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A History of the Relationship of the Evangelical Alliance with the Roman Catholic Church

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ONE OF THE MAIN strengths of God's people is their memory. The importance of memory for Christians depends on the basic fact that Christian faith is, above all, a historical faith. History, of course, is not the ultimate norm for Evangelicals; nevertheless it remains central in the definition of their beliefs and identity, though this is sometimes forgotten. Therefore, in order to define the contemporary evangelical profile, it is necessary to consider how Evangelicals have considered their faith

throughout history and in relation to other beliefs.

Undoubtedly, the relationship with Roman Catholicism [from now on RC] represents a major issue for Evangelicals and, particularly, for the Evangelical Alliance [from now on EA] which represents them. Moreover, the understanding of a complex issue, such as the relationship between the EA and the RC church, demands a historical perspective and the following report represents such content.

Of course, we will not be concerned with considering particular situations, but rather we will oversee the general trend and the great changes that occurred in the last decades of the last century, in the relationships between

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EA and RC. While the general history of the EA has already been written, so far no study on this particular topic has appeared.¹

The different approaches towards RC within the worldwide evangelical movement have often not been appropriate. Due to the global profile of the evangelical movement it is not correct to approach this topic from either a national or a personal theological perspective. It is also naïve to try to explain the past Protestant/Roman Catholic debate in terms of personal or geographical animosities. This issue is deeper than that. If as evangelicals we want to understand the Roman Catholic theology we need to have a more general or systemic approach. Any analysis of RC that fails to adopt a systemic approach, will risk misunderstanding the real nature of the issue.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was an 'aggiornamento', a revision, to the Catholic church. However, the word 'aggiornamento' does not

denote a reformation in the evangelical sense, but neither is it a merely political and linguistic device adopted to conceal an unchanging reality. It is, instead, the Catholic way of responding to the need of some kind of renewal, without altering the fundamental structure inherited from the past. It is a kind of moving without changing.

Some of the most insightful evangelical observers of the Catholic scene after the Council (i.e. Gerrit Berkouwer and David Wells) expressed perplexity in their understanding of what was going on within RC. The old critical apparatus adopted by most evangelical theologians, until that moment, appeared inadequate or obsolete to explain this evolving scenario. After more than forty years, today's question is whether that 'suspension of judgement', which was thought to be necessary, has contributed to much of the present-day evangelical disarray and has even become the typical evangelical impasse in coming to terms with Catholicism.

Both resentful resistance based on clichés from the past and undiscerning openness, mainly nurtured by 'culture war' concerns, lead to a stand-still. Yet, the 'wait-and-see' approach cannot be sustained indefinitely. Evangelicals need a pertinent framework to interpret Roman Catholicism. This needs to reflect their theological identity as well as being able to account for the multifaceted, yet unitary, reality of RC. In the absence of a solidly evangelical theological interpretative model, evangelicals will continue to be astonished by some of the inner developments within Catholicism which do not change its fundamental structure.

1 J.W. Massie, *The Evangelical Alliance: Its Origin and Development* (London: 1846); J.W. Ewing, *Goodly Fellowship: A Centenary tribute to the Life and Work of the World Evangelical Alliance 1846-1946* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1946); J.B.A. Kessler, *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain* (Goes: Netherland, Oosterbaan & LeCointre N.V., 1968); Philip Jordan, *The Evangelical Alliance for The United States of America, 1847-1900 Ecumenism, Identity, and the Religion of the Republic* (Mellen Press, 1983); David M. Howard, *The Dream that Would Not Die*, (Exeter: WEF/Paternoster, 1986); W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate* (Carlisle: WEF/Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Ian Randall and David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001).

I Some historical mileposts

We will proceed from the present to the past to gain a better understanding of the evangelical identity set forth. At present Evangelicals are open to some kind of relationship with Catholics. Although not widely recognized, this reflects a very new atmosphere. The controversies of the past seem to have become a very far memory. Evangelicals have gained social stability in many countries. In some they continue to grow and to arouse attention. At the same time they have more and more academic respectability.

After centuries of controversy, it seems that Evangelicals and Catholics are learning the art of dialogue based on mutual respect. When someone points out harshness or dogmatic severity, it seems possible to explain it in terms of internal plurality within Catholicism. In spite of unresolved issues on doctrine, proselytism and religious freedom, this atmosphere prevents us from regarding each other as strangers. Discussions, dinners, and time together seem to open up a new season in EA and RC relations.

