

## ***EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS***

### I. Introduction

A. Question: Should Evangelicals and Catholics be more united in their fellowship and mission?

B. Background: In the Eleventh Century, Christendom was split into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Subsequently, throughout the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church drifted toward Pelagianism (away from doctrines of grace) contrary to the warnings of some of its theologians. Early in the Sixteenth Century, the monk, Martin Luther, led a Reformation against the corrupt theology of Rome. These reformers became known as Protestants. In the years 1545-63 the Roman Catholic Council of Trent condemned the doctrinal distinctives the Protestants stood for. The rift widened. For more than the next four hundred years Catholicism was largely a monolithic religious organization. In the years 1962-65 the Catholic council known at Vatican II brought about some monumental changes. Among the changes was the recognition of Protestants as *separated brethren* rather than apostates. Some have referred to Vatican II as the Catholic Reformation. Today the Roman Catholic Church claims nearly one billion members world-wide.

C. Current Situation:

1. In the late 60's the charismatic movement swept through the Catholic Church. Many of these instantly found a new camaraderie with charismatic protestants.
2. Over the last several decades the mainline Protestant Churches became so liberal Evangelicals found more in common with traditional Catholics. This has led to sharing in the area of scholarly endeavors, social and ethical issues, and political coalitions.
3. In Eastern Europe, Catholics and Protestants became allies against the common enemy of communism. Most credit this alliance as one of the most important catalysts in the fall of communist Eastern Europe.
4. Currently, there are a growing number of Protestants, including Evangelicals, who are converting to the Catholic church. ***National And***

*International Religion Report* cites an organization of over 100 ministers in Ohio who are *closet Catholics* (Oct. 3, 1994). (Note: There is also a growing number of Protestants, i.e. Evangelicals, converting to the Eastern Orthodox Church.) It is not within the scope of this briefing paper to discuss the reasons why this is happening. Among the reasons given are: renewed interest in liturgy, a disinterest in Biblical doctrine, disgust with the disunity in Protestantism, and the authority of church history, et al.

5. Billy Graham, for many years has included Catholic Churches (and their leaders) in the organization of his city-wide campaigns. Catholics who come forward to make decisions to follow Christ are not counseled to attend Bible-believing Protestant churches. According to recent polls (4/94) 18% of Catholics polled described themselves as *born again*.
6. On March 29, 1994, a group of 30 renown Evangelical and Catholic leaders made history by signing a document entitled: *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millenium*. Prominent Evangelical signers were: Bill Bright, Os Guinness, Nathan Hatch, Richard Mouw, Mark Noll, James I. Packer, Pat Robertson, Chuck Colson, Richard Land, John White, and Herbert Schlossberg. Others quickly endorsed it. However, quite a few openly criticized it as a repudiation of the Reformation. The controversy that has ensued is the subject of the rest of this outline. Going back to the original question: To what extent should Evangelicals and Catholics cooperate?

## II. *The Accord: Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.*

### A. About the document

The idea for the *Accord* was jointly conceived in 1992 by Charles Colson, of Prison Fellowship, and Richard John Neuhaus, President of the Institute of Religion and Public Life. Kent Hill, President of Eastern Nazarene College, and George Weigel, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, also were consulted, and met with Colson and Neuhaus. The 25 page document, though initially signed by 23 individuals, was not officially sanctioned by any ecclesiastical organization, neither Protestant nor Catholic. (Though we understand the Vatican was kept informed of its development.)

### B. Stated Reasons for the *Accord*

1. In General: *To deepen cooperation and lessen conflict.*

2. More specifically: to bring about more unity with a view to advancing the church's mission; for more cooperation on moral, social, cultural, and political issues; to promote discussion in areas of disagreement.
3. In their own words: *In the light of the decadence of Western Culture, the growing antichristian bias, the boycott of Christian ideas in public discussion, and the positive changes in the Catholic church, why should Evangelicals and Catholics not present a united front against the forces of secularism?* In the words of Charles Colson: *When the Barbarians are scaling the walls there's not time for petty quarreling in the camp.* **Christianity Today**, 1994.

C. The Outline of the **Accord**: Introduction, I. We Affirm Together, II. We Hope Together, III. We Search Together, IV. We Contend Together, V. We Witness Together, Conclusion.

D. Brief Analysis: On the whole, the document is well-written; there is much in the **Accord** with which all Bible-believing Christians can readily agree. There are also some troubling elements which we will mention in Part III. It certainly seems fair to conclude that the strongest motivation for the document is to see The Church (Christendom: Catholics and Evangelicals, et al.) united in the cultural wars. *Sure there are major doctrinal differences*, they seem to be saying, *but we agree on most of the social and cultural issues. Why not be co-belligerents against the forces that are eroding the foundations of Western Civilization?*

### III. Problems with the Document

The problems with this document warrant close scrutiny.

