

Evangelical Review of Theology

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Volume 27 • Number 4 • October 2003

*Articles and book reviews reflecting global
evangelical theology for the purpose of
discerning the obedience of faith*

Published by



PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
**WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE**
Theological Commission

Christian Unity *vis-à-vis* Roman Catholicism: A Critique of the Evangelicals and Catholics Together dialogue Leonardo De Chirico

Keywords: Ecumenism, Second Vatican Council, culture, justification, biblical authority, salvation, sacraments

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Berlin Congress on mission (1966), a new season in ecumenical relationships was inaugurated between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics on a world-wide scale. Two main initiatives should be remembered: the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (ERCDOM),¹ which began after the publication of the encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the Lausanne Congress for

World Evangelization (1974), and the on-going discussions between the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity² which were prompted by the 1986 WEF document *Roman Catholicism. A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective*.³ Apart from these international meetings, more locally-based encounters are mushrooming everywhere. Following centuries of con-

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¹ B. Meeking, J. Stott (eds.), *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986).

² The proceedings of the meetings can be found in ERT 21:2 (1997) and 23:1 (1999).

³ ERT 10:4 (1986) and 11:1 (1987). For a brief presentation of other dialogues, cfr. N. Blough, 'Catholiques et évangéliques en dialogue. Perspective historique et actuelle' in L. Schweitzer (ed.), *Le dialogue catholiques-évangéliques. Débats et documents* (Cléon d'Andran: Ed. Excelsis; Vaux-sur-Seine: Edifac, 2002) pp. 19-40.

trovery, Evangelicals and Catholics are learning the art of dialogue based on mutual respect.

The new attitude to dialogue would seem to suit most Evangelicals though the most frequently heard voices come from the two opposite extremes of this broad consensus. While some are willing to go beyond mere dialogue to explore closer forms of unity with Catholics, others are reluctant to accept any form of dialogue because they deem that, in ecumenical jargon, dialogue is never mere dialogue but is based on the premise of a unity which already exists though it may be somewhat imperfect. The issue of Christian unity is at the centre of the debate while dialogue goes on at different levels.

On the whole, the situation is extremely fluid and is an example of the wide variety of positions within Evangelicalism which can be seen in other areas as well⁴. For Evangelicals, the issue of Roman Catholicism is closely linked to the issue of evangelical unity. The two issues are interwoven because the way they face the former calls into question the way they consider and experience the latter. The evaluation of the dialoguing process which started in the USA in the early 1990s is an interesting case-study in the present scenario and provides the opportunity for an evangelical reflection on Roman Catholicism and its bearings on the topic of Christian unity.

1. Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT)

The 1994 document, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*⁵, does not seem to be directly related to the above mentioned dialogues nor does it appear to be in any way connected to the institutions which had been involved up to that point.⁶ The architects of the whole project make it clear that its immediate background is to be sought in the American socio-political scene of the 1980s.

From their critical perspective, that decade witnessed a dramatic deepening of the chasm between opposing cultural forces in the American 'public square'.⁷ To put it simply, the fighting forces confronting each other were, on the one hand, those sections of society who wished to defend a Christian-based moral vision and social policy, and, on the other, the emerging, rampant segments who wanted to abandon the traditionally American ethos or radically rethink it in terms of postmodern, relativistic trends of thought. The range of battle fields was extremely diverse and included

⁵ Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (ECT) (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996)

⁶ Colson and Neuhaus explicitly say that the talks leading to ECT were 'independent of the official conversations between the Roman Catholic and various evangelical Protestants bodies'; C. Colson, R. Neuhaus (eds.), ECT, p. xiii.

⁷ This kind of approach can be found, for instance, in R. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); C. Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Dallas: Word, 1987); K. Fournier, *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994).

⁴ Cfr. my article, 'Evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II', *European Journal of Theology* X (2001/1), pp. 25-32.

thorny issues like abortion, pornography, homosexuality, euthanasia, the nature and integrity of the family, education value-systems and basic social patterns. In the midst of this dramatic confrontation in American society, and perhaps because of it and through it, some Evangelicals and Catholics found themselves fighting on the same side.⁸ Their encounter began to take shape at grass roots level in the 1970s, especially in the pro-life movement, after centuries of mutual harsh polemics,⁹ but the new element in the situation was that confessionally divided Christians were sharing religiously grounded moral convictions and wanted to engage more vigorously in the challenge of saving America from the disastrous results of relativism. The relationship between Evangelicals and Catholics which is contemplated in ECT is what Timothy George has called 'an ecumenism of the trenches'¹⁰ emerging from a common moral struggle against secular trends in American society and encouraging proclamation and implementation of Christian values at all levels.

