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Salvation Belongs to the Lord

Evangelical Consensus in Dialogue with Roman Catholicism

Leonardo De Chirico

THE CRY OF THE PROPHET Jonah in the big fish is an affirmation that expresses the biblical gospel in a nutshell (Jonah 2:9). In the midst of despair and powerlessness, the rebellious prophet cries to the Lord in repentance and faith and acknowledges that he finds himself in a deadly 'pit' and that God is the only Saviour to call upon for rescue. 'Salvation belongs to the Lord' is Jonah's final word of his prayer and is also the summary of the biblical message. At least, this is how evangelicals perceive it, articulate it and experience it.

Jonah's statement touches the heart of the evangelical faith: the need for a lost person to be saved and the prerogatives of God in granting salvation. This twofold emphasis on human need and God's gift is worked out in evangelical theology and life in such a way that it becomes a distinctive element of the evangelical faith itself and also a meaningful point of conversation with other Christian traditions.

This paper will seek to explore the evangelical doctrinal emphasis on salvation by showing its long historical trajectory and theological significance,

allowing respected evangelical voices to lead the argument.¹ The evangelical consensus, which is reflected in the *corpus* of present-day evangelical statements (mainly from the Lausanne Movement), will be used as exemplar of the general agreement that exists amongst Evangelicals. Then, the paper will turn to make reference to three recent Evangelical—Roman Catholic dialogues that have touched on the doctrine of salvation and will try to highlight some of the key questions that come to the fore that, in turn, will hopefully serve as points for further discussion.

I Salvation—a Broad and Defining Evangelical Identity-Marker

What is salvation and how to receive it

¹ Popular evangelical, yet theologically serious treatments of salvation are Ernest F. Kevan, *Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963) and David F. Wells, *The Search of Salvation* (Leicester: IVP, 1978). The bibliography of this paper will focus on resources in English.

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is a central concern of the evangelical faith. Dealing with salvation, in all its theological, experiential, evangelistic and symbolic connotations, leads to the very heart of what Evangelicalism is all about. In J. I. Packer's words,

Evangelicals have always seen the question of salvation as one of supreme importance, and their witness to the way of salvation as the most precious gift they bring to the rest of the church. This conviction rests not on the memory of the conversion of Paul or Augustine or Luther or Wesley of Whitefield or any other evangelical hero, but on the emphasis with which the Bible itself highlights salvation as its central theme.²

In Packer's view, both the evangelical understanding of the thrust of the biblical message and the main feature of its historical development as a movement are the focus of salvation. More than anything else, Evangelicalism is a 'redemptive' religion. All the different ways to describe Evangelicalism, no matter how many different angles and emphases they may cover, recognize in one form or another the centrality of salvation as a major, defining concern of the 'evangel' from which Evangelicalism derives. 'Eternal salvation through personal trust in Christ' captures the gist of the Evangelical faith.³

According to Carl Henry, the 'evan-

gel' itself can be evangelically defined as 'the momentous biblically-attested good news that God justifies sinners who for spiritual and moral salvation rely on the substitutionary person and work of Jesus Christ'.⁴ This definition of the gospel needs some theological unpacking because it is framed within evangelically distinctive language, but nonetheless shows the organic relationship between the gospel itself and the evangelical insistence on salvation. So, a certain understanding and experience of salvation lies at the heart of what Evangelicals have been standing for throughout the centuries.

1. The Biblical scope

Salvation is one of the key-terms of the Bible's soteriological vocabulary and Evangelicals are prone to emphasize this fact. Furthermore, salvation represents a wide semantic field that denotes the multifaceted, yet unitary redemptive purpose of the triune God in history.

The biblical terms of *jāsha'* (hiphil) and *mālat* (piel) in the Hebrew Bible and *sōzō* and *sōtēria* in the New Testament form the soteriological perimeter which describes God's saving action for his people and for the world as a whole.⁵ While the Old Testament words stress God's intervention to rescue from oppression, fear, sin and guilt, the New Testament terms are linked to the person and work of Jesus Christ who,

2 J.I. Packer, 'Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation' in K.S. Kantzer, C.F.H. Henry (ed.), *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 111-112.

3 This is one of the five characteristics of Evangelicalism according to George Marsden (ed.), *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ix-x.

4 Carl Henry, 'Who are the Evangelicals' in Kantzer, Henry, *Evangelical Affirmations*, 75.

5 '*soteria*' in G. Kittel—G. Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VII (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 965-1003.

as the Incarnate Son of God, crucified and risen from the dead, saves from God's judgment and delivers from evil.

In the whole Bible, the accent of salvation is placed on God and his saving initiative centred on the once-and-for-all death and resurrection of Jesus, whereas the individual is considered lost and is the recipient of God's salvation. Salvation is a broad category which is organically connected to other terms which enrich the soteriological vocabulary of the Bible. A whole cluster of related terms of the Christian life (e.g. grace, redemption, justification, rescue, being washed, healing) revolves around the terms and concepts and experiences of salvation.

