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Evangelicals and Catholics Together

Scripture: Isaiah 28:9-13; Romans 3:28; Romans 4:5; Romans 9:31-32; Romans 10:3; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Corinthians 6:14-17; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6-9; Galatians 2:16-21; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 10:10-12

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A recent document entitled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” signed by a number of prominent evangelicals, has neglected the wide doctrinal breach that separates evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism. It declares the unity of the two participating groups, emphasizes their common faith, allows for doctrinal differences, but states that the two nevertheless have a common mission. A fatal flaw in the document is its assumption that a common mission is possible in spite of the doctrinal differences. The alleged common mission is in effect a contradiction of the truths treasured among evangelicals. Reasons given by evangelical signers of the agreement are hollow and unconvincing. The statement in effect reverses what the Protestant Reformation advocated regarding sola Scriptura and sola fide. The position of the Reformers regarding justification, which was quite biblical, was pronounced as anathema by the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in 1547. Other essential biblical doctrines have been denied by Roman Catholic pronouncements, even recent ones. Unity with Roman Catholicism is not a worthy goal if it means sacrificing the truth.

March 29, 1994 saw a development that some have touted as the most significant development 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.

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

Colson explained that “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” resulted from a series of meetings sponsored by Neuhaus a few years ago in New York. The original purpose of the meetings was to discuss tensions in Latin America between Protestant missionaries and Catholic officials. “In some countries the Catholic Church was using political power to suppress Protestant evangelistic efforts; Protestant missionaries were being persecuted for their faith,” Colson said. “On the other side, some evangelicals were promoting the gospel by calling the Catholic Church the ‘whore of Babylon;’ the Pope, the ‘antichrist,’ and the like.” [2](#)

Colson says he and others at the meetings “were moved by the words of our Lord, calling us to be one with one another as He is one with us and with the Father, in order that the world might know, as Jesus prayed, that ‘Thou didst send me.’” Colson added, “We were agreed that the Scripture makes

the unity of true Christians an essential—a prerequisite for Christian evangelism.” [3](#)

The lengthy statement of accord that resulted has been praised in both the secular and Christian press as a landmark ecumenical agreement. Especially notable is the fact that the Catholics who signed are not from the liberal wing of Catholicism. Signatories on both sides are conservatives, many of whom are active in the pro-life movement and other right-wing political causes. Historically, evangelicals and conservative Catholics have opposed ecumenical efforts.

An article in *Christianity Today* praised the accord for bringing conservatives into the ecumenical movement: “For too long, ecumenism has been left to Left-leaning Catholics and mainline Protestants. For that reason alone, evangelicals should applaud this effort and rejoice in the progress it represents.” [4](#)

But does this new accord really represent progress, or are the essentials of the gospel being relegated to secondary status? Is the spirit of the Reformation quite dead? Should we now rejoice to see conservative evangelicals pursuing ecumenical union with Roman Catholicism?

The list of Protestant signatories to the document is certainly impressive. Some of these are men who have given their lives to proclaiming and defending Reformation theology. J. I. Packer’s work is well known through his many valuable books. His book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, in print for several decades, has introduced multiplied thousands to the Reformed emphasis on divine sovereignty. He has capably defended the key Reformation doctrine of justification by faith in several of his books. His book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* is an able defense of the authority of Scripture. Few in our generation have been more effective advocates of Reformation theology than Packer.

Charles Colson is one of evangelicalism’s most capable writers. Many of the recurring motifs in his writings over the years sound very much like echoes of Reformation themes—the sovereignty of God, the lordship of Christ, and the authority of Scripture. In fact, several of the teachers whom Colson himself names as his mentors are men whose ministries are closely aligned with the ideals and objectives of the Protestant Reformation.

Both of these men surely understand the gulf that divides Roman Catholicism from the evangelical faith. It is not a philosophical or political difference, but a theological one. And it is not a matter of trivia. The key difference between evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism is a difference over the *gospel*. The issues that separated the Reformers from the Roman Catholic Church go to the heart of what evangelicals believe about salvation.

Many people assume that with signatures from men of this stature on it, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” must be a trustworthy document, not a compromise of Reformation distinctives. But is that a safe assumption to make?

“Evangelicals and Catholics Together” is an object lesson on the importance of biblical discernment. But it is much, much more than that. As the pressure mounts for evangelicals to succeed in the political realm and fight for cultural morality, they capitulate to the new ecumenism. This may become one of the most hotly contested issues of the decade. The future of evangelicalism may hang in the balance.

What Does the Document Say?

“Evangelicals and Catholics Together” is a lengthy document. Unfortunately, it is impossible to reproduce the entire text here. But here are some of the highlights:

A Declaration of Unity

The document begins with this: “We are Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics who have been led through prayer, study, and discussion to common convictions about Christian faith and mission. This statement cannot speak officially for our communities. It does intend to speak responsibly from our communities and to our communities.” [5](#)

Later in the Introduction, the document states, “As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission” (2).

“Visible unity” is the stated goal (2). The document quotes John 17:21, where the Lord Jesus prayed “that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.” Then this follows: “We together, Evangelicals and Catholics, confess our sins against the unity that Christ intends for all his disciples” (2).

At this point the document’s drafters are very explicit about who they believe is included in Christ’s prayer for unity: “The one Christ and one mission includes many other Christians, notably the Eastern Orthodox and those Protestants not commonly identified as Evangelical. All Christians are encompassed in the prayer, ‘May they all be one’” (2).

The section that follows has the heading “We Affirm Together.” It 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.