It seems possible even to explore some kind of co-belligerency between the two, which is developing a sense of comradeship. Secularisation appears to many Evangelicals and Catholics to be the real danger. Catholics can be heard adopting a conservative stance on many ethical issues. In this atmosphere, it becomes more and more difficult to make distinctions. On many issues Catholics and conservative Evangelicals seem to have the same opinion. The Evangelicals have great difficulty in distancing themselves from the RC *magisterium* on ethical

issues. On some occasions, on doctrinal issues it becomes even more difficult to disassociate themselves. At worst, there is a feeling of a kind of neutralism. The only uncertainty is the attitude of the new pope Benedict XVI. He seems more concerned with unity with the Orthodox Church than with Evangelicals.

This staunch separation between Protestants and Catholics reflects part of the EA's history as well. Before the Evangelical Alliance was born, evangelicals made clear that the possibility of living out our unity in Christ depended strongly on the will of all believers belonging to different denominations to overcome past doctrinal controversies and seek unity. They made clear that Protestants should learn to protest a little less and to love a little more. The unity of the people of God was perceived as a leading force and the divergences in doctrine of the past were not considered central and no longer a reason for separation between Christians.

Although the desire to open greater dialogue within the evangelical movement was very strong among the fore-runners of the Alliance, this corresponded with a definitive closing of the dialogue with Catholicism and infidelity. This great opening towards internal unity and a closing toward Catholicism and infidelity meant that both systems of belief were seen as wrong, and thus Catholicism was not treated differently from infidelity.²

If creativity is a kingdom calling,

² The preparatory conference was held in Liverpool from 1-3 October, 1845, with 216 leaders from 20 denominations participating. 'The

this presents a problem not only for doctrinal issues, but also for ethical issues. Paradoxically, there is an impression that Evangelicals are not able to engage in creative thinking any more. They seem to have difficulty getting a perspective that can distinguish them from the RC Church. The Roman Church presents itself as a universal ethical agency in which all conservatives can find a place. Sadly, rather than reflect upon the issues at hand, many Evangelicals assume the stance provided by the RC church of not distinguishing the nature of the discussion or the outcome of such ideals.

We must now consider what roads have led to this point. Most recently, the document, *Church, Evangelisation, and the Bonds of Koinonia. A Report of the International Consultation between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance (1993–2002)*,³ represents the last important step in the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the EA. The Report is the work of an International Consultation between some representatives of the Catholic Church and some of the World Evangelical Alliance.⁴

emphasis in this conference was on unity and love rather than on controversy. [...] However, there was a definite position of strong opposition both to Roman Catholicism and also to infidelity' (Howard, *Dream*, pp. 8-9).

³ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Information Service* 113 (2003/II-III) pp. 85-101; www.ecumenism.net/archive/2002_wea_pccu_church.htm

⁴ The Report is the result of some meetings sponsored by international bodies on both sides: the *World Evangelical Alliance* and the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*. This initiative eventually resulted in formal

The Document consists of two parts: 1. The Church as *koinonia* (Fellowship, Communion); 2. Our Respective Views on Evangelization/Evangelism. After some consideration as to the meaning of 'Fellowship' in the NT, the document tries to describe the significance that the idea has for Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. 'Catholics tend to interpret *koinonia* in this passage to mean a participation in the divine life and "nature" while Evangelicals tend to interpret *koinonia* as covenant companionship, as it entails escaping moral corruption and the way of the world.'

The report takes into account the 'Respective Understandings of the Church and of Other Christians', according to both the Catholic and the Evangelical Views. The document is also concerned with 'Some Dimensions of the Church': its origins, the Local and Universal Church, with Convergences and Differences Between Catholics and Evangelicals on this topic. Another section concentrates on 'Preparing for a Different Future' for further dialogue. The second part, 'Our Respective Views on Evangelization/Evangelism', gives space to the Catholic view, the evangelical view and the challenge of common witness.

