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Pursuing a Hermeneutic of Trust in Evangelical–Catholic Dialog

Joel Elowsky

The most recent consultation between the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) took place over seven years spanning several continents. Its goal was not to produce a document expressing agreement, but to foster true dialog and conversation in an environment characterized by trust rather than suspicion.

Therefore, the resulting document is not so much a statement as the beginning of a conversation. It is designed not only to help the two sides understand each other better, but also to offer questions and challenges that might promote further understanding and conversation at the local level.

From the start, we agreed that we would not craft a 'top-down' document that would gloss over disagreements to provide a veneer of unity. Rather, our purpose was to foster an environment in which we could talk candidly but also fraternally with people with whom we have real disagreements. We hope that the same thing will also happen at the grass-roots level as Evangelicals and Catholics use our document as a model for how to begin or to continue talking to one another.

The initial points of the consultation focused on social issues on which Evangelicals and Catholics could for the most part agree. On social justice, abortion and co-belligerency in the cultural wars, Evangelicals and Catholics could offer each other mutual support without too much difficulty. Many of these issues had been discussed in previous dialogs or in other venues.

The leaders of the consultation then decided to go in a different direction for our subsequent work together, probing areas where both sides knew there was significant disagreement. This of course would also entail significant risk. We felt, however, that Evangelicals and Catholics need to start talking with each other about the more substantive theological issues that divide us.

We have since come to realize that there are some who view *any* such discussion of theological issues—with an ear towards a sympathetic understanding of the other—as already giving too much away and departing from the spirit of the Reformers themselves, who were quite assertive in their condemnations. Yet we were heartened by the realization that the Reformers of

Joel Elowsky (PhD, Drew University) is an ordained Lutheran pastor who currently serves as professor of historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. He was previously research director and operations manager for the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity Press) and associate professor of theology at Concordia University Wisconsin. Dr Elowsky has written or edited about a dozen books and authored numerous articles on early Christianity.

the sixteenth century were willing to affirm areas of agreement even as they also highlighted areas of disagreement.

I. Scripture and Tradition

The relationship between Scripture and Tradition was one of the foundational disagreements during the Reformation. Luther's emphasis on the three *solas*—*sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*—was at the heart of this disagreement.

Luther knew that the word *sola* ('alone') was a non-starter for Roman Catholics on any of these points; for Catholics, Scripture needed tradition, grace needed human effort, faith needed works. Already in the mid-1530s, Luther had called for a council to deal with these issues. He thought a council might be called in the late 1530s, and the Schmalkaldic League was organized for just such an action, with Luther composing the Schmalkald Articles in 1537 in preparation. But Luther would not see such an event in his lifetime.

As Luther's death was drawing near, Pope Paul III¹ called the Council of Trent in 1545 to deal with the challenges of the Reformation, resulting in what has been called the Counter-Reformation. The Council's fourth session, on Scripture and Tradition, emphasized the disagreement perhaps even more sharply than the Reformers had done.

The Reformers and the Catholics disagreed on the very nature of Scripture itself. Trent included in its list of canonical Scripture the Deutero-canon-

ical books, referred to as the Apocrypha by both the ancients and the Protestants. The Protestants had excluded the Apocrypha from the authoritative texts of Scripture and felt justified in doing so on the basis of Scripture and church history.²

The Council of Trent defined the old Vulgate Latin edition of the Bible as the authoritative text and translation of the Catholic Church.³ Luther and other Evangelicals, in the meantime, had been going back to the original Greek and Hebrew, translating them into German and other present-day languages.

Other canons in Trent's fourth session drew the strongest objections from Evangelicals, however. These canons asserted that no one should presume to interpret the Scriptures 'contrary to that sense which is held by the holy mother Church, whose duty it is to judge regarding the true sense and interpretation of holy Scriptures, or judge regarding the true sense and interpretation of holy Scriptures, or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers'.⁴

The first decree of the Council's fourth session stated that the church, 'following the examples of the ortho-

1 The council lasted through the time periods of two other popes, Pope Julius III and Pope Pius IV.

2 The Protestant response regarding the inclusion of the Apocrypha or Deutero-canonical books in the canon was that the ancient church had always made a distinction between these books and the canon utilized at Nicea and other subsequent councils and synods.

3 This was promulgated in the First and Second Decrees of the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent, 8 April 1546. Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publishers, 1954, rpt. 2004), 244–46.

