group include besides theological liberals? Yet Eastern Orthodoxy and most Protestant liberals would side with Rome in rejecting the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Having abandoned the true faith for “another gospel,” these groups are not entitled to be embraced as members of Christ’s body (Galatians 1:9).

The evangelical signers of the document—particularly those who have studied Reformation theology—surely are aware that official Roman Catholic doctrine is antithetical to the simple gospel

of grace. So why would theologically-informed evangelical leaders sign a document like this? Here is what some of them say:

One writes,

This document is not about theology or doctrine. From the outset we admit that there are doctrinal differences that are irreconcilable and we specifically identify many of these. This document is about religious liberty (i.e., the right of all Christians to share their faith without interference from church or state), evangelism and missions (e.g., not only the right but the responsibility under the Great Commission of all Christians to share Christ with all nations and all people), and the need all Christians have to cooperate, without compromise, in addressing critical moral and social issues, such as abortion, pornography, violence, racism, and other such issues.

In our battle for that which is good and godly, we must stand with those who will stand at all. [Most of these quotations from the document's signatories are taken from personal letters. I am quoting their comments anonymously.]

Another signer wrote, "Why did I sign the recent statement 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium'? I did so because the document—though by no means perfect—presents an unusually strong combination of basic Christian truth and timely Christian response to the modern world."

Another suggested, "To non-Christians and the non-believing world who know nothing about Christianity and who may think Protestants and Catholics worship a different God, this affirmation should be a great testimony to the Lordship of Christ and the truth of His Word."

And one well-respected evangelical leader wrote,

It was and is in harmony with the two-pronged approach to Rome that I have pursued for three decades: maximizing fellowship, cooperation, and cobelligerence with Roman Catholics on the ground, at grass roots level, while maintaining the familiar polemic against the Roman church and system as such. The document is not official, it is ad hoc and informal, and is designed to lead to honest cobelligerence against sin and evil in evangelism and community concerns.

Here are some other reasons evangelical signers give to justify their support for the document. All of these are taken verbatim either from letters these men wrote or papers they have circulated:

- I think the document is correct in saying that the scandal of conflict between Christians often has overwhelmed the scandal of the cross.
- I also thought the document's stand for life (especially in protest against abortion) and against the "relativism, anti-intellectualism, and nihilism" that are rampant today are exactly the stands that all Christians should be taking.
- The document is clear about what it is not trying to do. It is not put forth as an anticipation of church union, does not hide the fact that real differences continue to divide Catholics and evangelicals, and does not hide the fact that conditions outside North America are often different from those here.

- We have differences, but on the ancient creeds and the core beliefs of Christianity we stand together. Christianity is besieged on all sides—by a militant nation of Islam, by pantheists who have invaded many areas of life through the New Age Movement, and by aggressive secularism of Western life.
- If we are to reverse the surging tides of apostasy in Western culture and resist the advancing forces of secularism, then it is absolutely vital that those of us who share conservative, biblically-based views stand together, that we make common cause. Regardless of one's Christian tradition or even past prejudices, should we not affirm John Paul II and Mother Teresa for their uncompromising and stirring defense of the sanctity of human life?
- [The document states,] "All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ." Isn't "accepting Christ as Lord and Savior" what it means to be saved?
- The issue addressed is not theology. The primary issues addressed are missions, evangelism, societal concerns, and religious liberty.
- I believe the document represents the ultimate victory of the Reformation!

There, in the words of the evangelical signers themselves, is as complete a list of their arguments as I can assemble. To those must be added, of course, the arguments contained in the document itself. But all those reasons ring hollow in view of everything the agreement surrenders.

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