The Document recognizes that it is not an authoritative declaration and affirms that it is a study document produced by participants in the Consultation with the aim of being widely dis-

consultations beginning in Venice in 1993, and continuing at Tantur, Jerusalem in 1997, Williams Bay, Wisconsin in 1999, Mundelein, Illinois in 2001, and Swanwick, England in 2002.

cussed. To our knowledge, only one document has tried to offer a contribution to this Report: *A Response by the IFED Faculty*.⁵

This fact is interesting in itself. It is evident that a large number of Evangelicals do not seem very concerned by the question. In the face of a turning point such as this, there seems to be a great deal of passivity. Two things, however, have significantly changed the perception of these events for many people. The world is moving into a culture of uncertainty and the Roman Catholic Church seems to be taking the responsibility to give guide lines. We are said to be living in a sceptical age. Actually, we live in an age of outrageous credulity.

The only *Response* known, underlines the 'inadequacy of the format; of the language and of the methodology'.⁶ Moreover it focuses on the 'Standing theological issues which need to be faced' and the 'Long-term missiological implications' of the issues raised. It

concludes with a very concrete 'two-fold proposal'.

The document exists in a context where contact between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics is a widespread practice. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* has produced its fourth document as a result of a series of conversations which took place between some Evangelicals and some Catholics in the USA over the ten-year period 1994-2003.⁷ This process was challenged by some theologians,⁸ but the ecclesiastical trend seems stronger.

It is also interesting to note that in 1999, the World Lutheran Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed a joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. At the time of the Reformation, it was the doctrine on which the church stood or fell; in the Joint Declaration it is affirmed that 'the doctrine of justification is the measure or

5 Padova, 27th May 2005; www.ifeditalia.org

6 In Roman Catholicism it is possible to speak of the written Word of God as the 'final authority', but this does not exclude the fact that the Scripture is always inextricably joined to ecclesial tradition and magisterial teaching (*Dei verbum* II,9-10). By this conception the Word of God includes sacred tradition. '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.' (IFED Faculty 2002, *Your word is truth*).

7 While the first statement 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' (1994) introduced the conversation, 'The Gift of Salvation' (1997) focused on justification by faith, and 'Your Word is Truth' (2002) touched on Scripture and tradition. The on-going dialogue produced 'The Communion of Saints' (First Things, March 2003, pp. 26-33; hereafter COS) which develops the theme of Christian fellowship among believers.

8 For a clear discussion see De Chirico, 'Christian Unity vis-à-vis to Roman Catholicism. A Critique of the Evangelicals and Catholics Together dialogue' *ERT Oct 2003* (27:4), pp. 337-352; Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism* (Oxford/Bern: Peter Lang, 2003). This doctoral thesis provides critical analyses of evangelical writings on present-day Roman Catholicism (including the dialogue in which WEF-WEA is involved) as well as a systemic theological approach to the Roman worldview.

touchstone for the Christian faith'.⁹ The document seems to suggest that the condemnations of the Reformation were based on misconceptions and the separation was a mistake.

In 1999 the Italian Evangelical Alliance endorsed the document, *An Evangelical Approach Toward Understanding Roman Catholicism*. The document draws attention to a global understanding of the phenomenon, helping to give a theological and cultural perspective on the issue. However, it does not seem that this *Evangelical Approach* received the necessary consideration even though it was published in four different languages (Italian, French, German and English).¹⁰ In fact, the EA at the European level did not take it into consideration. Such lack of interest over a pertinent issue is contrary to the historical identity of the Evangelical Alliance.

From the beginning of its story, the Alliance felt itself to be a guarantor of a fully catholic belief—that is a universal belief, capable of uniting in truth every fully declared evangelical

denomination. Unity in truth constituted the goal that the evangelical world was called to achieve and the Alliance was the means by which to reach such a goal. As a consequence, the theological debates between Christian denominations which were of secondary importance were rejected in order to confess unity. Therefore, although the Alliance supported an attitude of listening to and understanding between Christians, a firm opposition towards Catholicism and infidelity continued to characterize its attitude towards other beliefs.¹¹ The founding fathers considered the conflict with Rome as an inevitable principle and a specific element of the identity of the Evangelical Alliance.¹²

In 1995, the General Director of WEA, Jun Vencer, was asked about the document 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' (ECT), signed by some Evangelicals, that caused so many reactions in parts of the world. His response was that 'Catholic relationships with Evangelicals vary from country to country. It can range from cordiality to persecu-

9 *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2000); see also Anthony N.S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 2002).