Christian Unity According to ECT
ECT is of theological interest in that this kind of coalition is said to have a theological basis. ECT drafters and supporters appeal not only to a relatively similar evaluation of current social trends and to the shared core values advocated by some politically conservative Evangelicals and Catholics. They have no difficulty in claiming that the possibility, indeed the necessity, of co-operation between conservative Christians in the 'public square' is primarily warranted by their theological common roots in spite of past and present confessional divisions. Sharing a political and moral agenda for society is a fruit of a 'theologically rooted alliance'.¹¹

The connection between socio-political motives and theological justification for common action is also clearly visible in the order of the statement; the section 'We Contend Together', which is focused on 'culture war' concerns, is preceded by the section 'We Affirm Together' in which a basic confession of faith is outlined, and then followed by the programmatic paragraph entitled 'We Witness Together' where a qualified commitment to Christian mission is envisaged. In other words, according to ECT, contending in society is based on affirming gospel truth and is aimed at witnessing to the world. This basic theological core is the real centre around which ECT revolves, most particularly as far as its Evangelical signatories are concerned.

⁸ The different stages of the history of ECT are summarized in C. Colson, R. Neuhaus (eds.), ECT, pp. x-xiii.

⁹ Cf. M. Noll, 'The History of the Encounter: Roman Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals' in C. Colson, R. Neuhaus (eds.), ECT, pp. 81-114. Cf. also R. Nash, 'Evangelical and Catholic Cooperation in the Public Arena' in J. Armstrong (ed.), *Roman Catholicism. Evangelical Protestants Analyze what Divides and Unites us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994) pp. 181-197.

¹⁰ T. George, 'Catholics and Evangelicals in the Trenches', *Christianity Today* (May 16, 1994) pp. 16-17.

¹¹ Colson, 'The Common Cultural Task' in C. Colson, R. Neuhaus (eds.), ECT, p. 3.

From a post-Vatican II Catholic perspective, in fact, there is nothing exceptional in acknowledging together with other Christians, as ECT does, the existence of 'common convictions about Christian faith and mission' which warrant the possibility for the dialoguing partners to consider each other as 'brothers and sisters in Christ'. For Evangelicals, however, this ecumenical readiness has not been a feature of their history and practice, especially in relation to Catholics. If it is borne in mind that until the 1960s, Protestant anti-Romanism was a very influential staple in American Evangelicalism, the committed language of togetherness, oneness, unity, co-operation which permeates ECT is much more telling than its ordinary usage in widespread ecumenical jargon. Evidently, in the case of ECT, the pervasive 'We-Together' pattern is much more ecumenically significant than in other bilateral documents where it is often employed.¹²

The doctrinal basis for this evangelically discovered or catholically reaffirmed unity in the gospel is the Apostles' Creed which both parties wholeheartedly indicate as being 'an accurate statement of scriptural truth'. The appreciation of this basic, albeit foundational, agreement does not eschew the frank assertion of 'authentic disagreements', 'deep and long-standing differences', 'communal and ecclesial separations' which

are barriers to full communion even between otherwise like-minded Evangelicals and Catholics. ECT drafters also provide a non-exhaustive but substantial list of problematic areas which includes fundamental issues regarding the nature of the church and ministry, the authority of Scripture, the sacraments and devotion to Mary and the saints. According to ECT, these matters are not to be avoided or downplayed but fully debated and thoroughly researched, even though the contingent socio-cultural motivations and preoccupations which were predominant in ECT's background tend to allow the whole dialoguing process to be shaped by a sort of theological pragmatism and not by a willingness to come to grips with the basic issues which divide Evangelicals and Catholics. The section 'We Search Together' is a further commitment on the part of the signatories to work and study side by side.

The aim of such an informal, 'disciplined and sustained conversation' is intended to be positive and constructive, that is 'to strengthen between us a relationship of trust in obedience of truth'.¹³ The non-confrontational line espoused by ECT is also visible in the expressed goal of nonproselytization between professing Christians and in the encouragement which the statement gives to focusing attention on the task of reaching those who are outside the broad community of faith instead of trying to convert who are already believers.

¹² Sproul reports that, according to Richard Neuhaus, this affirmation is 'at the core of the entire document', R.C. Sproul, *By Faith Alone. The Doctrine that Divides* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996) p. 15.

¹³ C. Colson, R. Neuhaus (eds.), ECT, p. xxi.