The specific purpose of this paper is to touch on the evangelical understanding of God's salvation. In his usual neat and profound language, John Stott provides a useful summary of how Evangelicals perceive and articulate the rich Biblical account of salvation:

What then is salvation? It is a great word. It urgently needs to be set free from those narrow concepts to which it has often been reduced. Salvation is not a synonym for forgiveness. It is bigger and broader than that. It denotes God's total plan for man, and it includes at least three phases. Phase one is our deliverance from the guilt and judgment of our sins, our free and full forgiveness, together with our reconciliation to God and our adoption as His children. Phase two is our progressive liberation from the downdrag of evil, beginning with our new birth into the family of God and continuing with our transformation by the Spirit of Christ into the image of Christ. Phase three is our

final deliverance from the sin which lingers both in our fallen nature and in our social environment, when on the last day we shall be invested with new and glorious bodies and transferred to a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Further, these three phases, or tenses, of salvation (past, present and future) are associated in the New Testament with the three major events in the saving career of Jesus, His death, His resurrection and subsequent gift of the Spirit, and His return in power and glory. Paul calls them justification, sanctification and glorification.⁶

From Stott's summary salvation appears to have a threefold significance: a *legal* dimension whereby the person is freed from the guilt of sin and justified by grace, a *transformative* dimension whereby the person experiences conversion into the new life and becomes part of the people of God, and an *eschatological* dimension whereby the effects of sin will be eventually wiped out and the *shalom* of God will reign forever. Here the Evangelical mainstream appreciation of salvation begins to take shape and is the background of many evangelical accounts of what it means to be saved by God.

2. The 'Grace Alone, Faith Alone' trajectory

One of the claims of Evangelicalism is that, while being conscious of being historically and spiritually situated, it does not represent a new religious

⁶ John Stott, *Christ the Controversialist. The Basics of Belief* (Leicester: IVP, 21996), 109-110.

Christian movement, but stands within the orthodox historical tradition of the Christian church. Again, Stott is helpful here when he argues that Evangelicalism is not 'a new-fangled "ism", a modern brand of Christianity, but an ancient form, indeed the original one'.⁷

This claim can be applied also to the account of salvation that has been briefly sketched out. While certainly being influenced by the theological debates at the time of the Protestant Reformation and by the spiritual ethos of various subsequent Revivals, the evangelical theology of salvation can be traced first and foremost to the Bible, and secondly to the long trajectory of Christian thought. In describing the theological roots of the evangelical view of salvation, Gerald Bray argues that it is especially dependent on Augustine's doctrine of sin and grace as well as his own paramount experience of conversion as narrated in his *Confessions*, and on Anselm's satisfaction theory of Christ's atonement as argued for in the book *Cur Deus Homo*?⁸

From the former (Augustine), later evangelical theology draws from the insistence on God's gracious initiative and man's total inability, due to his sin, to cooperate in salvation. Because salvation is a free gift of God from beginning to end, our boast lies in God alone. From the latter (Anselm), it further

elaborated the doctrine of penal substitution in accounting for Christ taking the place of sinners on the cross. By his death Jesus atones for our sin and restores us to God. He died in our place, bearing the penalty for our sin.

While it can be argued that this is a selective appropriation of the Christian tradition, it must nonetheless be recognized that it is not simply a new post-Reformation development in Christian theology. There is an 'evangelical' thread running throughout all of church history of which Evangelicals are legitimate interpreters. Reflecting on the 'evangelical consensus' of the doctrine of salvation, Packer and Oden argue that it is 'the Christ-centered story of redemption that earlier creeds and confessions also told'.⁹ In this respect, Evangelicalism is nothing but 'a version of catholic Christianity, to be acknowledged and assessed as such'.

While acknowledging the organic evangelical relationship with earlier accounts of salvation, it is valid to say that the Protestant Reformation was a pivotal phase in shaping subsequent and present-day evangelical soteriology. Evangelical theology is rooted both in the 'formal principle' of the authority of Scripture and in the 'material principle' of justification by faith alone interpreted extensively to include the broader historic Protestant soteriology.¹⁰ Salvation plays a defining role in the story of evangelical theology. More

⁷ John Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, 33. In the same book, Stott argues that evangelical Christianity is 'theological', 'biblical', 'original' and 'fundamental', 27-46.

⁸ Gerald Bray, 'Evangelicals, Salvation and Church History' in Thomas P. Rausch (ed.), *Catholics and Evangelicals. Do They Share a Common Future?* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2000), 77-100.

⁹ James I. Packer, Thomas C. Oden, *One Faith. The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 163-164.

¹⁰ This is argued by Donald A. Carson, 'Evangelicals, Ecumenism and the Church' in Kantzer, Henry, *Evangelical Affirmations*, 349-354.

specifically, the evangelical theology of salvation is an offspring of the four *solus/sola* (*sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*) which were defended by Luther and by the Protestant Reformation as a whole.¹¹

All these *sola/solus* have a driving soteriological concern. The Holy Scripture is the final authority by which the gospel of salvation can be known, not in isolation from tradition but above all traditions. Christ is the only mediator between God and man and the only Saviour. Divine grace is the only ground of salvation, thus nullifying human merit. In order to be saved and have the assurance of salvation, faith alone is the only sufficient response. Human contribution can therefore play no part. The *sola/solus* of the Reformation sketch a distinctive soteriological framework that is decisive for evangelical theology.¹² The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which are the capstones of our salvation, take centre stage. Post-Reformation Evangelical theology as a whole can be thought of as being an outworking of the message of 'the cross of Christ'.¹³

Within this soteriological framework there have been and can be variations—even significant ones—on how to relate the sovereignty of God and man's responsibility (predestination and free will), or the proclamation of the gospel and the role of the sacra-

ments, or the various components of the *ordo salutis* and their mutual connections, or the position of the individual saved and the involvement of the Christian community. These and other issues have been and continue to be hotly debated between different traditions in Evangelical theology.