10 The text can be found in *Ideitalia* III:5 (1999) pp. 7-8. Translations are available in French: 'Le catholicisme romain: une approche évangélique', *Vivre* 8-9 (2000) pp. 10-14 and *Fac-Réflexion* 51-52 (2000/2-3) pp. 44-49; in German: 'Ein Evangelikaler Ansatz zum Verständnis des Römischen Katholizismus', *Bibel Info* 59/3 (2001) pp. 10-13; in English: 'An Evangelical Approach Towards Understanding Roman Catholicism', *Evangelicals Now*, Dec 2000, pp. 12-13 and *European Journal of Theology* X (2001/1), pp. 32-35.

11 In the first issue of *Evangelical Christendom* (the Evangelical Alliance publication from January 1847 to 1954) it was written: 'Evangelical Christendom will advocate and exalt these common and uniting truths. Rejecting what is sectarian and partial, its pages will exhibit only the Catholic faith of God's elect. [...] Its only controversy will be with Romanism and Infidelity.' (18 cited from Kessler, *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance*, p. 42)

12 'The conflict...with Rome was a major factor in the thinking of those early founders, and repeated references to this are found in the pages of the journal' (Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, p. 19).

tion.¹³ At the same time he affirmed that 'The critical issue really is the doctrinal differences between the two that remain unresolved and must not be denied or underplayed. The use of a common religious language does not mean that the meanings are the same. There are reasons to believe that they are not and have not changed since the Reformation.'¹⁴ This was a very clear statement from an official leader to be considered by all who shun discussions about our relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

Taking this into consideration, it is also possible to consider some of the most important worldwide declarations from Evangelicals. When they have spoken about Roman Catholicism, they have agreed about the danger of Romanism and its vast differences from the Evangelical faith—in fact, this was an unquestioned part of evangelical conviction. The *Evangelical Affirmations* (1989), the result of a consultation co-sponsored by NAE and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, have a very clear position on Roman Catholicism.¹⁵ Reformed faith was not conceived as a compatible component within the RC system, but notably, as an alternative to it.

It is entirely possible to affirm that some recent contacts between Evangelicals and Catholics have influenced

some within the EA toward a more open approach to ecumenism. An international dialogue on missions between some Evangelicals and Roman Catholics took place between 1978 and 1984. On the Catholic side it was sponsored by the Vatican's Secretariat (after 1988, Pontifical Council) for Promoting Christian Unity.¹⁶ From the evangelical side there was no precise strategy stated. In dealing with the Roman Catholic Church, nobody asked whether evangelical identity could be either powerfully strengthened or dangerously weakened. There is the impression that people were involved thoughtlessly and without reflection on evangelical identity.

The contacts were always made on the basis of the authority of the individual participants, without officially representing any evangelical body. Evangelical participants included some prominent leaders such as John Stott, not in the name of WEF/WEA. These Evangelicals felt that it could be helpful to have a more irenic dialogue and the contacts show some degree of respectability vis-à-vis Evangelicalism. But the issue became more and more confusing to the point that some were asking if in the evangelical context something was changing in the doctrinal content and if they shared a common future with those with whom they engaged.¹⁷

13 Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, p. 192.

14 Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, p. 192.

15 On *Evangelical Affirmations* (1989), a consultation co-sponsored by NAE and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; see *Evangelical Affirmations*, S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). In particular see Donald A. Carson (p. 379).

16 For the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (ERCDOM) see Basil Meeting and John Stott, (eds.), *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986).

17 Thomas P. Rausch, (ed.), *Catholics and Evangelicals. Do They Share a Common Future?* (Leicester: IVP, 2000).

Moreover, in the context of WEF, the starting point of the process from Venice (1993) to Swanwick (2002) was Jerusalem (1988). Evangelicals met some Catholic leaders at the annual meetings of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CWC).¹⁸ The CWC meeting provided an occasion for a private conversation between Rev. David Howard, International Director of WEF, and Dr. Paul Schrottenboer, General Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod and Chairman of the WEF Task Force, as well as Rev. Pierre Duprey, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and Msgr. John Radano of the same Pontifical Council. The issue was a Document approved by the delegates at the WEF Eighth General Assembly in Singapore (1986) about Roman Catholicism, *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism*.¹⁹

These church leaders meeting in Jerusalem decided to hold a short meeting to discuss issues raised in the book, which took place on the occasion of the CWC meeting in October 1990 in Budapest, Hungary. Two persons from each side attended: Dr. Paul Schrottenboer and Dr. George Vandervelde for

WEF, and Msgr. Kevin McDonald and Msgr. John Radano for the PCPCU. This discussion helped to increase interest in these pertinent matters and it was proposed that a well prepared and longer consultation should be arranged for a later date. Bishop Pierre Duprey invited the consultation to meet in Venice.