A Statement of Common Faith

The document highlights areas of common faith between Catholics and evangelicals. It affirms the lordship of Christ as “the first and final affirmation that Christians make about all of reality” (5). It

identifies Christ as “the One sent by God to be Lord and Savior of all” (5). It declares that the Scriptures are divinely inspired and infallible (6). And it affirms the Apostles’ Creed “as an accurate statement of Scriptural truth” (6). The Apostles’ Creed is reproduced in its entirety as a part of the document.

The pact also includes this statement about salvation:

We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ. Living faith is active in love that is nothing less than the love of Christ, for we together say with Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2) (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, as will be shown below. The real issue under debate between Roman Catholicism and historic evangelicalism—justification by faith *alone*—is carefully avoided throughout “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.”

A Statement of Doctrinal Differences

Those who drafted the accord did acknowledge other important areas of doctrinal difference between Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism. Further, they correctly observed that real unity cannot be achieved merely by glossing over Catholic-evangelical differences. In fact, near the end of the Introduction, they state, “We reject any appearance of harmony that is purchased at the price of truth” (4).

In a section titled “We Search Together,” they said, “We do not presume to suggest that we can resolve the deep and long-standing differences between Evangelicals and Catholics. Indeed these differences may never be resolved short of the Kingdom Come” (9).

How are differences to be addressed? They “must be tested in disciplined and sustained conversation. In this connection we warmly commend and encourage the formal theological dialogues of recent years between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals” (9).

The document continues,

We note some of the differences and disagreements that must be addressed more fully and candidly in order to strengthen between us a relationship of trust in obedience to truth. Among points of difference in doctrine, worship, practice, and piety that are frequently thought to divide us are these:

- The church as an integral part of the Gospel, or the church as a communal consequence of the Gospel.
- The church as visible communion or invisible fellowship of true believers.
- The sole authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) or Scripture as authoritatively interpreted in the church.

- The “soul freedom” of the individual Christian or the Magisterium (teaching authority) of the community.
- The church as local congregation or universal communion.
- Ministry ordered in apostolic succession or the priesthood of all believers.
- The Lord’s Supper as eucharistic sacrifice or memorial meal.
- Remembrance of Mary and the saints or devotion to Mary and the saints.
- Baptism as sacrament of regeneration or testimony to regeneration.

This account of differences is by no means complete (9–10).

The document even acknowledges the solemn importance of many Catholic-evangelical differences.

The signers expressly confess that some of the differences are so profound that they impinge on the Gospel itself:

On these questions, and other questions implied by them, Evangelicals hold that the Catholic Church has gone beyond Scripture, adding teachings and practices that detract from or compromise the Gospel of God’s saving grace in Christ. Catholics, in turn, hold that such teachings and practices are grounded in Scripture and belong to the fullness of God’s revelation. Their rejection, Catholics say, results in a truncated and reduced understanding of the Christian reality (10–11).

A Mandate for Common Mission

But the theme that runs like a thread through “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” is identified by the document’s subtitle: “The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.” The primary motivation behind the accord is the desire to eradicate differences that supposedly “obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission” (2). How this can be done without *resolving* doctrinal matters that affect the Gospel is not explained.

But the gospel is clearly *not* the driving concern of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” The “one mission” envisioned by the accord places temporal goals alongside—and in effect ahead of—eternal ones. Much of the document focuses on “the right ordering of society” (12). The longest section, “We Contend Together,” states that “politics, law, and culture must be secured by moral truth” (12). The mandate they assume is cultural and temporal, not spiritual and eternal.

Therefore the catalog of issues which the document’s signers “contend together” for is made up of religious freedom, right-to-life issues, moral education, parental choice in education, anti-obscenity laws, human equality, a free-market economy, esteem for Western culture, pro-family legislation, and a responsible foreign policy.

Another section, “We Witness Together,” deals with evangelism. No attempt is made to outline the *content* of the Gospel message. Indeed, since the document already lists key elements of the Gospel

as points of disagreement, consensus on this would seem utterly impossible. Nevertheless, as if oblivious to the insurmountable difficulty this poses, the document unequivocally calls for evangelicals and Catholics to demonstrate “the evidence of love” toward one another that “is an integral part of [our] Christian witness” (20).

Beyond that, it gives no positive guidelines for *how* Catholics and evangelicals can “witness together.” Instead, the primary concern of this entire section on evangelism is to “condemn the practice of recruiting people from another community for the purposes of denominational or institutional aggrandizement” (22).

The document states unequivocally that our witness is *not* toward people already in the “Christian community.” That is, evangelicals are not supposed to proselytize active Roman Catholics (22–23). This is labeled “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).

The Fatal Flaw

But it is another statement in the section “We Witness Together” that betrays the document’s fundamental weakness:

There are, then, differences between us that cannot be resolved here. But on this we are resolved: All authentic witness must be aimed at conversion to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Those converted—whether understood as having received the new birth for the first time or as *having experienced the reawakening of the new birth originally bestowed in the sacrament of baptism*—must be given full freedom and respect as they discern and decide the community in which they will live their new life in Christ (24, emphasis added).

The document acknowledges “a major difference in our understanding of the relationship between baptism and the new birth in Christ. For Catholics, all who are validly baptized are born again and are truly, however imperfectly, in communion with Christ” (23). But how “major” is this difference? Signers of the accord evidently did not feel it was anything fundamental. “*There are,*” after all, “*different ways of being Christian*” (22, emphasis added). The temporal, cultural, political issues are so compelling that the Gospel must be ameliorated to whatever degree necessary to achieve a superficial “Christian” morality.

So people who believe they are “born again” because they were baptized Catholic “must be given full freedom and respect” to remain Catholic. 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 (v. 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 ground of justification is precisely the teaching Paul condemned as “a different gospel” (cf. 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 teaches 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 shall no flesh 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.

A Step in the Right Direction?