- A. There is a fuzziness as to just exactly what is the mission of the Church. The document reiterates that the Church's mission is one and that the two parties are in agreement. Historically, the mission of the Church was defined in spiritual terms, i.e. to minister to believers and to prepare them for their ministry in the world. The underlying assumption of the document seems to be that the Church's role is one of social gospel. Nine pages (out of 25) of the **Accord** are devoted to becoming a strong political bloc to effect social change.
- B. There is fuzziness on the doctrine of Justification. This is the doctrine that caused the rift in the 16th Century. The document does not deny justification by faith, nor does it clearly affirm it. What it does do, is leave out the very crucial word *alone* that Martin Luther would have insisted on.

- C. Richard John Neuhaus has commented that *By far, the document's most important single statement... is the affirmation that Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.* To this we would agree, but with the added comment that not all who attend Evangelical or Catholic churches are believers. There are *tares* in both! We would mildly object to the broadness of the statement. Another troubling line in the introduction *The one Christ and one mission* includes many other Christians, notably the Eastern Orthodox and those Protestants not commonly identified as *Evangelical*. Who are the latter? Are they those of the liberal persuasion who have long since departed from the cardinal doctrines of Christianity?
- D. The promise not to proselytize each other is likewise disturbing. Are we not to bear witness to the Gospel regardless of a person's affiliation (if admittedly there are tares in all churches)? They do, however, acknowledge the full religious freedom of an individual to do so.
- E. In Section III, *We Search Together*, an attempt is made to list the major points of disagreement between Catholics and Evangelicals. Probably the most glaring error in the document is the total omission of the differences over the doctrine of justification by faith. Officially at least, the Catholic Church condemned the teaching of Justification by faith alone through Christ alone, and it has never been rescinded. For Bible-believing Protestants this is the doctrine on which the Church rises or falls.

#### IV. Where Evangelicals and Catholics Agree

- A. Worldview. Evangelicals and Catholics share essentially the same worldview. See CIM Briefing Paper #35. ***Developing a Christian Mind.***
- B. Moral theology. There is essential agreement on moral issues. The alliance of Catholics and Evangelicals on pro-life issues has been on-going.
- C. Some historical figures. Catholics and Evangelicals have a common heritage of early church history (the first five centuries). Both groups can claim such great theologians as Augustine, Anslem, and Aquinas.
- D. Both affirm the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed.
- E. Political goals can be shared if there is agreement on moral issues.
- F. Scholarship. Either side is the poorer if it ignores the scholars that both sides have produced, both in the past and at the present. How could Evangelical

scholars ignore such cogent writers as Peter Kreeft, Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, John C. Murray, William F. Buckley, Jr., Russell Kirk, and many others. There are rich lodes to mine on both sides.

## V. Where Evangelicals and Catholics Differ

- A. Soteriology. Without a doubt, the widest chasm exists here. Evangelicals insist on the Biblical teaching of justification as an imputed act of God whereby the sinner is declared righteous. A sinner is saved by grace through faith alone through Christ alone. Catholics teach a system whereby righteousness is infused in the sinner. It is a system of grace plus works. Little distinction is made between justification and sanctification in Catholic theology. A case can also be made for a Catholic teaching of universalism (all will eventually be saved). With the non-Biblical teaching of purgatory there is always a second chance.
- B. Communion. Catholics see communion as an actual reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ. While all Protestants do not agree, most see Christ as present at communion and the partaking of the elements as a memorial of His historical sacrifice on the Cross.
- C. The priesthood of every believer is perhaps the second most important difference demarcated by the Reformation. Every believer has access to the Father, and through the Holy Spirit can interpret the Scriptures. The Catholic church teaches apostolic succession and the church as the only authoritative interpreter of Scripture.
- D. The doctrine of Revelation. Catholics not only accept the Apocryphal books in the canon, they also elevate the traditions of the church to the level of sacred scripture. Protestants also object to Papal infallibility.
- E. Protestants maintain that Catholics hold to an unbiblical view of Mary. In Catholic teaching Mary was free of original sin, a perpetual virgin and was bodily translated into heaven and now reigns with her son and is considered co-redemtrix. All of the preceding did not originate from a study of the Biblical text but rather arose only in the last few hundred years.

## VI. Conclusion

We can and should applaud the irenic spirit of this *Accord*. However, we must resist the temptation to put physical unity ahead of Biblical doctrine. We should never withhold fellowship from another professing Christian who maintains that

his salvation is due solely to the grace of God, and who acknowledges Christ alone as Lord. All professing Christians should be encouraged to attend local churches that celebrate the Lord's table in a Biblical manner and where worship is based on sound Biblical teaching.

We say *yes* to being united together for cultural goals, but caution that political clout cannot necessarily accomplish spiritual goals. We must not put the cart before the horse. Reform is the natural result of revival in the church.

P.S. The Reformation was not a mistake!

For Further Reading:

Ankerberg, John, and Weldon, John. *Protestants & Catholics: Do They Now Agree?*

Armstrong, John. ed. *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Unites & What Divides Us.*

Fournier, Keith A. *Evangelical Catholics.*

Fournier, Keith A. *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together.*

Hardon, John A. *The Catholic Catechism.*

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Creed.*

Ratzinger, Joseph, and Christopher Schonborn. *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.*