What was amazing was that the document, *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism*, was not intended for ecumenical discussion or dialogue, nor for external confrontation, but for internal clarification. It was the final step in a three-year process after a dubious action by the WEF General Secretary, Waldron Scott, at the Seventh General Assembly of the World Evangelical Fellowship, 24-28 March, 1980, in Hertfordshire, England. Scott had invited two representatives from the Roman Catholic Church to bring greetings. Ralph Martin of the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, and Monsignor Basil Meeking of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity were given a platform from which to speak within the realm of the evangelical assembly.

It was a totally new approach to the Roman Catholic Church and was difficult for many at the Assembly to accept. In fact, the appearance of these two Catholic theologians at a Protestant gathering provoked a reaction. Delegates from Spain, France and Italy protested. After a heated debate, the Italian Evangelical Alliance withdrew its membership²⁰ and the Spanish Evangelical Alliance placed its partici-

¹⁸ This Conference, existing for more than forty years, was an informal annual meeting including the general secretaries or their equivalent, from a broad range of Christians. The International Director of the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have been among the participants in this Conference.

¹⁹ Published as Paul G. Schrottenboer (ed.), *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

²⁰ General Assembly AEI, 29/03/1980.

pation in abeyance.

As a result of the deep feelings and misunderstandings generated by this issue WEF appointed a carefully selected Task Force to study relationships with the Roman Catholic Church. It was emphasized that WEF was concerned that 'as Protestants we do not lose our evangelistic ministry to Roman Catholics and that we do not compromise our theological convictions in our contact with them'.²¹

The Task Force was commissioned to draw up a statement on the evangelical stance toward Roman Catholicism that all member bodies and fellowships could endorse. This Task Force was composed of leading theologians from every major region of the world, with special attention given to those areas such as southern Europe and Latin America where the Roman Catholic Church has exercised special influence in the life of the nations and peoples. At the Eighth General Assembly in Singapore in 1986 this Task Force produced the report, *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism*. As the title indicates, the report was very irenic but also very clear about the impossibility of cooperating with the Roman Church, perhaps the result of a clearer theological perspective even if not too systemic. Gordon J. Spykman,²² one of the members of the TF WEF TC, said:

This story does not yet have an ending. In view of the shortcomings in the *Perspective*, a further chapter has yet to be written. At the recent

General Assembly of the WEF, it was concluded that the report 'deals with only a limited range of issues of Roman Catholicism'. Moreover 'the Theological Commission did not have an opportunity to discuss the statement before it was sent to the Assembly'. It was therefore decided that the Theological Commission should continue this study of contemporary Roman Catholicism.

The spirit of *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism* can be found also in other evangelical documents of the time, for example in the *Recife Conclamation* (1980)²³ and in the *Wheaton Declaration* (1966) on missions.²⁴ In these documents, reformed faith was not conceived of as a compatible component within the RC system but, once again, as an alternative to it.

At the Lausanne Consultation at Pattaya, Thailand (1980), the commitment to evangelize pressured Evangelicals to produce reports dedicated to 'Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics'. If some Evangelicals were not happy about the expression, 'Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics', there was still a concern for bringing the gospel to RC.

In May 1976, the participants at the annual Evangelical Alliance Confer-

²³ The Italian text is published in P. Bolognesi (ed.), *Dichiarazioni evangeliche. Il movimento evangelicale 1966-1996* (Bologna: EDB 1997), §186-193.

²⁴ H. Lindsell, (ed.), *The Church's Worldwide Mission* (Waco: Word Books, 1966), pp. 215-237, DE §12.

²¹ Bruce J. Nicholls' letter to E. Milazzo 27/08/1980.