Signers of the document nonetheless hailed what they had done “as historic.” Some applauded it as a major step toward healing the breach caused by the Reformation. Catholic signatories said the document had even circulated inside the Vatican, where it was received with great enthusiasm. *Christianity Today* ran an editorial welcoming the new ecumenism as a reflection of the changing pattern of American church life. Two major agency heads from the Southern Baptist Convention were signatories to the document. One of them wrote me to say this accord fulfills the whole intent of

the Reformation!

But not all evangelicals responded so warmly. Many see the document as confusing, misleading. Some have said it sells out the Gospel. Evangelicals who are former Catholics have called the accord a betrayal. Missionaries taking the Gospel to predominantly Roman Catholic nations read it as an attack on their ministries. Evangelicals in Latin America fear that the pact will be used as a weapon against them.

Even some Catholics have taken exception. Christians United for Reformation (CURE) featured on their weekly radio broadcast a dialogue with a leading Catholic apologist who agreed with CURE's assessment: the document muddles and simply sweeps aside the important doctrinal differences that prompted the Reformation. CURE scrambled to produce an alternative document that would affirm Catholic-evangelical cobelligerence on moral and political issues without validating Roman Catholicism as authentic Christianity.

I am convinced that "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" is a step in exactly the *wrong* direction. It contradicts the very truths it professes to stand for. It expresses a wish for unity but threatens to split the evangelical community. It claims to reject the appearance of harmony purchased at the price of truth, but it treats precious truths thousands have died for as if they were of negligible importance. It calls for the removal of tensions that supposedly hinder the testimony of the Gospel, then renders the Gospel moot by suggesting that perhaps "the sacrament of baptism" is efficacious for spiritual regeneration. It condemns moral relativism and nihilism, yet it attacks the very foundation of absolute truth by implying that all forms of "Christianity" are equally valid. It calls for a clearer witness, but it denigrates evangelism among active Catholics as "sheep stealing"—while unduly elevating the importance of social and political issues. It is, frankly, an assault *against* evangelism. It suggests that "the right ordering of society" takes precedence over discerning between true Christianity and "a different gospel." It sets aside personal salvation in favor of national morality. It is nothing but the old ecumenism with moral conservatism rather than radical politics as its real agenda.

In an age already prone to reckless faith and lacking in biblical discernment, this accord seems fraught with potential mischief. It blurs doctrinal distinctives and therefore inflames the very worst tendencies of modern religion. It falls lock-step into line with our culture's minimalist approach to truth issues. Far from signaling "progress," it may mark the low point of post-Reformation evangelicalism.

That may seem like a harsh judgment of a document endorsed by so many stellar evangelicals. But quite honestly, one of the most distressing aspects of "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" is that men of such caliber would lend their support to an effort that camouflages the lethal errors of the Roman Catholic system. Having studied both the document and the different rationales for signing given by various signatories, I am convinced that no matter how noble the motives, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" is a grave mistake, and it poses profound dangers for the future of evangelicalism.

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 in spite of concerns 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 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). [6](#)

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. [7](#)

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 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 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, it 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.

What Is Compromised by the Agreement?

Notice that a common theme that runs through the signers' arguments is the protest that "this document is not about doctrine." After all, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" explicitly disavows any intent to seek resolution of any doctrinal differences (24). All those who signed point to the document's long list of doctrinal differences as proof that no crucial doctrine was compromised.

But the incredible naivete of that perspective is unworthy of any of the men who attached their signatures to this document. Far from safeguarding evangelical distinctives, the document relegated them all to the status of non-essentials. By expressly stating, "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ," the document suggests that none of the differences between Catholics and evangelicals involve any doctrines of eternal significance.

Yet that was the whole point of the Reformation. Rome viewed the Reformers as apostates and excommunicated them. The Reformers became convinced that Rome's deviation from biblical doctrine was so serious that the Papal system represented false Christianity. Both sides understood that the doctrines at stake were fundamental. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," while acknowledging that *all* those doctrinal differences still exist, simply assumes without discussion that none of them makes the difference between authentic Christianity and "a different gospel." That assumption itself is a monumental doctrinal shift—abandoning more than four hundred years of evangelical consensus. So it is disingenuous to suggest that the document "is not about doctrine."

In fact, one might argue that the document is *against* doctrine. By downplaying or denying the importance of crucial doctrinal distinctions, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" amounts to a virtual assault against discernment. The sort of Christianity it proposes—broad fellowship based on the barest possible confession of faith—will provide a hothouse environment for reckless faith.

The *Christianity Today* editorial I mentioned earlier includes this welcome caveat: "Lest anyone be carried away by the ecumenical euphoria of the moment, it needs to be stated clearly that the Reformation was not a mistake." But quite unaccountably, the editorial also assures readers that the accord as it stands sufficiently safeguards the essential doctrines of the Reformation: "Both the formal and material principles of the Reformation—that is, the infallibility of Holy Scripture and justification by faith—are duly affirmed in this statement." [8](#)

That language may be unfamiliar to some readers, but "the formal principle" and "the material principle" are terms most students of Reformation doctrine will immediately recognize. One excellent textbook on Reformation doctrine says this: "Historians have frequently referred to the doctrine of *sola scriptura* as the *formal* principle of the Reformation, as compared to the *material* principle of *sola fide*." [9](#) The *formal* principle has to do with the form, or the essence, of the theological debate between Rome and the Reformers: the sufficiency of the Scriptures alone (*sola Scriptura*). The *material* principle defined the matter in question: whether sinners are justified by faith alone (*sola fide*) or by faith plus works.

The truth is, *Christianity Today's* endorsement notwithstanding, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" utterly compromises both the formal and the material principles of the Reformation.