However, the soteriological scheme of the Reformation with its focus on God's grace and the sufficiency of the once-and-for-all saving work of Jesus Christ is the common ground for all evangelical accounts of salvation.

3. The evangelical message and experience of salvation

'Saved from sin; saved by grace; saved through faith, saved for God's glory' is a way to reaffirm the Reformation heritage of the message of salvation.¹⁴ Yet, the evangelical theology of salvation is further enriched by the insistence on the personal need for salvation and the personal responsibility to respond to God's grace in repentance and faith. The gospel is both an announcement of God's intervention to save and a summons to respond with faith.

In David Bebbington's terms, 'conversionism' (together with Biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism) captures the heart of Evangelicalism in that it recognizes the centrality of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ resulting in forgiveness of sin and a changed life.¹⁵ The Reformation doctrine of

¹¹ Robert Webber, *Common Roots. A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 26.

¹² See Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought. An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) ch. 5 on 'The doctrine of grace'.

¹³ This is the title of one of John Stott's classics: *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986).

¹⁴ These are the titles of the four parts of the book by Philip G. Ryken, *The Message of Salvation* (Leicester: IVP, 2001) and well reflect the gist of evangelical soteriology.

¹⁵ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain. A History from 1730s to the*

salvation based on *Solus Christus* is matched with the revivalist emphasis on the reality of personal conversion.

Jesus' injunction to Nicodemus, 'You must be born again' (Jn 3:7) becomes paramount for each and every person. Regeneration through conversion is the necessary threshold for salvation and is achieved by the Holy Spirit through the preaching and witness of the gospel to which people respond in repentance and faith.¹⁶ Salvation does not come by simply being born into a Christian family, nor from being part of a Christian environment. Not even being a formal member of a Christian church, nor having received a sacrament of Christian initiation earn salvation. It is not by merit, it is not by works, it is not by tradition, it is not by sacraments: it is by grace alone through conversion to Jesus Christ.

The personal experience of salvation marks the evangelical approach to salvation and to the Christian life. 'Evangelicals are those who preach the same gospel, of punctiliar conversion and immediate assurance available through faith alone.'¹⁷ This is not to suggest, however, that Evangelicals are prone to look for a single pattern and timing of conversion. In this respect, Runia correctly says that 'When it comes to the "form" of conversion, there are some differences of opinion

among evangelicals (is conversion instantaneous, so that one can mention time and place, or is it more in the nature of a process?) but generally evangelicals do not prescribe a particular method or a particular manifestation.

The emphasis is on the *fact* of conversion, not on its particular form.¹⁸ Most Evangelicals can identify with the words of John Newton (1725-1807) who in his world famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, could write: 'I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind but now I see'. Personal stories may vary considerably, but they are all characterized by a personal conversion which can be recounted in a personal biography. Evangelicalism is a conversionist Christian tradition and every Evangelical Christian is taught to be always ready to give her/his personal 'testimony', i.e. an account of her/his conversion.

The objective message of the cross is the legacy of the *sola/solus* principles of the Reformation. Together with the personal experience of salvation, it forms the foundation of much evangelical preaching of the gospel, especially of those sermons that came out of the different revivals of post-Reformation history. Again Packer and Oden are helpful here when they write that

Evangelicalism characteristically emphasizes the penal-substitutionary view of the cross and the radical reality of the Bible-taught, Spirit-wrought inward change, relational and directional, that makes a person a Christian (new birth, regener-

1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

16 There is a recent study on being 'born again' by John Piper, *Finally Alive. What Happens When We Are Born Again* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2010).

17 Stephen R. Holmes, 'Evangelical Doctrine: Basis for Unity or Cause of Division?', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 30:1 (2012), 64.

18 Klaas Runia, 'What is Evangelical Theology?', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21:4 (1997), 299.

ation, conversion, faith, repentance, forgiveness, new creation, all in and through Jesus Christ).¹⁹

John 3:16 is the single Bible verse where the gospel of God's salvation and human responsibility to believe are masterfully condensed. Evangelicals champion, memorize and extensively use John 3:16 in their spiritual pilgrimage and personal evangelism.

In the long trajectory of Evangelical history, modern revivals have put an emphasis on personal conversion as the necessary step towards salvation. The stress on conversion has also strongly influenced the evangelical preaching of the gospel that invites people to repent from sin, believe in Jesus as personal Saviour and Lord and be saved, urging people to respond and to go through a conversion experience.