4 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 245.

dox Fathers, receives and holds in veneration with an *equal affection of piety and reverence*⁵ all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament, since one God is the author of both, *and also the traditions themselves*, those that appertain both to faith and to morals, as having been dictated either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Spirit and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.⁶

In essence, Trent placed Scripture and tradition on the same authoritative footing, largely (it would seem) in response to the Protestant Evangelicals' pitting of Scripture against the Church and against traditions that had developed over time as part of the church's faith and life. The battle lines that had been drawn during Luther's time were now etched in stone in the Council's canons: *sola scriptura* versus *scriptura et traditiones*. And there they have largely remained through Vatican II and up to the present day. Vatican II's *Verbum Dei* 9 reiterates Trent's assertion that 'both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.'⁷

5 The Latin reads *pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia suscipit et veneratur*. See J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, eds., *The Christian Faith: In the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 1996), 96.

6 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 244 (emphasis mine).

7 It precedes this statement by noting, 'Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under

II. Suspicion or Trust

The WEA-PCPCU consultation document does not gloss over this history or over the disagreements of the past or the present.⁸ It does, however, deliberately choose not to approach either side of the debate with a hermeneutic of suspicion—which frankly has been the *modus operandi* between Catholics and Evangelicals for most of the 500 years we have spent apart.

Some people felt that even this step—i.e. operating from a hermeneutic of trust—was already a betrayal of the gains that the Reformation had won, especially in countries where Catholic hegemony still holds sway. But the hermeneutic of trust did not betray our continued recognition that we operate with different canons and understandings of Scripture.

We also came to realize, after talking candidly with one another in a spirit of trust that developed over seven years, that we held many things in common, such as the inerrancy of Scripture and its efficacious nature,

the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed.'

8 See the paper I wrote for one of the consultation meetings, published as Joel C. Elowsky, 'Scripture and Tradition in an Evangelical Context', *Concordia Journal* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 41–64, available online at https://is-suu.com/concordiasem/docs/cj_winter_2016_final.

i.e. that it accomplishes what it sets out to do in leading us into all truth. We both agreed that we expect no further revelation than what Scripture has revealed, and we agreed on the canon of the New Testament, while remaining in disagreement about the extent of the Old Testament text.

We even began to notice statements in which Catholics said that Scripture is ‘the highest authority in matters of faith’.⁹ Growing up in what I might characterize as an anti-Catholic home, I would never have believed that Catholics had said such things, let alone placed them in official statements. It was also heartening to see that the Catholic arguments we encountered in the consultation were based primarily on Scripture and not on Tradition. There are copious citations of Scripture throughout the document.

We as Evangelicals came to realize that a renaissance is taking place among many in the Roman Catholic Church who recognize that Scripture needs to play a more central role in faith and life—and that laity and clergy alike desire this to be so. And we rejoiced in that, even as we also expressed some reservations in our ‘Fraternal Questions of Concern’, noting that other official Catholic statements seem to contradict the high view of Scripture that we witnessed in the consultation.

We also had to acknowledge that Catholics, in a spirit of trust and hu-

mility, were able to challenge Evangelicals concerning the authority operative in our own interpretation of Scripture. They pointed out that we do not operate with a magisterium or tradition as our guide. This is true. But what *does* serve as authority for Evangelicals when differing interpretations of Scripture arise, we were asked?

Scripture interprets Scripture, we typically say. But our Catholics counterparts observed that we have Evangelicals on opposite sides of issues quoting Scripture and coming to contradictory conclusions on many issues, such as the sacraments, charismatic gifts or decision theology. How do we respond? What serves as the arbiter for interpretation of Scripture when there mutually exclusive interpretations of Scripture are offered among Evangelicals?

Tradition, liturgy, sacraments, church fathers—we came to recognize that these are foreign concepts among a fair number of Evangelicals. Catholics in the dialog sought to create better understanding about some of these issues. But a hermeneutic of distrust remained at this point among some who believed that the core doctrine of salvation was at stake. They perceived the sacraments, the liturgy, and tradition as taking away from the *solas*—adding something we must do (e.g. liturgy or sacraments) to our faith, or including other authorities (Tradition or church fathers) alongside the authority of Scripture.