²² *Christian Beacon*, March 12, 1987.

ence at Papua New Guinea, were led by Gottfried Osei-Mensah, as guest speaker, to study Stott's commentary on the Lausanne Document. Protestants and Catholics met on this occasion side by side, thinking about and discussing evangelism. In the end it was stated that 'right through the seminar it became very clear that we should be united in proclaiming the Gospel'.²⁵

In the meantime, contacts between Catholics and Evangelicals took place within the activities of United Bible Societies and in the context of the Billy Graham evangelistic crusades.²⁶ These were very good occasions to unite the RC and Evangelicals together for cooperation on the field. In some countries this kind of cooperation caused disagreements among Evangelicals because it gave the impression of a doctrinal agreement with Roman Catholics.

In a few countries some Evangelicals also started open dialogues with Catholics. This was a great change from the historical past of the EA. This change could give the impression of

going from a ghetto to a network²⁷ in a very new way. However, historically speaking, these dialogues are contrary to EA identity. The Alliance has historically affirmed that the controversy with Catholicism and infidelity have been integral elements of the EA since its inception.

Furthermore, the commitment to Christian unity, the missionary effort, the defence of religious freedom, the international organization of conferences and the worldwide week of prayer provided a precise definition of the evangelical belief and identity. Every form, more or less, of declared ecumenicalism, aside from the representation of the Alliance, constitutes not only a betrayal of the historical identity of the Alliance, but also a threat to the continuity of these activities, which have established our identity. Each of these dialogues, meetings or invitations to representatives of Catholicism embodies a negation of everything which the Alliance has represented for millions of evangelicals worldwide. Those who think to promote such dialogue may seek to do so, but this will clearly not be a promotion of the interests of the Alliance, but in fact, a negation of those interests.

II Some Systemic Approaches

It is impossible to follow all the situations in past years, but it is possible to

25 'To Members of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation' LCWE, Nairobi, (June 23, 1976), pp. 1,2. But at Lausanne Congress, Ramez L. Atallah feels that in view of the complex and ambiguous situation of Roman Catholicism 'it becomes impossible to adequately study trends in modern Catholicism'. See his 'Some trends in the Roman Catholic Church Today' in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *Let the earth hear his voice*, (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), pp. 872-884.

26 For some elements, see Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided. A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), pp. 68-78.

27 It is the case in France. See Louis Schweitzer (ed.), *Le dialogue catholique-évangélique, Débats et documents* (Cléon d'Andran: Edifac, Excelsis, 2002); Sébastien Fath, *Du ghetto au réseau. Le protestantisme évangélique en France 1800-2005* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2005).

derive some main points from these occurrences.

An important step in the history of differences between Evangelicals and Catholics was the National Assembly of Evangelicals in Great Britain in 1966. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott focused on what was a Christian and what was a church.²⁸ The question of dialogue and relationship put at stake the question of identity.

The Evangelicals charged that 'the Church of Rome continually denounces the public-school system of the United States and that to Roman policy makers, state support of their schools is only one step toward RC control of all government functions and of the Government itself'.²⁹ The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) also opposed the establishing of diplomatic ties with the Vatican that sounded like a preference of one religion over others, and unwarranted entanglement of church and state. Also, in the 1960s, the Evangelicals in the United States were not happy about the religious affiliation of President Kennedy. NAE leaders were not optimistic about the matter: 'We doubt that the RC president could or would resist fully the pressures of the ecclesiastical hierarchy'.³⁰

After the Second World War, Evangelicals in the United States were aware of the policy of the Roman Catholic Church in seeking a dominant role in public life. It was seen as one of the contenders with Protestant modernism and secularism in a 'struggle for power' for the dominant role in shaping 'America's cultural patterns'. The NAE represented a ray of hope for winning America. Its doctrinal position and its spirit of cooperation were seen as a good bulwark.³¹ Catholicism was enjoying unprecedented vitality and respectability in America and American Catholic leaders felt more confident than ever that they could promote their dream of applying the 'culture of Catholicism'³² to every sphere of life, as they had done in so many other nations before.

This kind of approach was not new in the context of the EA. From the very beginning, the EA was involved in protesting at the persecution of Protestants in Roman Catholic countries. Having become General Secretary of the British organisation in 1904, H. Martyn Gooch took on an 'ambassadorial role' in the 1920s and 1930s in support of European Evangelicals oppressed by Roman Catholicism. After the fall of the Berlin wall, when

28 Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, pp. 68-78; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Fight of faith 1939-1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990).