The 'sinner's prayer'—'Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be'—captures an important feature of contemporary evangelical accounts of the presentation of the gospel of salvation and the expectations it produces.²⁰

In the 20th century, the global evan-

gelistic ministry of Billy Graham well epitomized a variant of this inherent combination between the objective (the cross of Christ) and the subjective (personal conversion) sides of salvation. The basic threefold structure of Graham's message (i.e. the human problem; God's solution; the way forward), as it is exemplified in his widely circulated book, *Peace With God*, reflects shared patterns of the evangelical way of understanding and presenting the message of salvation.²¹

The sheer fact that in his 60 year-long career Billy Graham has preached the gospel live to more than 210 million people in 185 different countries of the world, and that it is estimated that nearly 3 million people have responded to Jesus Christ by faith, are in themselves remarkable markers of his evangelical zeal for spreading the message of salvation. This is recognized and respected also by critical voices that advance more or less legitimate criticism on various aspects of his ministry.²²

II Salvation—Consensus of Present-Day Evangelicalism

The broad picture that has been painted of the basics of the evangelical account of salvation shows that, in spite of the significant historical, doctrinal, denominational and sociological differences that the movement reflects within itself, it is indeed possible to grasp a

19 Packer, Oden, *One Faith. The Evangelical Consensus*, 160.

20 It should be noted that the worldview of the 'sinner's prayer' is a topic of growing uneasiness in evangelical circles. It is deemed to be too simplistic, too individualistic, too modernistic, too superficial, too close to western cultural patterns of individual decision-making processes and far from other cultural patterns, etc.

21 Billy Graham, *Peace with God*, 1953 and dozens of subsequent editions and reprints.

22 Some of the criticism from 'liberal' voices are found in Michael G. Long (ed.), *The Legacy of Billy Graham. Critical Reflections on America's Greatest Evangelist* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

sufficiently unitary and coherent theological map of evangelical soteriology, at least in its essential theological contours. The 'evangel' of God's salvation in Christ to a lost world is the common ground of Evangelicalism.

This theological assessment is further corroborated by reference to various statements and documents that stem from present-day Evangelicalism. In fact, for the past fifty years different evangelical networks and circles (from the 1966 Berlin Congress on Evangelism²³ to the 2010 Lausanne III Congress on World Evangelization held in Cape Town) have been producing a manifold *corpus* of declarations, covenants, manifestos, commitments, etc. that together constitute an important reference point for our purposes. This material shows a significant and comprehensive degree of 'transdenominational evangelical consensus' across the whole spectrum of the Christian faith, written mainly in a declaratory way and with an unmistakable evangelical missional tone.²⁴

Within this broader set of documentation, the Lausanne Movement has played a leading role in helping post-World War II Evangelicalism learn to appreciate its own gospel-centred unity and to speak with one voice on the missionary nature of the church and the missionary task for the whole world by the whole of God's people.²⁵

The analysis of this vast material could push the paper beyond its proper limits. Suffice it to select some of the most significant statements on salvation and point to some of their underlining concerns. One preliminary remark is that the accounts of salvation offered by these documents are given in the context of the wider rubric of evangelism and world mission. Their primary focus is missiological.

1. The Lausanne Covenant (1974)

The Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization in 1974 is perhaps the most significant event of 20th century Evangelicalism. Under the joint leadership of Billy Graham and John Stott, it was the first evangelical conference that reflected the global nature of Evangelicalism and the growing importance of the global south, together with re-launching the missionary task of the church in terms of evangelism and social responsibility. As far as the relationship with the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, the *Lausanne Covenant* should be read together with the 1975 Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which expresses similar missiological concerns.

Here are some significant Lausanne texts on salvation:

To proclaim Jesus as 'the Saviour of the world' is not to affirm that all people are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to af-

²³ The proceedings of the Berlin Congress are published by Carl F.H. Henry, W. Stanley Mooneyham (ed.), *One Race, One Gospel, One Task*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1967).

²⁴ Packer, Oden, *One Faith. The Evangelical Consensus*, 24.

²⁵ The main Lausanne documents up to 1989 have been collected by John Stott (ed.), *Making*

Christ Known. Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement (1974-1989) (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996). Later documents, especially the 2012 Cape Town Commitment, can be found at www.lausanne.org.

firm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God's love for a world of sinners and to invite everyone to respond to him as Saviour and Lord in the whole-hearted personal commitment of repentance and faith (n. 3).

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world (n. 4).

The goal should be, by all available means and at the earliest possible time, that every person will have the opportunity to hear, understand, and to receive the good news' (n. 9).

The mainstream evangelical position is affirmed by Lausanne. Both the proclamation of the historic message of the cross of Christ and the urgency

to invite everyone to respond to it is a pressing concern. The 'cost' of conversion is mentioned (against the option of easy-believism) and the incorporation into the church is referred to as a natural result of conversion, yet without any indication of the church's sacraments.

2. The Manila Manifesto (1989)

The Second Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization took place in Manila in 1989. The outcome of the conference was a longer text than that of the Lausanne Covenant and has been given the name, *The Manila Manifesto*. It should be read in cross-reference with the 1990 Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* by John Paul II.

Here are some significant texts:

We affirm that on the cross Jesus Christ took our place, bore our sins and died our death; and that for this reason alone God freely forgives those who are brought to repentance and faith (n. 6).

We affirm that the Holy Spirit's witness to Christ is indispensable to evangelism, and that without this supernatural work neither new birth nor new life is possible (n. 10).