Sola Scriptura— the Formal Principle

Notice that the *Christianity Today* editorial identifies the formal principle of the Reformation as “the infallibility of Holy Scripture.” But the actual issue under debate in the Reformation was the *sufficiency*, not the *infallibility*, of Scripture. From the beginning of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants have agreed on the questions of biblical inspiration and infallibility. Even in Luther’s day, church officials “were in perfect agreement with him” on biblical infallibility. [10](#) What the papists objected to was Luther’s doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. In Luther’s own words, *sola Scriptura* means that “what is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed.” [11](#)

Catholicism flatly rejects that principle, adding a host of traditions and Church teachings and declaring them binding on all true believers—with the threat of eternal damnation to those who hold contradictory opinions. In Roman Catholicism, “the Word of God” encompasses not only the Bible, but also the Apocrypha, the Magisterium (the Church’s authority to teach and interpret divine truth), the Pope’s *ex cathedra* pronouncements, and an indefinite body of church tradition, some formalized in canon law and some not yet committed to writing. Whereas evangelical Protestants believe the Bible is the ultimate test of all truth, Roman Catholics believe *the Church* determines what is true and what is not. In effect, this makes the Church a higher authority than Scripture.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council affirm that “it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the [Catholic] Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed,” but “sacred tradition [transmits] in its full purity God’s word which was entrusted to the apostles.” [12](#) “Therefore both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence.” [13](#)

How does “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” address the issue of biblical authority? As *Christianity Today* pointed out, the document expressly affirms “that Christians are to teach and live in obedience to the divinely inspired Scriptures, which are the infallible Word of God” (6). But the document lists the question of the Bible’s *sufficiency* as one of the disputed issues: “The sole authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) or Scripture as authoritatively interpreted in the church” (10).

The manner of framing that statement implies that the difference between evangelicals and Catholics has to do with the question of who is authorized to interpret Scripture. It implies that evangelicals allow for individuals to interpret the Bible according to their personal preferences while Catholics insist on following the hierarchy of Church authority. But that is a gross misstatement of the issue.

Evangelicals certainly believe in interpreting Scripture correctly. That is why they have creeds and doctrinal statements. But evangelicals believe that creeds, decisions of church councils, all doctrine, and even the church itself *must be judged by Scripture*—not vice versa. Scripture is to be interpreted accurately in its context by comparing it to Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:13; Isaiah 28:9–13)—certainly not according to anyone’s personal whims. Scripture itself is thus the *sole binding rule of faith and practice* for all Christians. Protestant creeds and doctrinal statements simply express the churches’ collective understanding of the proper interpretation of Scripture. In no sense do the creeds or pronouncements of the churches constitute an authority equal to or higher than Scripture. Scripture always takes priority over the church in the rank of authority.

Catholics, on the other hand, believe the infallible touchstone of truth is the Church itself. The Church not only infallibly determines the proper interpretation of Scripture, but also *supplements* Scripture with additional traditions and teachings. That combination of Church tradition plus the Church’s

interpretation of Scripture is what constitutes the binding rule of faith and practice for Catholics. *De facto*, the Church sets herself *above* Holy Scripture in rank of authority.

Therefore the real point of disagreement between evangelicals and Catholics regarding *sola Scriptura* is not the question of *who* should interpret Scripture but whether Scripture alone is a sufficient rule of faith and practice.

“Evangelicals and Catholics Together” not only misrepresents *sola Scriptura*, but it also consigns the whole issue to the status of secondary, non-essential point of disagreement. In that regard, it represents a major victory for Rome and a sorry defeat for the Reformation.

Sola Fide— *The Material Principle*

The other great plank in the Reformers’ platform—the material principle—was justification by faith alone. *Christianity Today’s* contention that *sola fide* was “duly affirmed in this statement” is mystifying. In the entire twenty-five-page document, not one reference to *sola fide* appears anywhere! Yet this is what Martin Luther called “the article of the standing or falling church.” In other words, Luther believed—and the rest of the Reformers were of one accord on this—that the test of authentic Christianity is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Rome disagreed, declared the doctrine a damnable heresy, and pronounced a series of anathemas against anyone who dared to side with the Reformers.

It is surely significant that in “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” the issue of justification—the doctrine that launched the Reformation—is not even mentioned in the list of points of disagreement! Are the drafters of the document satisfied that evangelicals and Catholics now agree on this issue? Indeed, where justification is mentioned, it is given as a point of *agreement*. “We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ” (5).

What is wrong with that? many evangelicals will ask. So what if it leaves out the disputed word *alone*? After all, the phrase “justification by grace through faith” is certainly biblical as far as it goes. It may not be a full discourse on the doctrine of justification, but is it not really adequate? Does it not seem like theological nitpicking to insist on technical precision in an informal statement like this?

But it is *not* nitpicking to fault this statement. For five hundred years the question of whether people are justified by faith *alone* has been the main point of theological dispute between Catholics and evangelicals. Both sides have taken rather clearly defined positions on the issue. Any document that purports to bring Catholicism and evangelicalism into harmony *must* address this fundamental disagreement. The difference is so crucial that it cannot and should not merely be glossed over with ambiguous language.

In fact, it does not overstate the case to say that on the matter of justification the difference between the Roman Catholic view and that of Protestant evangelicalism is so profound as to constitute *two wholly different religions*. Error at this point is damning heresy. If one view represents authentic Christianity, the other certainly cannot. They are antithetical. There is no common ground here.

The doctrine of justification by faith has been something of a focus in my personal study for the past few years. It rose to prominence as a major point in the so-called “lordship controversy”—a debate

between evangelicals about the role of good works in the Christian life. That debate was sparked by several prominent evangelicals who insisted that people can be saved by accepting Jesus as Savior—even if they choose to defer obedience to His lordship indefinitely. Justification by faith was the issue on which they staked their claim. If we are truly justified by faith *alone*, they reasoned, all good works must remain optional for Christians. That position, known as *antinomianism*, I rejected on biblical grounds.