The Spectrum of Evangelical Reactions to ECT

ECT's evangelical signatories are ranged across the wide spectrum of present-day American Evangelicalism, though they participated in it strictly as individuals acting from and to their denominational or para-church constituencies but not on behalf of them. While on the Catholic side, 'relatively little commotion has resulted from the conciliatory statement',¹⁴ the American Evangelical world does not seem to have received it with the enthusiasm its promoters hoped for. Although sundry ecumenically-minded Evangelicals have accepted ECT quite positively, the release of the statement has produced much bewilderment and disarray especially in Reformed Evangelical circles.¹⁵

The debate following it has exposed the serious rift within Evangelicalism on fundamental theological orientations and concerns, and not just over the issue of how to relate to Catholicism.¹⁶ In J.I. Packer's vivid words, ECT has inevitably

come 'under evangelical fire'¹⁷ with 'bleak, skewed, fearful, and fear-driven things'¹⁸ being said about it. In spite of all their diversity, such negative critical judgements share some basic common strands which can be highlighted, varying from the claim that ECT jeopardizes the gospel to the charge that it betrays the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith;¹⁹ it blurs the meaning of the word 'Christian';²⁰ it confuses Christian mission with a social agenda; it undermines evangelism in Catholic countries, and so forth.

The scope and tone of the criticism has been so drastic and clear-cut because for many Evangelicals 'no less than Christian theological integrity is thought to be at stake'.²¹ Apart from strong opposition from individual theologians, journals and church leaders, even a highly representative evangelical institution, the World Evangelical Fellowship (now Alliance), which is itself carrying on an official dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, thought it appro-

¹⁴ D. Charles, 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together: one year later', *Pro Ecclesia* V (1996/1) p. 73.

¹⁵ Cfr., for instance, J. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994); J. Ankerberg, J. Weldon, *Protestants and Catholics. Do they now agree?* (Eugene: Harvest, 1995); R. Zins, *Romanism* (Huntsville: White Horse Publ., 1995); J. McCarthy, *Conversations with Catholics* (Eugene, Harvest, 1997).

¹⁶ For a survey of Evangelical reactions, cfr. N. Geisler, R. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) pp. 491-502 and D. Charles, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: one year later*.

¹⁷ J. Packer, 'Crosscurrents among Evangelicals' in C. Colson, R. Neuhaus (eds.), *ECT*, p. 149. In this paper, Packer assesses and responds to the evangelical criticism of ECT. On Packer's involvement in the ECT process, cf. A. McGrath, *To Know and to Serve God. A Biography of J.I. Packer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) pp. 264-275.

¹⁸ J. Packer, 'Why I signed it', *Christianity Today* (Dec 12, 1994) p. 34.

¹⁹ R.C. Sproul, *By Faith Alone*, pp. 10-30 and 152-155; P. Eveson, *The Great Exchange. Justification by Faith Alone in the Light of Recent Thought* (Bromley: Day One Publ., 1996) pp. 89-96.

²⁰ I. Murray, 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A movement of watershed significance?', *The Banner of Truth*, 393 (1996) p. 12.

²¹ D. Charles, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: one year later*, p. 74.

priate to issue a 'commentary on ECT' expressing perplexities on the document and distancing itself from the initiative as a whole.²² More specifically, WEF refuses to link a commendable 'ecumenism of the trenches' as far as culture war is concerned to the possibility for Evangelicals and Catholics to do evangelism and mission together when 'the doctrinal differences ... remain unresolved'. Furthermore, WEF underlines the semantic problem together with the interpretative issue involved in joint statements such as ECT whereby 'the use of common language does not mean that the meanings are the same'. In other words, the mere act of subscribing a declaration is no indication of a genuinely recovered unity if each party attributes substantially different nuances to the agreed text.

Another significant response to ECT has come from an authoritative evangelical parachurch agency, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (ACE). In reacting to ECT not only in negative terms but with the desire to suggest basic guidelines for subsequent Evangelical-Catholic discussion, ACE issued seven 'Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue'.²³ While questioning ECT's purported creedal unity, the 'Resolutions' affirm that 'this

catholic consensus' over the ecumenical creeds is not perceived 'as a sufficient basis for declaring that agreement exists on all the essential elements of the gospel' (1). According to ACE, this kind of confessional unity could be found only when the other essential tenet of the Gospel is included, that is 'justification by faith alone' without which the 'adequacy of any version of the Gospel' is deemed as falling short. As for this pivotal doctrine, 'radical disagreement continues' between Evangelicals and Catholics (2). Creedal consensus as advocated by ECT, however, warrants 'the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society' though this cooperation should not be regarded as a 'common ecclesial action in fulfilling a common ecclesial mission' (4). While rejoicing in the awareness that 'the Roman Catholic Church contains many ... believers', ACE states that as an ecclesial institution, it is not 'an acceptable Christian communion, let alone being the mother of all the faithful' (6).

On the whole, then, ECT has stimulated much discussion and has provided an occasion for Evangelicals to reflect afresh on the issue of Roman Catholicism and on the wider stance of Evangelicalism in the present-day ecumenical scene.