(5. God the Evangelist) The Scriptures declare that God himself is the chief evangelist. For the Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth, love, holiness and power, and evangelism is impossible without him. It is he who anoints the messenger, confirms the word, prepares the hearer, convicts the sinful, enlightens the blind, gives life to the dead, enables us to repent and believe, unites us to the Body of Christ, assures us that

we are God's children, leads us into Christlike character and service, and sends us out in our turn to be Christ's witnesses. In all this the Holy Spirit's main preoccupation is to glorify Jesus Christ by showing him to us and forming him in us... Every true conversion involves a power encounter, in which the superior authority of Jesus Christ is demonstrated. There is no greater miracle than this, in which the believer is set free from the bondage of Satan and sin, fear and futility, darkness and death.

At Manila the Reformation 'material principle' was clearly reaffirmed with a stress on the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. The other emphasis was on the role of the Holy Spirit in the salvation process, from the preaching of the gospel to its acceptance in conversion and the resulting Christian life. In this way, Manila welcomes the Pentecostal insistence on the work of the Spirit, but places it in the context of classical Reformation theology of salvation.

3. The Amsterdam Declaration (2010)

Born as the result of an International Conference of Preaching Evangelists (sponsored and led by Billy Graham), the *Amsterdam Declaration* is an affirmation of Evangelical convictions for the New Millennium aimed at nurturing the vision for world mission and personal evangelism.²⁶

²⁶ The proceedings of the conference and the *Amsterdam Declaration* can be found in *The Mission of an Evangelist* (Minneapolis: World Wide, 2001).

Salvation. The word means rescue from guilt, defilement, spiritual blindness and deadness, alienation from God, and certainty of eternal punishment in hell, that is everyone's condition while under sin's dominion. This deliverance involves present justification, reconciliation to God and adoption into his family, with regeneration and the sanctifying gift of the Holy Spirit leading to works of righteousness and service here and now, and a promise of full glorification in fellowship with God in the future. This involves in the present life joy, peace, freedom and the transformation of character and relationships and the guarantee of complete healing at the future resurrection of the body. We are justified by faith alone and the salvation faith brings is by grace alone, through Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. (Definition 7)

Amsterdam stresses the sinfulness of man and therefore echoes the anthropological pessimism of much of the evangelical tradition. Hell is also cited as the 'condition' for unsaved sinners to be in. The twofold temporal dimension of salvation—i.e. present: justification, reconciliation, adoption, regeneration, sanctification, transformation and future: full glorification—is referred to. The statement ends with a strong affirmation of the *sola, solus* of the Reformation.

4. The Cape Town Commitment (2010)

The last Evangelical global statement is the result of the third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization that took place in Cape Town in 2010. For

the first time, a congress of this size and scope happened without the direct participation of the two main evangelical leaders of the post World War II period, namely Billy Graham and John Stott (who died the following year), both aged and no longer capable of public commitments.

The Commitment was a further elaboration of the 1974 *Covenant* and the 1989 *Manifesto*, with an even more 'missional' emphasis on the over-arching theme of love. Mission is considered as God's mission that empowers the church's holistic mission in word and deed.

Note the 2010 coincidence between Lausanne III and Benedict XVI's creation of the new Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization. After Lausanne I and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1974), then after Lausanne II and *Redemptoris Missio* (1989), one sees yet another missiological parallel between the evangelical movement and the Roman Catholic Church.

Concerning the account of salvation, here is a significant text of the Cape Town Commitment:

We love the assurance the gospel brings. Solely through trusting in Christ alone, we are united with Christ through the Holy Spirit and are counted righteous in Christ before God. Being justified by faith we have peace with God and no longer face condemnation. We receive the forgiveness of our sins. We are born again into a living hope by sharing Christ's risen life. We are adopted as fellow heirs with Christ. We become citizens of God's covenant people, members of God's family and the place of God's dwelling. So by trusting in Christ, we have full assurance

of salvation and eternal life, for our salvation ultimately depends, not on ourselves, but on the work of Christ and the promise of God. 'Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' How we love the gospel's promise! God commands us to make known to all nations the truth of God's revelation and the gospel of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ, calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship. (8.C)

The standard evangelical view of salvation is rehearsed with its traditional emphasis on the 'Christ alone' grounds of salvation and the calling to make the gospel known to the whole world. The theme of Christian assurance is also evoked as stemming from salvation. The church is contemplated as the 'covenant people', 'God's family', and 'the place of God's dwelling', so to convey the message of salvation as not an overtly individualistic bent, but as an ecclesiological thrust.

Quite remarkably for an evangelical document of this kind, 'baptism' is also referred to as part of the calling to be extended to all nations. There is no hint of sacramental language, though. Even the position of baptism in the fourfold sequence is interesting in that it places baptism *after* repentance and faith, so as to allow an understanding of baptism as an ordinance that does not sacramentally *cause* repentance and faith, but rather follows them. The reference to baptism is nonetheless interesting with regards to the next section that deals with recent dialogues between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics on salvation.

III Case Studies—Evangelical—Roman Catholic Dialogue

The topic of salvation has been central in recent dialogues between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Given its biblical pervasiveness, its historical and doctrinal significance in the Christian tradition, and its paramount importance in defining both the evangelical and the Roman Catholic identities after the Reformation, it should not be surprising that this is the case.

Several Protestant denominations and traditions have been dialoguing with the Roman Catholic Church on the doctrine of salvation at different levels and with different focuses. What will be taken into consideration here is the dialogues that have taken place between self-defined evangelical bodies or self-defined evangelical groups and Roman Catholic representatives, both officially nominated and informally convened. The theme of salvation runs through the wider conversation and it is not often the main focus of it. Nonetheless, for the future of the dialogue it is necessary to take into account previous attempts at discussing various aspects of the doctrine of salvation.