But the lordship controversy launched me on a very profitable study of justification by faith from both the biblical and the historical perspectives. As I read what the Reformers had to say about justification, I gained a new appreciation for their biblical thoroughness. I also began to see in a clearer light than ever before how vitally important it is to be absolutely sound on the doctrine of justification by faith. Luther did not overstate the case when he called justification the article by which the church stands or falls. A right understanding of justification is the only safe course between the Scylla of works-righteousness and the Charybdis of radical antinomianism.

The Reformers' Firm Stance on Justification

The Roman Catholic Church defined its views on justification at the Council of Trent. That Council began its work in 1545 and continued for nearly twenty years. The doctrine of justification was high on the Council's list of priorities. The canons and decrees on justification were written in 1547 at the Council's sixth session.

Trent was the Catholic Church's answer to the Reformation. In 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, attacking the sale of indulgences, he "cut a vein of mediæval Catholicism." [14](#) The bleeding continued for at least three decades. The Council of Trent was a desperate attempt to stanch the flow.

Philip Schaff described the work of Trent:

The decisions of the Council relate partly to doctrine, partly to discipline. The former are divided again into Decrees (*decreta*), which contain the positive statement of Roman dogma, and into short Canons (*canones*), which condemn the dissenting views with the concluding "*anathema sit*" ["let him be damned"]. The Protestant doctrines, however, are almost always stated in exaggerated form, in which they could hardly be recognized by a discriminating Protestant divine, or they are mixed up with real heresies, which Protestants condemn as emphatically as the Church of Rome. [15](#)

So rather than replying to the Reformers' teaching, Trent often attacked straw men of its own making. Bear that in mind during the discussion below regarding some of the Council's pronouncements about justification. Sometimes the view they condemn is merely a caricature of Reformation teaching.

On the other hand, many of Trent's decrees sound quite evangelical. For example, the Council of Trent explicitly denied that anyone can be justified by good works apart from grace: "If anyone says that man may be justified before God by his own works...without the grace of God through Jesus Christ—let him be anathema" (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 1). [16](#)

The council also affirmed that "God justifies sinners by his grace, through the redemption that is in

Christ Jesus” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap 6) and that “we are said to be justified by faith because faith is the beginning of human salvation” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 8). It also stated that the *meritorious* cause of justification is “our Lord Jesus Christ, who...merited justification for us by His most holy passion on the wood of the cross, and made satisfaction for us unto God the Father” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 7).

So when the recent “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” document stated that “we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ,” *it was saying nothing that the Roman Catholic Church has not consistently affirmed for the past 450 years.*

If that is true, why did the Reformers object so strenuously to the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of justification? The dispute had to do with the very nature of justification. The Reformers said justification is an act of God whereby the believing sinner is *declared* righteous. The Council of Trent argued that justification is a process that actually *makes* the sinner righteous. Here is Trent’s definition: “[Justification is] Not remission of sins merely, but *also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man*, through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts by which an unrighteous man *becomes righteous*” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 7, emphasis added).

Certainly all true evangelicals believe that the believer’s “inward man” is renewed and sanctified in the salvation process. But, as we shall see momentarily, evangelicals are careful to distinguish between *justification* and *sanctification*. The distinction must be drawn in order to make clear that it is Christ’s righteousness imputed to us—not something in the “inward man”—not even an infusion of divine grace—that makes us acceptable to God. *This is the essential theological difference that underlies every other point of disagreement between Catholicism and evangelicalism.* Only if this issue is settled can there ever be any real spiritual unity between Rome and evangelicals.

According to Trent, justification is a lifelong process (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 10). Perseverance is not guaranteed (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 13); but “those who, by sin, have fallen from the received grace of justification may be again justified...through the sacrament of penance” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 14). The council also stated that justification must be preserved through good works, which are energized by the grace of God infused into the believer (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 16).

What consistently comes through in Trent’s pronouncements is a clear and definite repudiation of the doctrine of justification by faith *alone*. According to the Council, “unless hope and love are *added to faith*, it neither unites a man perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of His body” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 7, emphasis added). In the Catholic scheme, justification means that God’s grace pours forth into the sinner’s heart, making the person progressively more righteous. It then becomes the sinner’s responsibility to preserve and increase that grace by various good works. The system mixes works with grace, so that justification is not *sola fide*, by faith alone. And it makes justification an ongoing process, never an accomplished fact.

Here are the Council of Trent’s own words:

- If anyone says that *byfaithalone* the sinner is justified, so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification...let him be anathema (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 9).
- If anyone says that men are justified either by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone, or by the remission of sins alone, to the exclusion of the grace and love that is poured forth in their

hearts by the Holy Spirit and is inherent in them; or even that the grace by which we are justified is only the favor of God—let him be anathema (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 11).

- If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God *by good works*, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a *cause* of its increase, let him be anathema (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 24).
- If anyone says that the guilt is remitted to every penitent sinner after the grace of justification has been received, and that the debt of eternal punishment is so blotted out that there remains no debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened—let him be anathema (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 30).
- If anyone says that the Catholic doctrine of justification set forth in this decree by this holy Synod derogates in any way the glory of God or the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not rather that the truth of our faith and the glory of God and of Jesus Christ are rendered more illustrious—let him be anathema (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 33).

Trent also declared that the *instrumental* cause of justification (the means by which it is obtained) is not faith, but “the sacrament of baptism” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 7). The Council also said justification is forfeited whenever the believer commits a mortal sin (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 15)—clearly making justification contingent on human works. So according to Trent, justification is neither procured nor maintained through faith; works are necessary both to begin and to continue the process.