2. The Gift of Salvation (GOS)

In the intention of the drafters, the ECT document was conceived as an initial step in the deepening of a mutual commitment to dialogue between its Evangelical and Catholic contributors. The negative appraisal

²² J. Vencer, 'Commentary on ECT' in H. Fuller, *People of the Mandate. The story of WEF* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) pp. 191-193. The next two quotations are taken from the same article.

²³ *Modern Reformation* (July 1994) 28-29. It is perhaps worth noticing that Jim Packer signed both ECT and these Resolutions.

of some Evangelicals on the main tenets of the statement apparently strengthened the conviction that there was a need for further conversations, especially on the weaker, problematic areas which had come under strong criticism. The first result of this continuing and more sharply focused debate was a shorter document released in November 1997 under the title of *The Gift of Salvation*.²⁴ Sponsored and led by the same authors as ECT, namely Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus, GOS stems from the continuation of the process initiated by ECT and can be thought of as being an elucidation of the controversial section 'We Affirm Together' of the previous document. The filial connection with ECT is also evoked when GOS is sometimes called ECT II.

Unity and Justification by Faith in GOS

As has already been suggested above, what the supporters of ECT considered to be the real gain of the whole ecumenical process which led to this document was considered by some Evangelical critics to be its fatal flaw. Expressing a trenchant comment often repeated in evangelical reactions to ECT, Sproul asks whether Evangelicals have the right to root an alleged confessional unity apart from, besides or beyond an unambiguous agreement on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Granting the decisive importance of *sola fide* in historic Protestantism

and noting the noisy silence in ECT over it, Sproul defines it as 'the missing doctrine' of the statement.²⁵ In his view, its omission either means that ECT does not perceive justification by faith to be an essential aspect of the Christian faith or that the long controversy over it between Evangelicals and Catholics has now been resolved. It is clear that both assumptions are not feasible and this omission can be explained only in terms of ecumenical diplomacy. The train of Sproul's argument goes as far as to say that this kind of apparent neutrality or wilful bypassing fudges the whole effort and empties the statement of any ecumenical credibility.

At this point, Sproul voices a conservative evangelical quasi-consensus in holding that without coming to terms with *sola fide*, that is without a full acceptance of the Protestant doctrine of imputed righteousness on the Catholic side, even speaking of 'unity' is a sheer impossibility, given the corner-stone role of justification in Protestant Evangelicalism especially in relation to or against the catholic understanding of it which was framed at Trent. In light of this opinion shared by many Evangelical critics of ECT, Christian unity cannot be attained at the expense of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone because without this doctrine there is no evangelically interpreted Christian gospel. Taking these reservations seriously into account, ECT drafters eventually decided to engage in the debate precisely over the crucial issue of *sola*

²⁴ The GOS text was originally published in *Christianity Today* (Dec 8, 1997) p. 34.

²⁵ R.C. Sproul, *By Faith Alone*, pp. 22-24.

fide. In this way, they wished to demonstrate that the kind of ecumenism favoured by the participants is an 'ecumenism of conviction', not one of 'accommodation'²⁶ as was charged against the vagueness of ECT on various matters.

Given this background, justification by faith comes to the fore as the obvious doctrine on which dialogue must concentrate if it is to go beyond socio-political concerns. The outcome of such an ecumenical endeavour is that, while restating with ECT the confession of a 'common faith in Christ' and the acknowledgement of 'one another as brothers and sisters in Christ', GOS strives to deepen the theological quality of the professed unity after addressing the core soteriological issue of the Reformation. If ECT confessed unity on the basis of the Apostles' Creed, GOS claims that it is also possible to envisage 'a common understanding of salvation', including an agreed version of *sola fide*. With this development, the ECT process has gained a theological merit, in its supporters' opinion, in that the unity expressed in GOS is 'not indeed unity in every aspect of the gospel, but unity in its basic dimension'²⁷ which bridges the confessions of faith of the undivided church and that of contemporary American conservative Christianity without ignoring the doctrinal specificity of the historic protestant tradition.

Rather boldly and with a hint of triumphalism, after outlining the content of the accord over salvation, GOS states that what has been affirmed 'is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*)'. In view of such a statement, it should not be a surprise to read that, according to the signatories, 'for the first time in 450 years, Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics have publicly agreed to a common understanding of salvation'.²⁸ Without making any reference to the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue nor to any other relevant ecumenical document on the same doctrine, these claims sound rather curious because they give the impression of a major breakthrough of historical importance achieved through an informal, unofficial and relatively short dialogue culminating in the release of a concise text.