29 'Learning from the past: A History of the Public Policy Resolutions of the Nation Association of Evangelicals' in Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (eds.), *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), p. 40.

30 Sider and Diane Knippers, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*, p. 45.

31 Harold J. Ockenga, 'Can Fundamentalism Win America?', *Christian Life and Times* (June 1947), pp. 13-15. At Fuller, Harold Lindsell wrote *A Christian Philosophy of Mission* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1949), where Roman Catholicism was considered among the 'arch enemies of America and our way of life and of the true faith' (p. 223).

32 Harold Fey, 'Can Catholicism Win America?' (*Christian Century* eight-part series in 1944 and 1945).

the EA was founded in Romania (1989), believers in that country proclaimed that repression of Evangelicals did not start with the Communist regime, but that the RC Church had always been hostile to Evangelicals. They hoped that the EA would help to oppose the discrimination and oppression in their nation and enable them to live out their evangelical faith.

For Evangelicals it seemed clear that Roman Catholicism was a 'system'.³³ For this reason there was no sense in considering only one particular topic or doctrine in Catholicism. This was a unanimous conviction on the part of all evangelicals.

Another occasion on which the EA gave due attention to Catholicism was the Ninth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, held in Florence in 1891.³⁴ Even though some other Conferences were important as well [London (1851), Paris (1855), Berlin (1857), Geneva (1861), Amsterdam (1867), New York (1873), Basel (1879), Copenhagen (1884)], the Ninth General Conference was considered as 'one of the most delightful and successful gatherings of Christian brethren ever held'.³⁵

The Conference showed a remarkable awareness of the *context* by giving attention to the 'new aspect of the Roman Catholic religion since the loss

of temporal power and the establishment of religious liberty opened the opportunity for such a Conference to be held'.³⁶ Many testimonies reported discrimination, but the perspective wasn't merely geographical.

We know, also, how great, powerful, astute, and implacable is our enemy, the Papacy... Catholicism cannot succeed in this work of awaking the conscience... Romanism destroys the power of the Gospel by its subtle distinctions between different kinds of sin.³⁷

For centuries Antichrist was a code word among Protestants for Roman Catholicism, but for Evangelicals the more important question was the conversion of people from darkness to light.

The Conference underlined also a *historical* perspective. Philip Schaff was very clear about the effect of the Reformation.

It emancipated half of Europe from the spiritual tyranny of the papacy, and cleared away the rubbish of medieval traditions, which obscured and 'made void the Word of God' like the rabbinical traditions of old (Matthew 15:6) and which obstructed the access to Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.³⁸

The Evangelicals spoke without fear of the reasons for the suppression of the Reformation in Italy and their great consequences for the national culture. They said that 'Italy has fallen asleep religiously in the Roman

33 Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962), pp. 455, 459.

34 R.A. Redford(ed.), *Christendom from the standpoint of Italy*. The Proceedings of the Ninth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, held in Florence in 1891 (London: Office of Evangelical Alliance, 1891).

35 Redford, *Christendom*, p. 1.

36 Redford, *Christendom*, p. 2.

37 Redford, *Christendom*, pp. 115, 195.

38 Redford, *Christendom*, p. 29.

Catholic doctrine' and that 'Romanism has inoculated into the Christian religion the form of a magical and idolatrous naturalism'... and it is 'the very opposite of that duty which distinguishes the human soul'.³⁹ There was no illusion about the possibility of a renewal with such a doctrine because 'its ultimate result can only be ignorant credulity in the midst of ignorant incredulity'. 'Here, indeed, Romanism has worked the greatest destruction' (p. 54). 'It will be easy to understand now that the Evangelicals are the only ones who have rightly understood the religious problem of Italy.'⁴⁰

Evangelical thought is the opposite of Catholic thought. A historian said that the obstacles to Reformation in the fifteenth century as well as in the nineteenth were 'centred in the Papacy. Everyone knows that the political obstacles were impersonated there'.... 'Rome is an amalgam of truth and error.'⁴¹

It is well-known that one of the reasons why the Reformation could not take root in Italy was the concern of Roman Catholicism to keep the country divided:⁴² on one side the formal Latin and Romanic unity, on the other side individualism. In a certain way it seems possible to think in a *systemic* manner. It was perhaps for this reason that Evangelicals were conscious that Florence would be 'the first attempt to influence a Catholic population'.⁴³ They

felt that to be near to Roman Catholicism could be a fatal seduction for the gospel that they would preach. The Evangelicals were convinced they were an alternative to Roman Catholicism because Catholicism was a factor of cultural pollution in the life of the country.