The Reformers objected to Trent’s pronouncements solely on biblical grounds. They filled many thick volumes with Scriptural proofs against Rome’s position. But since the Council of Trent’s rulings were deemed infallible and those who questioned them threatened by the Church with eternal damnation, the breach between Rome and the Reformers was in effect made irreparable.

The Biblical Doctrine of Justification

The Reformers’ objections to the Catholic Church’s stance on justification may be summed up in four biblical arguments.

First, Scripture presents justification as *instantaneous*, *not gradual*. Contrasting the proud Pharisee with the broken, repentant tax-gatherer who smote his breast and prayed humbly for divine mercy, Jesus Himself said that the tax-gatherer “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14). His justification was instantaneous, complete before he performed any work, based solely on his repentant faith. Jesus also said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). Eternal life is the present possession of all who *believe*—and by definition eternal life cannot be lost. The one who believes immediately passes from spiritual death to eternal life, because that person is instantaneously justified. “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). A few verses later we read, “Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him” (Romans 5 9). Those verses put justification for the believer in the past tense, not the present or the future. Justification occurs in an instant. At the first moment of faith it is already an accomplished fact: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Second, justification means the sinner is *declared righteous, not actually made righteous*. This goes hand in hand with the fact that justification is instantaneous. There is no process to be performed. Justification is a purely forensic reality, a declaration God makes about the sinner. Justification takes place in the court of God, not in the sinner's soul. It is an objective fact, not a subjective phenomenon. It changes the sinner's status, not his nature. Certainly at the moment of conversion the sinner's nature *is* changed miraculously; old things pass away and all things are made new (2 Corinthians 5:17). But the actual changes that occur in the believer have to do with *regeneration* and *sanctification*, not justification. Again, it is absolutely vital to keep these ideas separate. Regeneration is a spiritual quickening in which the sinner is born again with a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26; John 3:3); sanctification is a lifelong process whereby the believer is conformed to the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). But *justification* is an immediate decree, a divine "not guilty" verdict on behalf of the sinner. This is inherent in the meaning of the word *justify*. The word itself (*dikaioo* in the Greek) means "to declare righteous"; the sense it conveys is the exact opposite of the word *condemn*.

Third, the Bible teaches that justification means righteousness is *imputed, not infused*. Righteousness is "reckoned," or credited to the account of those who believe (Romans 4:3–25). They stand justified before God not because of their own righteousness, but because of a perfect righteousness outside themselves that is reckoned to them by faith (Philippians 3:9). Where does that perfect righteousness come from? It is God's own righteousness (Rom 10:3), and it is ours in the person of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; cf. Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16). We are united to Christ by faith—we are "in Christ"—and therefore accepted by God in His beloved Son (Ephesians 1:6–7). Christ's own perfect righteousness is credited to our personal account (Romans 5:17, 19), just as the full guilt of our sin was imputed to Him. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). So once again we see that the ground on which we stand before God is the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to us by faith, and not (as the Catholic Church teaches) the imperfect righteousness that is wrought by God's grace infused into us. The point is that the only merit God accepts for salvation is that of Jesus Christ; nothing we can ever do could earn God's favor or add anything to the merit of Christ.

Finally, Scripture clearly teaches that we are justified *by faith alone, not by faith plus works*. "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom 11:6). Contrast that with Trent's ruling: "If anyone says that by the said sacraments of the New Law [17](#) grace is not conferred through the act performed [*ex opere operato*, lit., "the work worked"] but [says] that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace, let him be anathema" (*Trent*, sess. 7, canon 8).

In other words, grace is received not by faith but through works—specifically, through the Roman Catholic sacraments.

But again, the Bible says, "By grace you have been saved *through faith*; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; *not as a result of works*, that no one should boast" (Eph 2:8–9, emphasis added). The only correct answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?" is the one the Bible gives: "*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31).

For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

But *to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness*, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom *God reckons righteousness apart from works*" (Romans 4:3–6, emphasis added).

None of this renders good works, obedience, or sanctification optional in Christian living, as I have argued at length in two other books. [18](#) But it does mean emphatically that works play no role in justification. Works of righteousness and religious ritual can never make anyone acceptable to God. For that, we must depend wholly by faith on the merit of the Lord Jesus. Any system that mingles works with grace is "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6), a distorted message that is anathematized (v. 9)—not by a council of medieval bishops, but by the very Word of God that cannot be broken.

Other Essentials of the Faith

"Evangelicals and Catholics Together" compromises and obfuscates several other essential evangelical truths. Notice, for example, that fourth from the end in the document's list of "differences and disagreements" is this: "The Lord's Supper as eucharistic sacrifice or memorial meal" (10). Here it treats another fundamental doctrine as though it were a peripheral matter.

Roman Catholicism teaches that the communion wafer is transformed through a miracle into the literal body of Christ and the wine is transformed into the literal blood of Christ. Trent stated, "The whole Christ is contained under each form of the communion elements" (*Trent*, sess. 13, canon 3). Therefore, whoever participates in the Mass actually eats the flesh of Jesus Christ, and the priests who partake of the wine actually drink His blood. This is the doctrine known as *transubstantiation*.

Its corollary is the teaching that every time Mass is said, the sacrifice of Christ is offered over again. "A true and real sacrifice" is offered to God in the Mass and "Christ is given to us to eat" (*Trent*, sess. 22, canon 1). Rome believes that the "Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again."[19](#)

That nullifies the crucial biblical truth that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*. And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered *one sacrifice for sins for all time*, sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:10–12, emphasis added).

There is no more need for daily sacrifices or an intercessory priesthood.