Reflecting on the ecumenical ethos of the whole initiative, it can be argued that the sort of pragmatic ecumenism resulting in ECT seems to have also operated in GOS with a certain measure of consistency. Apparently, the vaguely Protestant outlook of the statement is moderated by the eloquent underestimation of the concept of imputation. The newly discovered possibility of confessing together 'fundamental truths about the gift of salvation' goes hand in hand with the awareness of 'some serious and persistent differences' between the Evangelical signatories

²⁶ These expressions are employed by T. George, T. Oden, J. Packer, 'An Open Letter about The Gift of Salvation', *Christianity Today* (April 27, 1998) p. 9.

²⁷ George, Oden, Packer, 'Open Letter', p. 9.

²⁸ As reported by R. Frame, *Christianity Today* (Jan 12, 1998) p. 61.

and the Catholic ones on specific details or broad frameworks related to the doctrine itself which require 'further and urgent exploration'. Among these 'necessarily interrelated questions' there are 'the meaning of baptismal regeneration, the Eucharist and sacramental grace, the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness' and 'the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine'.

On the whole, then, while testifying to a further advancement along the path of an 'ecumenism of conviction' than ECT was able to express, GOS is also in itself an interlocutory step. Its theological import is partially invalidated by its rather naïve approach to the controversy over *sola fide* which is a highly complex matter. In Sproul's telling words, 'the ECT initiative is seriously, if not fatally, flawed since it proclaims too much way too soon'.²⁹ Another point underlined by some GOS evangelical signatories is that the professed unity testified to in the statement is a bond between 'some Roman Catholics and some evangelicals', not implying at all 'a unity of faith with the church of Rome'.³⁰

The level of brotherly recognition concerns individual believers involved in the process while no recognition of that kind is extended to Catholicism as an ecclesial institution. As Gerald Bray puts it, 'one of the most painful parts of the ECT dialogue has been the need for Evangelicals to explain to the Catholics involved that we cannot regard the Roman Church in the way that a Baptist might look at Presbyterians. There is a qualitative difference between us.'³¹

Evangelical Criticism of GOS

As it might be expected, in spite of the good wishes of the promoters, GOS is facing nonetheless the negative responses of the same strands of the Evangelical movement which reacted negatively to ECT. The tone of many appraisals sounds very similar to previous verdicts, including the charge of selling out the Reformation and of being a 'disappointing sequel' to ECT.³² As for the merits of the document, the main reservation advanced by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (ACE) is that GOS fails 'adequately to express the essential Protestant understanding of the gospel' in that it does not grapple with the concept of imputation.³³ What GOS does is to indulge in 'ambiguous expressions' which are perfectly compatible within a Roman Catholic perspective. The blatant

²⁹ R.C. Sproul, 'What ECTII Ignores. The inseparable link between imputation and the gospel', *Modern Reformation* (Sept/Oct 1998). In the same respect, Neuhaus writes that 'the Lutheran formula of *simul iustus et peccator*, which was Rome's chief objection to JD (Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration), is no part of 'The Gift of Salvation', *First Things* 86 (Oct 1998) p. 82. Neuhaus too recognises that the central issue of the Protestant-Catholic divergence on the doctrine was untouched by GOS.

³⁰ T. George, T. Oden, J. Packer, 'Open Letter'—italics in the original.

³¹ G. Bray, 'Editorial', *Churchman* 113 (1999) p. 197.

³² Zins, *Romanism*, p. 255.

³³ 'An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals. The Alliance Response to the second ECT document *The Gift of Salvation*' (1998).

paradox seen by ACE is that 'while ECT expressed concern over the relativization of truth in our day it has led in GOS to a relativizing of the most important truth of all, namely, the Gospel itself'.

The problem of ambiguity is also evoked by Sproul, for whom GOS was drawn up with a 'studied ambiguity by which agreement is reached in words but not in substance, leaving each side the opportunity to maintain its original position'.³⁴ Moreover, given the admission found in GOS of a 'serious and persistent' difference on the language of imputation (which is inseparably linked to the concept of imputation), what is presented as an agreement on justification by faith as the protestant traditions understood it is not *sola fide* but, at best, a limited version of it, if not a deformation of it. In this train of evaluation, GOS only affirms 'ingredients' of *sola fide*, not *sola fide* itself. Of course, this criticism is mainly addressed at Evangelical participants who have presented the common declaration in a much more positive way. As for Catholic signatories, their unwillingness to embrace *sola fide* wholeheartedly is thought of as being perfectly legitimate from their point of view.