From the beginning the EA was concerned with a 'definite posture of a strong opposition both to Roman Catholicism and also to infidelity'.⁴⁴ The spiritual unity of the pioneers had a doctrinal basis and the conflict with Rome was a major factor in their thinking. 'The references to "Romanism" and "Infidelity" are elaborated with pejorative language.'⁴⁵ They realized 'the paralysing influences of the Romish Antichrist'. Evangelicals were not terrorized by such controversial issues. They were confident in the power of the gospel for salvation and spoke as such.

Prior to the 1891 conference, the Evangelical Alliance of Geneva received an invitation extended to Protestants by Pius IX in 1868, on the eve of the First Vatican Council, to come back to the fold of Rome. The Alliance answered that for Christians who submit to the authority of Scripture it was impossible to fall back under the power of Rome. The freedom of God's children was and is endangered by the tyranny of the Roman yoke. There was no way of accepting the invitation of the Pope, given the fundamental clash between Rome and the Protestant faith.

39 Redford, *Christendom*, p. 52.

40 Redford, *Christendom*, pp. 53, 55.

41 Redford, *Christendom*, pp. 61, 113.

42 N. Macchiavelli, *Discorsi I*, 1, cap. 12, AE, p. 79.

43 Macchiavelli, *Discorsi I*, p. 39.

44 Howard, *Dream*, p. 9; also Kessler, *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance*, p. 42.

45 Howard, *Dream*, p. 19.

III Some Provisional Conclusions

Based on these matters and historical facts, how can we come to a conclusion? It would be wrong to attach too much significance to these labels, but it is obvious that the future belongs to those Evangelicals who can learn from their past.

It seems that the Roman communion does not appear to be a strictly confessional body inasmuch as, since Vatican II, it is quite latitudinarian in doctrine and practice. It is not necessary to adhere strictly to the magisterial doctrine as embodied in the conciliar pronouncements or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to be regarded as a faithful Roman Catholic. What is essential is to remain in submission to the Roman see. But from the very beginning the EA was born with the conviction that the church was one; this was the reason why its task is not 'to create this unity, but to confess it'.⁴⁶ If we take for granted that 'that seminal concept not only characterized the Alliance formed in 1846, but also its subsequent history in every land and every era',⁴⁷ it seems possible to search for a more coherent approach.

It seems that until *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism* (1986), the EA was aware that it held a different perspective from that of Catholicism. It was clear that the EA and the RC Church had two different theological structures. It clearly

affirmed that it was impossible to cooperate with RC. This kind of clear polarisation was based on a different doctrinal perception. Twenty years ago, evangelical leaders were not afraid of possible disagreements with the RC Church because they knew that such contrasts were unavoidable.

But since then important changes have taken place. Great changes frequently go unnoticed when they happen under the guise of cultural change. The true nature of such changes often becomes evident only after the fact. Dialogues have a function in gaining a better perspective. The approach has been less and less global. The EA has refused in this day to fully develop its attitude toward Catholicism. There have been some episodic approaches, but nothing concrete to provide a strong identity. It is clear that a coherent vision is being lost. This is the reason why it seems urgent to develop a theological approach that will enable the EA to have a common methodological approach to the RC church. It also needs to develop secure identity as to who we once were, based on our common history as Evangelicals.

If the EA is to be the most representative international institution or agency for Evangelicals, it must have a common theological understanding of Catholicism and a confessional approach to it. The search for identity in ecumenicity needs to take into account a clear view of Roman Catholicism and the theological implications of such a union with RC. Based on our search for an enduring identity, the relationship with the Roman Catholic Church is not a secondary matter, and therefore there is a need for a common attitude toward it.

⁴⁶ Minutes of the Proceedings of the Conference held at Freemasons' Hall in London, August 19 September 2, 1846, cit. in Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, p. 19.