In fact, those things have encumbered the Roman Catholic system with pure idolatry. Each Mass features the holding up of the consecrated wafer ("the host") and the bowing and worshipping the communion elements by all present. The Council of Trent ruled,

If anyone says that in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ the only begotten Son of God [in the form of the wafer], is not to be adored with the worship of *latría* [worship due God alone], also outwardly manifested; and is consequently neither to be venerated with a special festive solemnity, nor to be solemnly borne about in procession according to the laudable and universal rite and custom of Holy Church; or is not to be proposed publicly to the people to be adored and that the adorers of it are idolaters—let him be anathema (*Trent* sess. 13, canon 6).

In other words, the host—the transubstantiated wafer—is deemed worthy of the kind of worship reserved only for God.

On the other hand, Mary, the saints, and relics are objects for *veneration*, which is supposed to be something less than *worship*—but practically it is difficult to see any meaningful difference. Indeed, the word *venerate* originally meant “worship”—from a Latin, rather than Anglo-Saxon root.

Mary is practically vested with attributes of deity. The Church teaches—with no biblical warrant whatsoever—that she is sinless, that she “was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory,” and that “she was exalted by the Lord as Queen of all.” [20](#) The current Pope is well known for his devotion to Mary. He and millions of other Catholics pray to Mary daily—as if she were omniscient. She is said to have a “saving role” because of her heavenly intercession and is deemed “Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix [words meaning “Helper,” “Benefactor”], and Mediatrix” [21](#) —all roles mirroring those ascribed in Scripture to both Christ and the Holy Spirit. Vatican II specifically ordered “that the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered” and that “exercises of devotion toward her...[as well as] decrees issued in earlier times regarding the veneration of images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints, be religiously observed.” [22](#)

The Second Vatican Council stated at least one thing accurately:

When Christians separated from us [Protestants] affirm the divine authority of the sacred Books, *they think differently from us*....According to Catholic belief, an authentic teaching office plays a special role in the explanation and proclamation of the written word of God. [23](#)

In other words, in Catholicism, the plain sense of Scripture apart from the authoritative interpretation of the Church has no relevance whatever. So Catholics can quote and affirm 1 Timothy 2:5: “There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” But “they think differently from us” about whether God speaks directly to people through the plain sense of His Word. According to Roman Catholicism 1 Timothy 2:5—and every other verse of Scripture—is subject to the Church’s infallible interpretation. The Scriptures do not speak for themselves as the Word of God. *The Church* determines what the Bible means, and *that authoritative interpretation* becomes the infallible Word of God.

Thus—ironically—the section of the Vatican II document that asserts Mary’s “saving role” as intercessory Mediatrix *begins* by quoting 1 Tim 2:5! [24](#) In a popular edition of the Vatican II documents, a footnote after the word *Mediatrix* explains, The Council applies to the Blessed Virgin the title of Mediatrix, but carefully explains this so as to remove any impression that it could detract from the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ’s position as Mediator (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5). [25](#)

Of course, simply *denying* that their violation of 1 Timothy 2:5 does not resolve the obvious contradiction between ascribing to Mary an ongoing “saving role” as intercessory “Mediatrix” and Scripture’s plain meaning. But that does not matter in Catholicism, since authoritative truth is not determined by the plain sense of Scripture, but by the church’s teaching authority. If the Church says Mary’s “saving, mediatorial role” does not encroach on Christ’s uniqueness as sole Mediator between God and men, Catholics are supposed to believe it with unquestioning faith.

That is reckless faith. Evangelicals must continue to oppose it.

Is Union with Rome a Worthy Goal?

Should evangelicals wish to see the Protestant Reformation undone? Certainly not. The Reformation was not a tragedy but a glorious victory. The result of the Reformation was not a breach in the true body of Christ but the recovery of the gospel of grace from the near obscurity it had fallen into under Catholic abuses. Protestants who doubt that ought to study church history.

Some claim the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s brought Rome and evangelicals closer together doctrinally. They say Rome further reformed herself and opened the door for ecumenical rapprochement. But Vatican II only solidified the stance Rome took against the Reformation. Rome declared herself “irreformable.” [26](#)

It would certainly be wonderful for the Roman Catholic Church to repudiate her opposition to justification by faith and abandon her extrabiblical doctrines. Yet nothing suggests that it might happen. All the dialogue between evangelicals and Roman Catholics has not brought Rome one hair’s breadth closer to a biblical position on any pivotal doctrinal issue. Nor is there any sensible reason to think that *more* dialogue could accomplish this. On the contrary, changes in Rome’s doctrinal position have never been a matter for discussion.

The fact is that the Colson-Neuhaus accord became possible not because Roman Catholicism moved closer to the evangelical position, but because the evangelical drafters of the document either downplayed, compromised, or relinquished all the key evangelical distinctives. “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” capitulated precisely where the Reformers stood firm. Far from being an incentive for Rome to reconsider her position, this document grants an unwarranted stamp of legitimacy on the Roman Catholic system. It makes it harder than ever for doctrinally-minded evangelicals to mount an effective polemic against Rome’s “different gospel.”

Now is the time when evangelicals must carefully reexamine how dearly they hold their doctrinal convictions. We ought to pause and ask ourselves if we really are willing to consider all who recite the Apostles’ Creed as true members of the body of Christ. Either the Protestant Reformation was all a big mistake, or we must be willing to stand with the Reformers. Are we ready to concede that the thousands of martyrs who gave their lives to oppose the tyranny and false doctrine of Rome all died for an unworthy cause?

These are not minor issues. Nor will they go away if evangelical leaders merely keep silent. Other treaties and more doctrinal compromise will follow “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” Those who hold biblical convictions will find themselves forced either to make peace with enemies of the gospel or to take a clear and vigorous stand against Rome’s “different gospel” and against ecumenical homogeneity.