The question of how to approach Roman Catholicism is another area which has not seen any significant development. GOS, like ECT, appears to espouse an isolated, atomistic, fragmented way of conducting the conversation which

seems to overlook the fact that doctrines are parts of a coherent system and that the difference between Evangelical and Catholic views of justification lies in the central core of their respective understandings of the reality of God's saving work. In Sproul's words, 'the differences are systemic, not partial; they are radical, not slight'.³⁵ Applying these critical remarks to GOS, it can be said that 'from an evangelical point of view, it is practically meaningless to uphold together with Catholics the doctrine of justification by faith, on the one hand, and express a sharp disagreement on 'baptismal regeneration', 'the Eucharist', 'sacramental grace', 'diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences', 'Marian devotion and the assistance of the saints', etc., on the other. Unlike the Catholic one, the evangelical framework cannot tolerate such diversity and calls for a choice'.³⁶

In other words, an appreciation of the sharp edges of the evangelical doctrinal system should go together with an awareness of the open-ended and rounded shape of the Catholic one. The latter can subsume the former, provided that it renounces its sharpness, while the former cannot blunt itself to be a part of the latter, lest it lose its distinct adherence to the exclusiveness of the gospel. The acknowledgement

³⁵ R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right. The Tie that Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) p. 86.

³⁶ 'The Gift of Salvation. A Reflection by IFED', unpublished paper (1999).

³⁴ R.C. Sproul, 'What ECTII Ignores'

of this basic contrast between the respective doctrinal systems should inform all theological discussions with Roman Catholics. GOS lacks a theologically 'integrated approach' in dealing with the doctrine of justification by faith because it severs it from the whole of the biblical message and does not show a satisfactory degree of acquaintance with the Catholic synthesis which is unpalatable for Evangelicals.

If this is the case, GOS achieves far less than is claimed by its proponents. Furthermore, because of its basic methodological and theological weakness, as a model for ecumenical dialogue with Catholics it is bound to be ambiguous and, in the end, unfruitful. The kind of dialogue Evangelicals should aspire to needs to be more historically conscious, theologically careful and ecumenically alert than their contributions to both ECT or GOS have been.

3. The Gospel of Jesus Christ (GJC)

The process which has led from ECT to GOS has shown that while confronting Roman Catholicism, Evangelicals reflect and act upon their own identity. The question of how to deal with Roman Catholics can be answered only after one has tackled what it means to be an Evangelical. Differences in the area of ecumenism generally reflect divergences in understanding of what is constitutive for the evangelical faith. It should not be surprising therefore that after having ventured into conversations with Catholics and received some negative reactions from within the

movement, the Evangelical promoters and their critics have come back to the issue of evangelical doctrinal identity, and inevitably so. This pause in evangelical reflection on the ecumenical process has given birth to 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ. An Evangelical Celebration'³⁷ which is a basic statement on the evangel, nurtured by strong evangelical convictions and aimed at a broad evangelical consensus, beyond past and present contrasts on ecumenical initiatives.

The Evangel as the Basis of Unity

GJC is meant to be a 'celebration' of the gospel, a brief dogmatic outline of the content of the biblical message expressed in a rather doxological vein. Apart from this general thrust, the main emphasis of the document revolves around the doctrine of justification by faith, its place within the evangelical confession of the gospel and its theological articulation vis-à-vis recent disputes within Evangelicalism itself. If GOS pointed the way to a possible convergence between Evangelicals and Catholics on justification which was criticised by some Evangelicals, GJC spells out the basic and shared evangelical understanding of the same doctrine.

The paramount desire is to stress the forensic view of justification and this is achieved by the insertion in the text of a list of synonymous verbs or nouns when the meaning of justification is sketched out. So, it is said that

³⁷ The GJC text was published on *Christianity Today* (Jun 14, 1999) pp. 51-56. R.C. Sproul provides an useful, article by article, commentary in *Getting the Gospel Right*.

'God 'justifies the wicked' (ungodly: Rom 4:5) by imputing (reckoning, crediting, counting, accounting) righteousness to them'. Later GJC speaks of 'the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us' (12) and of Christ's righteousness which is 'counted, reckoned, or imputed to us by the forensic (that is, legal) declaration of God' (13). The entire semantic power of the forensic language of justification is employed to focus on the declarative dimension of the act of justification. Another related concern is the willingness to underline what happens in justification in terms of a 'decisive transition, here and now' and 'transaction'.

Of course, though unmentioned, the distinct protestant perspective on justification with its anti-Roman Catholic overtone is clearly in the background of such statements. Other aspects of the evangel are not as emphasised as justification by faith alone³⁸ but, in light of the history and purposes of GJC, the insistence on 'sola fide' should not be taken as an underestimation of necessarily related truths concerning God's saving work. Since every text has its context, GJC has its own in the debate over justification which ECT and GOS gave rise to. In the light of internal disputes over ecumenical issues,

the message of GJC seems to be: back to square one, back to the evangel.