1. The Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (1977-1984)

Between 1977 and 1984 representative groups of Evangelicals and Roman Catholics met on three occasions for intensive dialogue on mission under the leadership of John Stott and Basil Meeking.²⁷ ERCDOM was the outcome

of this particular historical phase which both Roman Catholic and Evangelical constituencies experienced.

On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council with the decree, *Ad Gentes*, was integrated by Paul VI's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in 1975, and put mission back on the Roman Catholic agenda. On the other hand, the Evangelical International Congress on World Evangelization which took place in Lausanne in 1974 fully confirmed the traditional Evangelical emphasis on mission in the *Lausanne Covenant*.

Recognizing this parallel interest in mission, ERCDOM resolved to be 'a faithful record of the ideas shared' (11) in which the brief exposition of both positions was followed by the honest indication of areas of disagreement as well as points of agreement. Our interest here has to do with the section on 'The Gospel of Salvation'.

Participants found areas of consensus on the inseparability of 'repentance and faith, conversion and baptism, regeneration and incorporation into the Christian community' (57-60) as well as on 'certain convictions about the Church' (65-69). On the whole, ERCDOM testifies to the reality that 'deep truths unite' Evangelicals and Roman Catholics (82-83), and that on certain fundamental doctrines their understanding is 'identical or very similar' (88).

This, however, is only one side of the coin. ERCDOM also clearly shows that 'divisions continue' (82) and that they are rooted in 'real and important convictions' (83) that the two counter-

²⁷ John Stott, Basil Meeking (ed.), *The Evangelical—Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission*

1977-1984 (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986).

parts wholeheartedly hold as essential elements of their doctrinal identity. Beside other areas of disagreement, the Report refers to the understanding of the soteriological significance of the work of Christ.

In this respect, Evangelicals stress the word 'substitution', whereas Catholics prefer the word 'solidarity' (43). On the basis of this divergence, the meaning of the word 'gospel' can change considerably. Moreover, there is the recognition that profound divergences are apparent in the doctrine of sin where Evangelicals are more pessimistic, stressing the concept of 'total depravity' while Roman Catholics are more optimistic, speaking of sin in terms of 'injury' and 'disorder' (40). Somewhat analogously, Evangelicals are referred to as underlining 'discontinuity' whereas Catholics focus on 'continuity' between man redeemed and man unredeemed (73). Consequently, the meaning of the term grace is articulated 'somewhat differently' (60).

Finally, an appendix to the proceedings is dedicated to Mariology, giving Evangelicals an occasion to express all their 'uneasiness' with a 'certainly ambiguous and probably misleading' vocabulary with soteriological implications used by Roman Catholics in relation to Mary (52).²⁸

On the whole, ERCDOM reflects a responsible ethos of dialogue on salvation. On the one hand it tries to allow both traditions to speak in their own terms and to compare the respective languages, thought-forms and expres-

sions of what they believe. Common features are appreciated and differences are not hidden nor minimised. On the other, though, it makes the effort to show awareness of wider theological issues that undergird the accounts of salvation. Salvation is not an isolated theological topic but has multiple connections with the whole of one's own 'system' of beliefs.

2. World Evangelical Fellowship-Pontifical Council Discussions (1993, 2003)

After the publication of the 1986 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism' by the World Evangelical Fellowship,²⁹ conversations began between WEF and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. The first official event between the delegations was held in October 1993 in Venice with 'Justification, Scripture and Tradition' as the general theme.

The choice of such a triangular topic was the result of a compromise. The Pontifical Council's proposal to focus on a fundamental issue like Scripture and tradition was fully endorsed. Yet, Evangelicals felt that the doctrine of justification by faith could not be ignored and pressed for it to be included in the course of the discussion.³⁰ The outcome of the agreement was thus,

²⁸ A more detailed examination of ERCDOM can be found in my book, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 113-118.

²⁹ Paul Schrotenboer (ed.), *Roman Catholicism. A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

³⁰ Paul Schrotenboer, 'Introduction', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21:2 (1997) pp. 101-102. WEF had previously sponsored an international symposium on justification by faith: Donald A. Carson (ed.), *Justification in the Bible and the World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1992).

'Justification, Scripture and Tradition'.

In his paper,³¹ George Vandervelde surveys the US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on justification, pointing out the 'convergences' as well as the persisting 'contrasting perspectives' that emerged as a result of the bilateral dialogue. The whole discussion is presented against the background of the Reformation *versus* Trent controversy. One aspect which deserves mentioning is that both parties now agree that justification by faith is only 'a criterion, not *the* criterion for the authenticity of the Church' as the Lutheran tradition used to maintain with the famous saying, *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.