The Catholics pointed out an obvious but largely unstated issue that the WEA itself must grapple with: the WEA ‘brings together Christian communities with a common statement of faith, but also with great diversity’ (paragraph

⁹ *Ut unum sint* (‘That They May Be One’), encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, 25 May 1995, paragraph 79, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html.

41 of the statement). This diversity, though in many ways a strength of the WEA, also makes agreement on issues such as the sacraments and ecclesiology seem almost impossible among Evangelicals.

All members of the consultation, though, acknowledged that the Lord's supper and baptism are not only mentioned in Scripture but occupy a prominent place in Christian faith and life in the early church.

III. The Pattern of the Consultation: Affirmation and Questioning

In our conversations, we tried to follow the pattern that the Reformers themselves used in such documents as the Augsburg Confession, which in its opening articles affirms agreement with the Roman church on various issues. We also followed the Reformers' example of prioritizing areas of disagreement that are essential to the Gospel.

Furthermore, we recognized that those coming from the Catholic tradition might have something to teach Evangelicals, especially concerning blind spots that may have developed with regard to ecclesiology, conversion and the doctrine of salvation. But we also felt that we would be better heard by our interlocutors if we asked questions instead of issuing statements. The goal of such questions was to seek genuine clarification and move the conversation forward; we did not ask 'gotcha' kinds of questions designed simply to show how the other side was wrong, and we did seek to offer words of encouragement where appropriate.

For instance, the evangelical em-

phasis on individual faith and conversion was challenged by Catholics, who noted the benefits of being called into the community of the church where our faith can be strengthened and built up. In response, we Evangelicals indicated that we were encouraged by 'the communal dimension of salvation we see evidenced [by Catholics] over against individualistic tendencies which have characterized some trends in Protestantism' (paragraph 56).

The Evangelical impression of Catholic piety has long been that membership in a parish and attendance at mass were sufficient for salvation. But we found that Catholics were just as disturbed as Evangelicals over the trend of viewing church membership itself as salvific if that membership is not followed up by a life of discipleship (paragraph 57).

We had an especially heartening conversation on the issue of certainty of salvation. Catholics, on one hand, perceived Evangelicals as holding to a 'once saved, always saved' mentality, which the Catholics interpreted as a form of presumption. From the Catholic perspective, it seems as if Evangelicals think that they can sin with impunity because God will always forgive. Evangelicals, for their part, challenged Catholics as to why they talked only about their 'hope' and not their 'assurance' of being saved, especially given the abundance of promises found in Scripture that provide such assurance (paragraph 60).

The tension in evidence here was between the Evangelical over-familiarity with God, where Jesus is more like a coach or best friend, and the Catholic distance from a God who stands at a remote distance as judge and expects

good works for someone to be saved. Both views, which are common among laity and clergy, need to be probed further.

The questions with which we challenged each other can perhaps serve as a diagnostic tool in challenging some of the easy assumptions under which both Evangelicals and Catholics operate at times. How should pastoral care handle troubled consciences or secure sinners, for instance? Such questions are directly relevant to the grass-roots level of what ordinary Catholics and Evangelicals experience.

Other questions concerning the language of merit found among Catholics, as well as the Catholic teaching on the sacraments and their efficacy with respect to episcopal ordination, would certainly need further discussion and clarification for Evangelicals. But in the same way, the Evangelical understanding of ecclesiology and ministry and Evangelicals' varied views of the sacraments and ordinances need further clarification too. Catholics also challenged the Evangelical emphasis on decision theology, which they viewed as placing the onus of assurance on the believer's decision rather than on God's promises.

Finally, further discussion is needed on the meaning of the possibility of

salvation outside the church or outside of faith. Evangelicals are glad to hear that Catholics are open to the former, but concerned that Catholics might believe the latter (paragraph 60).

IV. Conclusion

No one who reads this document fairly can pretend that the real differences between Evangelicals and Catholics in doctrine and practice are being papered over or minimized. Papal infallibility, the Marian dogmas, purgatory, and other developments in Catholic Tradition still appear, from an Evangelical viewpoint, contrary to the clear witness of Scripture, and we raised these concerns clearly in our questions to Catholics.

But the document also provides Evangelicals with a constructive challenge to explore more fully what we believe and what we practice. Are we as consistent as we think we are? How does Scripture really function as our authority? How do we view the church in relation to our salvation? The consultation members hope that the conversation will not only continue but become deeper as God's people are guided by Scripture and as the Holy Spirit continues to work in and through his church.