The Affirmation/Denial Pattern

After the introductory preamble, two paragraphs on 'the Gospel' and 'Unity in the Gospel' and before the final section on 'Our Commitment', the rest of GJC is constructed using a composite pattern whereby affirmations concerning various constitutive elements of the evangel are followed by denials of possible misunderstandings or incompatible statements with the previously asserted truths. The rationale behind such a procedure seems to imply that the act of affirming something is only one side of the task related to the spelling out of the evangelical doctrinal identity. The other unavoidable aspect has to do with denying what is perceived as being contrary to what is positively affirmed. The gospel can be witnessed to propositionally by way of positive assertions and negative derivations. In contemporary history of confessional declarations, this pattern has noble precedents in the Barmen Declaration (1934) and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

The model reflects the evangelical logic of theologizing, in which affirming something implies negating what is not in line with what has been affirmed. What is even more important is that the wise combination of 'yes' and 'no' is particularly vital for Evangelicals as they confront the ecumenical movement in general and Roman Catholicism in particular.

This procedure is very far from the

³⁸ In a brief letter Cornelius Plantinga, John Stackhouse and Nicholas Wolterstorff, amongst others, have expressed reservations on the fact that GJC seems to refer to justification at the expense of sanctification, thus failing to represent a real evangelical consensus; cfr. *Christianity Today* (Oct 4, 1999) p. 15.

ecumenical (or catholic!) pattern in which two or more parties can uphold something together but are not constrained to work through the implications of what they have affirmed in an evangelically coherent way. Moreover, as will be indicated later, the Catholic epistemological framework is characterised by a comprehensive et-et (both-and) pattern which enables it to hold together things which are different. The introduction of the 'denial' element in GJC contrasts with this Catholic sensitivity towards the catholicity of doctrine. A Catholic theologian would perhaps subscribe to the 'affirmation' sections of GJC but would feel extremely uncomfortable, if not totally uneasy, with the 'denial' parts, especially nn. 1, 12, 13, 14 on issues like the authority of the church, justification as infusion of righteousness, the role of works and human cooperation with grace.

Unlike ECT and GOS, GJC goes in the right direction in stressing the essential link between the 'yes' and the 'no' of the gospel evangelically interpreted. The misunderstanding caused by the previous documents should teach an important lesson in this respect—that is, the need for Evangelicals to relearn to say their evangelical 'no' (together with the 'yes', of course!) in ecumenical encounters when the truth of the gospel is under scrutiny. 'No' is part of their theological identity just as much as 'yes' and makes it possible to avoid dangerous ambiguities.

4. Your Word is Truth (YWT)

The hope that the content, the pat-

tern and the ethos of GJC was to become a useful reference point for future evangelical endeavours in the ecumenical scene has been frustrated by the most recent release of the ECT process: the document *Your Word is Truth* issued in 2002.³⁹ While YWT drafters thank God for 'the years of prayer, study, and conversation' and recall 'the many blessings resulting from this cooperative effort', they do not mention the controversy and conflict that the same process has caused within Evangelicalism. There is no hint of the theological debate, at times unhelpfully dismissive but often constructive and worth engaging, that has taken place in Evangelical circles.

This unilateral evaluation evokes a question: are theologically critical assessments of the ECT process being taken into consideration or is the ecumenical agenda of ECT so pervasive that it is pursued at any cost? As has been pointed out earlier, the whole ECT process has produced a widespread controversy which culminated in the drafting of GJC (1999) in which more evangelically defined criteria were stated as far as the core of the gospel is concerned against the background of the ECT process. It seems that the ECT dialogue has not started from GJC's refreshing lessons, but is more interested in pursuing the dialogue according to the ecumenically controversial ECT categories. The by-

³⁹ The document itself and some essays reflecting on its contents are found in C. Colson and R.J. Neuhaus (eds.), *Your Word is Truth. A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids-Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).

passing of GJC can be thought of as a weakness of YWT while it is hoped that future engagements of ECT will take it into a proper account.

Systemic Awareness and Christian Unity

With YWT the ECT dialogue has addressed the classical *locus* of Scripture and tradition while further conversations on *communio sanctorum* are anticipated. It is impossible to downplay the importance of focusing on specific theological topics in order to encourage the conversation. Indeed, this procedure is inevitable. What is at stake here is the theological approach which should nurture an evangelical analysis of Roman Catholicism and dialogue with Roman Catholics. Any attempt to address Roman Catholicism should be informed by an awareness of its being a theological system characterised by distinctive features which differ significantly from the evangelical faith.⁴⁰ There are distinct points where YWT is wanting in its lack of systemic awareness.