On this point, Vandervelde introduces a distinction between a 'necessary and sufficient criteria' for guiding the church (146). Justification belongs to the former, not to the latter, in that 'salvation in Christ is too rich, too deep and broad, to be captured by the soteriological cutting edge' of this doctrine (147). On the whole, this dialogue touches on salvation only through a historical overview of the controversy over justification by faith, but does not really grapple with the issue.³²

More substantial is the contribution on the topic of salvation by the 2003 study document, 'Church, Evangelization and the Bonds of Koinonia' which stemmed out of the dialogue between the World Evangelical Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity.³³

According to the drafters, 'a common reflection on the biblical notion of *koinonia* would help us to clarify some convergences and differences between us on the church'. The relevant passages of the document are the following:

(5) For both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics communion with Christ involves a transformative union whereby believers are '*koinonoi* of the divine nature and escape the corruption that is in the world by lust' (2 Pt 1:4). 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.

Here an important point is rightly highlighted. The word *koinonia* has obvious links with salvation, and because of that it is interpreted differently by Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. A participatory meaning is preferred in Catholic theology (based on a less radical view of sin, a more optimistic anthropology, a highly sacramental framework and a *de iure divino* hierarchical ecclesiology) whereas a covenantal significance is given priority by Evangelicals (such as referring to covenant-breaking and covenant-renewal, condemnation and acquittal, enmity and reconciliation, as it is stated in n. 58).

The word 'fellowship' is the same, yet its meaning is different. Words do not stand in isolation but are part of

31 George Vandervelde, 'Justification between Scripture and Tradition', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21:2 (1997), 128-148.

32 More details on this Venice consultation can be found in my *Evangelical Theological Perspectives*, 131-135.

33 The text can be accessed at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20111220-report-1993-2002_en.html

theological frameworks that inform what they mean. In dialogue we can use the same words, yet we have to be sure that we understand what it is meant by those who use them.

3. The Gift of Salvation (1997)

1994 marked the release of the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (ECT) statement in the USA. It was the outcome of an informal dialogue that emerged out of the 'culture wars' that North America was experiencing between secularizing tendencies and more religious approaches to public life.³⁴ The first result of this initiative was a shorter document released in November 1997 under the title of *The Gift of Salvation* (GOS).³⁵ Sponsored and led by the same authors as ECT, namely Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus, GOS can be thought of as being an elucidation of the 'We Affirm Together' of the previous document. The filial connection is also evoked when GOS is sometimes referred to as ECT II.

Granting the decisive importance of *sola fide* in historic Protestantism and noting the 'noisy silence' in ECT over it, Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul defined it as 'the missing doctrine' of the statement.³⁶ Taking these reserva-

tions seriously into account, ECT drafters eventually decided to engage in the debate precisely over the crucial issue of *sola fide*. In this way they wished to demonstrate that the kind of ecumenism favoured by the participants was an 'ecumenism of conviction', not one of 'accommodation'³⁷ as was charged against the vagueness of ECT on various matters.

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 upon version of *sola fide*. With this development, the ECT process has gained some 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'.³⁸

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

34 Charles Colson, Richard J. Neuhaus (ed.), *Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publ., 1995). In this section I use parts of my article published as 'Christian Unity vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism: a Critique of the Evangelicals and Catholics Together Dialogue', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27:4 (2003) pp. 337-352.

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

36 R.C. Sproul, *By Faith Alone. The Doctrine that Divides* (London: Hodder & Stoughton,

1995), 22-24.

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

38 George, Oden, Packer, 'Open Letter'.

common understanding of salvation'.³⁹

Without making any reference to the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue nor to any other relevant ecumenical documents 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. The problem of ambiguity is 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'.⁴⁰ GOS only affirms 'ingredients' of *sola fide*, not *sola fide* itself.

It is fair to say that 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 and Catholic signatories 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 transforma-

tive 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' that ECT was able to express, GOS is somewhat wanting. In Sproul's telling words, 'the ECT initiative ... proclaims too much way too soon'.⁴¹

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', thus by no means implying 'a unity of faith with the church of Rome'.⁴² 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.⁴³

GOS is therefore a further exercise in the on-going Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue on salvation which

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

40 R.C. Sproul, *What ECTII Ignores. The inseparable link between imputation and the gospel*, *Modern Reformation* (Sept/Oct 1998). Other criticisms by Sproul to the whole ECT initiative are echoed in his book, *Getting the Gospel Right. The Tie that Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

41 R.C. Sproul, *What ECTII Ignores*. 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), 82.

42 George, Oden, Packer, *Open Letter*, italics original.

43 Gerald Bray, 'Editorial', *Churchman* 113 (1999), 197.

shows some merits as well as some weaknesses. Its primary merit is that it rightly addresses the core issue of the historical and theological division that has existed since the time of the Reformation in a fresh way and with an open-minded attitude. The major weakness is that the conversation needs to be more historically conscious, theologically careful and ecumenically alert than previous contributions to both ECT and GOS have been.

IV Towards Future Conversations

The doctrine, experience, message and symbolic significance of salvation represent the core of the evangelical faith. The same could be argued as far as the Roman Catholic faith is concerned. Yet differences remain because salvation is received, lived out, and accounted for in different ways. Building on past experiences of dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics and given the fact that this dialogue will continue, it is important to learn the art of dialogue in a theologically informed, historically conscious, and pastorally alert way. The following are some broad perspectives which can be helpful in pushing the conversation further without losing sight of wider issues and concerns.

Christian doctrines are part of a more or less coherent theological system. The doctrine of salvation is no exception. It is rooted in the triune life of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; it is based on his grace alone that saves sinners and renews the world; it is anchored in the unique person and the once-and-for-all work of Jesus Christ and his mediatorship; it is

grounded in the on-going work of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, it presupposes man's sinful condition and total inability to be reconciled to God; it is attested to in the written and inspired Word of God; it is related to the whole of the Christian life that is changed by salvation; it is linked to the life of the church and its ordinances; and it is connected to the eschatological hope of the resurrection and eternal life.

The list could go on in spelling out all the doctrinal dimensions of the Christian faith and in appreciating their multiple relationships. What matters here is that salvation stands in the middle of a theological web, and is an organic part of the whole Christian vision.

The evangelical doctrine of salvation, in its essential yet coherent account, is not isolated from other biblical doctrines that define the evangelical faith. The same is true as far as Roman Catholicism is concerned. When Evangelicals and Roman Catholics discuss their respective soteriologies they do so with a specific focus on the topic itself, but also in its being part of their comprehensive theological meta-narrative.

With many theological issues that are organically related to salvation, there are different degrees of consensus or dissent between Evangelicals and Catholics that come to the fore as dialogue proceeds. Instead of stifling mutual understanding, the awareness of the respective theological 'system' helps to clarify the merits of one specific topic and allows one to grasp it responsibly. How is salvation related to the whole of the theological system? How does it impact the system and how

is impacted by it? How does it translate into spiritual practices?

Evangelicals tend to view salvation in *relational* categories whereby God saves lost sinners in reconciling them to himself by the work of Christ alone. The whole theological vocabulary of salvation is relational in focus and intent: regeneration (life language), justification (juridical language), adoption (familial language), and conversion (language of change). These are all pictures that depict the re-enacted relationship between God and man in different ways.

Evangelicals find it difficult to think of salvation in sacramental terms. In the evangelical understanding and experience of salvation, the sacraments are important, but not prominent. They are in the background, of course, as part of the God-given and Scripture-attested life of the church, but are not essential to salvation and the theological account of salvation.⁴⁴ To put it simply: Evangelicals would not say that they are saved because they have been baptized or because they are regular participants at Communion services.

The basic view of salvation is that it is God's free gift, in spite of ourselves, through the work of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection. John Stott is again helpful here:

If there is no saving merit either in our good works or in our faith, there is no saving merit in the mere reception of the sacraments either... It is not by the mere outward administra-

tion of water in baptism that we are cleansed and receive the Spirit, nor by the mere gift of bread and wine in Communion that we feed on Christ crucified, but by faith in the promises of God thus visibly expressed, a faith which is itself meant to be illustrated in our humble, believing acceptance of these signs. But we must not confuse the signs with the promises which they signify. It is possible to receive the sign without receiving the promise, and also to receive the promise apart from receiving the sign.⁴⁵

The cross, not the Eucharist, has centre-stage in the evangelical horizon.⁴⁶ The *hapax* (once-and-for-all) significance of the cross is emphasized much more than the *mallon* (more and more) aspect of the Eucharist.⁴⁷ Each evangelical tradition has its own sacramentology, but it does not lie at the 'centre' of the evangelical faith. Nor does sacramental language define the grammar and vocabulary of the evangelical understanding of salvation.

When Evangelicals and Catholics converse about salvation, a relational theological mindset is exposed to a sacramental theological mindset and vice versa. Many words and expressions are the same, but their theologi-

⁴⁴ This aspect is well presented in the 1996 WEF document on Roman Catholicism: Paul Schrottenboer (ed.), *Roman Catholicism. A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective*, par. 8.

⁴⁵ John Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, 120-121.

⁴⁶ See my 'The Cross and the Eucharist: the Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church', *European Journal of Theology* VIII (1999/1), 49-59.

⁴⁷ On the *hapax* and *mallon* as defining categories for Evangelical theology, see John Stott, *Evangelical Truth. A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), pp. 34-38.

cal meanings are different because of the distance between their underlying, fundamental frameworks.

Linked to the evangelical uneasiness towards sacramental language is the place of the church in the account of salvation. Salvation is a *personal* salvation through the unique mediation of Christ. The emphasis is put on the direct relationship between the person saved and Christ, rather than on the church as a corporate agent that administers grace.

Stemming from the once-and-for-all work of Christ and the firm promises of the gospel, Evangelicals also experience a high degree of the assurance of salvation. Salvation is *certain* because of the juridical significance of justification and the eschatological trustworthiness of God's covenant promises. 'If I die today, I will go to heaven' is the standard evangelical language.

Sometimes this attitude is perceived as arrogant and misplaced, yet it reflects the 'grace alone', 'faith alone' and 'Christ alone' emphases of the

evangelical account of salvation. Indeed, salvation belongs to the Lord and those who receive it can be assured of it, despite their failures. Generally speaking, Roman Catholics find it difficult to appropriate this assurance, and this reluctance derives from a different way of approaching salvation.

We could also touch on the different anthropological views that form the basis of the different accounts of salvation. How much, for example, does the *homo capax dei* tradition affect Roman Catholic soteriology and the evangelical puzzlement over it because of its apparently overt optimism? How deep is the respective doctrine of man's sin as the natural condition that prevents any contribution on his part for his salvation?

Dialogue is a means of elucidating all of these dimensions. They are all inter-related because of the comprehensive and articulated nature of Christian theology. Staying on the surface could allow a faster dialogue but its quality and usefulness would suffer.