Someone who had heard of my stand against “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” asked, “Don’t you want to see Christian unity?” I certainly do want to see *true* Christian unity. Remember, however, that the unity our Lord prayed for goes hand in hand with His request that we be sanctified in the *truth* (John 17:17–21). The familiar principle in 2 Corinthians 6:14–17—though it certainly applies to marriage—is actually far broader, encompassing all forms of spiritual union:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you."

Unity at the expense of truth is never a worthy goal. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" gave lip service to that principle but failed to follow through.

To those who ask "Don't you want to see unity?" I ask in return, "Are you willing to allow souls to be led into darkness by false religion and error?"

"Evangelicals and Catholics Together" practically demands that evangelicals regard all active Catholics as true Christians and refrain from "proselytizing" them. To accede to that request is to capitulate to reckless faith.

I have heard testimonies from literally hundreds of former Roman Catholics who affirm unequivocally that while they were in the Catholic Church they did not know Christ at all. They were blindly following the religious system, attempting to earn grace and work their way into divine favor. They actively partook in the sacraments and ceremonies and rituals, but they had unregenerate hearts. Hardly a Sunday evening passes without at least one or two former Roman Catholics giving a testimony to that effect from our church baptistry. None of these people passed from death to life until they abandoned their blind faith in the Roman Catholic system and embraced the message of God's free grace.

For evangelicals to sign a pact labeling such conversions "sheep stealing" is in my mind unconscionable. And for the document to declare that "it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among active adherents of another Christian community" (23) is incredible. By the document's own definitions, that puts all churchgoers who are Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or liberal Protestant off limits for evangelism.

But *most* "active adherents" of those communities simply do not know Christ as Lord and Savior. The Christ they worship is not the One who offers full salvation freely to those who trust Him. Most of them are feverishly trying to earn divine favor for themselves through good works and religious ritual—as if Christ had never said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Those people desperately need to hear the liberating message of the gospel of grace. For evangelicals to sign a document agreeing to place them off limits for evangelism is a gross act of betrayal.

Ecumenical unity with Roman Catholicism is not essential to the furtherance of the kingdom of God. Evangelism of Roman Catholics is. To waive the latter goal in pursuit of the former is a serious mistake. One wonders what the evangelical leaders who signed "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" were thinking when they approved such strictures against evangelizing Catholics.

Do the evangelical signers of the document really intend to follow the path it lays out? Let us fervently pray that they will not. Those who pursue that course will find that they have traded away

their evangelical birthright for a mess of ecumenical pottage. Rather than honoring our Lord, they will dishonor Him. Rather than clarifying the gospel for a watching world, they will be substituting a muddled message. And rather than steering people to the small gate and the narrow way, they will be pointing multitudes to the wide gate and broad way that lead to destruction. [\[1\]](#)

[1](#) 1. The source of this essay is the volume entitled *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994). It is adapted and used here by permission.

[2](#) 2. “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Comments from Chuck Colson and Prison Fellowship Ministries,” news release from Prison Fellowship dated 15 June 1994.

[3](#) 3. Ibid.

[4](#) 4. Timothy George, “Catholics and Evangelicals in the Trenches,” *Christianity Today* 38/6 (May 16, 1994) 16.

[5](#) 5. “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” (29 March 1994) 1. All page numbers refer to the 25-page version of the document as originally distributed by Prison Fellowship. Hereafter quotations from this document are cited in parentheses with a page number only.

[6](#) 6. This is by no means meant to imply that none who identify with these groups are truly saved. There are undoubtedly people within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy who really do trust Jesus Christ alone for salvation without realizing that their evangelical faith is a wholesale departure from official Catholic and Orthodox Church doctrines. Yet the Catholic Church’s anathemas against anyone who affirms justification *sola fide* (see section below on “The Reformers’ firm stance on justification”) amounts to an automatic excommunication of all who sincerely trust in Christ alone for salvation. Such people—though they may call themselves Catholic—are officially sentenced by Rome to eternal damnation. Hence the expression “evangelical Catholic” is something of a contradiction in terms.

[7](#) 7. Most quotations from the document’s signatories are from personal letters. Their comments are cited anonymously unless quoted from published sources.

[8](#) 8. George, “Catholics and Evangelicals” 16.

[9](#) 9. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988) 82. Ironically, George is also the author of the *Christianity Today* editorial.

[10](#) 10. Ibid., 82-83.

[11](#) 11. Ibid., 80-81.

[12](#) 12. *Dei verbum*, 9 (emphasis added). All citations from the Vatican II documents are quoted from Walter M. Abbot, S. J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966).

[13](#) 13. Ibid.

[14](#) 14. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1910) 7:160.

[15](#) 15. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 1:94.

[16](#) 16. Quotations from the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent are cited in parentheses as *Trent*.

[17](#) 17. "New Law" refers to the Council of Trent's canons and decrees on the sacraments. The seventh session established seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, extreme unction, order, and matrimony—then pronounced the usual anathema on anyone who says that there are more or less than these seven sacraments (*Trent*, sess. 7, canon 1).

[18](#) 18. *The Gospel According to Jesus*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1992) esp. 90-121, 242-43.

[19](#) 19. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican II), 47.

[20](#) 20. *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican II), 59.

[21](#) 21. Ibid., 62.

[22](#) 22. Ibid., 67.

[23](#) 23. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21.

[24](#) 24. *Lumen Gentium*, 60.

[25](#) 25. Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, 91. Catholic apologist Karl Keating says any contradiction between 1 Tim 2:5 and Mary's "saving role" as "Mediatrice of all graces" is "illusory" [Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on "Romanism" by "Bible Christians"* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 278]. The inescapable fact Catholic apologists must deal with, however, is that multitudes of Catholics "venerate" Mary with a devotion that far outdoes their "worship" of Christ.

[26](#) 26. *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

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