Firstly, in briefly reviewing the ECT process, YWT states that there has been 'a common affirmation of the most central truths of Christian faith, including justification by faith', referring explicitly to GOS. Later in the text, the Roman Catholic signatories restate their view that the church is

the body of Christ 'through which his justifying and sanctifying grace is mediated'. From an evangelical perspective, this statement clearly contradicts what has been written earlier about the 'common affirmation' of the 'most central truth' of justification by faith alone. How can there be a 'common affirmation' of justification by faith when the Roman Catholic view of ecclesial mediatorship of justifying grace is represented again in so sharp terms? Is it still justification by faith alone if it is mediated by the church in Roman Catholic terms? Again, the problem lies in the ambiguity of GOS which is sustainable, indeed indispensable in a Roman Catholic framework, but not compatible with an affirmation of the Evangelical doctrine of justification by faith. That ambiguity remains unresolved in YWT since it restates *both* the common affirmation of justification by faith alone *and* the mediatorship of the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, Catholics hold both, but Evangelicals cannot if they want to remain true to the most central biblical truth of justification by faith alone.

Secondly, the fact that the Catholic signatories affirm the 'final authority' of the written Word for faith and life does not mean, in a Roman Catholic perspective, the setting aside of the teaching of Vatican II (namely, *Dei Verbum* II,9-10) which enlarges the scope of Catholic theology so as to include sacred tradition and the teaching of the Church as inextricably joined to Scripture (and thus possessing equal finality with it). Since Scripture is always related to eccle-

⁴⁰ A systemic analysis is suggested in the document 'An Evangelical Approach Towards Understanding Roman Catholicism' issued by IFED and endorsed by the Italian Evangelical Alliance in 1999: cfr. *European Journal of Theology* X (2001/1), pp. 32-35.

sial tradition and magisterial teaching, her alleged finality is not understood as if it were above all other *loci* of authority. It is clear that Vatican II urges the faithful to receive Scripture and tradition as equals, '*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*'.

So, the impression is given that a substantial agreement on the finality of Scripture is reached while the reality is that the real theological difference remains unresolved. The authority of Scripture is either 'final' or it is not so. In Evangelical terms, the finality of Scripture requires the submission to it of any ecclesial tradition and of any teaching authority of the church. If the church says 'yes' to the final authority of Scripture, she says 'no' to any attempt to shift the *locus* of authority from the Word of God to herself via tradition. Again, Roman Catholic theology can reconcile the affirmation of both, whereas Evangelical theology cannot. Evangelicals can affirm something and, while affirming it, deny its contrary, whereas Roman Catholics can affirm something without necessarily denying what is not explicitly denied. Their theological epistemology is a programmatic 'both-and' one and a meaningful dialogue with Roman Catholics should take it into consideration.

Thirdly, the list of unresolved differences between Evangelicals and Catholics, namely: the Eucharist, purgatory, aspects of Mariology, papal infallibility, is another area of concern. A similar list occurred in ECT and GOS and is likely to be found in further conversations as a kind of persistent *cahier de*

doléance appended to the text. The problem is that all these theological issues are quintessentially related to the whole of the Roman Catholic system and, therefore, cannot be treated as if they were marginal, secondary aspects for theological discussion. Any real, substantial, evangelical agreement cannot be reached if issues like the above mentioned ones remain areas of theological conflict. Issues like Scripture and tradition or *communio sanctorum* are not isolated from them and require an approach which helps to relate them to the whole of the respective theological vision instead of separating them from the rest. While it is true that YWT is frank enough to admit serious standing differences between Evangelicals and Catholics, a sharper systemic awareness of Roman Catholicism could help the dialogue to resist more atomistic approaches which, while seeming more promising, are in the end less useful and productive.

Cultural Concerns and Christian Unity

The final section of YWT underlines a typical concern of the ECT process: a broad based Christian witness in a society 'marked by unbelieving ideologies and the culture of death'. Culture war continues to be a driving force of the process. This is both understandable and plausible, not only in USA but everywhere in the world. Culture war, however, should be fought with all religious and social forces which oppose 'unbelieving ideologies and the culture of death' on the basis of shared core values and in view of specific

battles. A confessional alliance is not required for culture war; a co-belligerence is instead more than sufficient to build a common front in society against the disrespect of life and the centrality of the person. If culture war is the motivation of ECT and if Evangelicals and Roman Catholics often fight together in this war, why try to base this common action on a theologically defined alliance which is utterly unlikely to be reached, namely, the Roman Catholic theological system which is closed to an Evangelical reformation? Why insist on pursuing a theologically rooted basis for co-operation when a host of theological problems remain

unsolved between two substantially different theological visions? Furthermore, are not common grace and the general influence of Christian values sufficient in themselves in allowing, indeed requiring, a co-belligerence in culture war with Roman Catholics?

All energy should be invested in promoting gospel values in society but this compelling task should not be confused with the search of an evangelical ecumenism with Roman Catholicism. The whole ECT process is at risk of blurring the distinction between co-belligerence and Christian unity. At times, the distinction may be subtle, but it is important to maintain it.

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Paternoster Press, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK