

***Evangelicals and Catholics together—
adhering to two brands of Christianity?***

Five centuries ago, Western Christianity split into two groups—Catholics and Protestants. Many today are calling for a reconsideration of the split, urging for more dialogue and better understanding. Certainly the weight of eternity and God’s glory demand a careful and informed decision.

Presented here are some facts that a young man in seminary learned when he examined the debate for himself in the light of Scripture. This paper is not as thorough as it could be, but it bears the mark of fresh discovery. You too may find it helpful.

*The first to plead his case seems right,
until another comes and examines him.*

—Proverbs 18:17 (NASB)

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Evangelicals and Catholics **A Young Seminarian** **Looks at an Old Debate**



Robert A. Snyder

Evangelicals and Catholics

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To those
in their twenties,
who are examining this debate
for the first time.

Preface

This research paper is from a twenty-five-year-old seminary student, who took advantage of a national controversy over “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” to examine for himself the legitimacy of Roman Catholicism. At the time, his seminary professor questioned the need for re-examination, as if the topic had been clearly settled for all time. Since then, however, the author has learned through lengthy interactions with college students that many students from an evangelical background wrestle with Roman Catholicism. Accordingly, this paper is published *as is* (with minor corrections), in order to let one twenty-five-year-old to speak to other young men and women about the facts he found. May the Lord Jesus Christ use this paper to give helpful information to those in a season of personal exploration and identification.

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Jonesville, Michigan
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Protestant Identity Crisis

The Need to Differentiate

Believers come in contact with Roman Catholics almost every day, but may wonder who these people are. Is it even proper to distinguish between “Catholics” and “believers”? Many believers know Catholics who seem to live more loving and generous lives than many professing Christians. These Catholics revere the Scriptures, venerate Jesus of Nazareth, and believe in keeping God’s moral commandments. So how should these “good Catholics”¹ be viewed? Are they self-righteous hypocrites following after the great apostate church? Or are they deluded unbelievers innocently trapped by cunning liturgy and tradition? Or are they genuine believers in Jesus Christ with slightly different beliefs, worship-forms, and tradition? After all, no believer is ever 100% error-free in his thinking, so how can one professing believer deduce that another

¹ This term is borrowed from J. I. Packer (“Why I Signed It,” *Christianity Today*, 12 December 1994, p. 35) and will be explained more fully later.

professing believer is really not a believer simply on the basis of beliefs? This seems presumptuous.

Even more basic, why should such an examination of beliefs be done? Does not this type of endeavor lead to a suspicious spirit, which views any belief different than one's own with extreme skepticism?

In answer, it must be granted that extreme narrowness in one's beliefs is a mark of pride. Every believer should have some level of tolerance toward other believers with differing opinions on many matters of practice. Paul commanded, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions...Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Rom 14:1,4).² The catch is that this command works only for those with a common master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

What today's generation seems to forget is that there are many beliefs that a person must have to even be a Christian, a *believer*. Conversely, there are beliefs which condemn a person who believes them—

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

automatically.³ Love demands that these beliefs be enunciated so that people will be warned not to embrace them for their own soul's eternal good. In light of the Holy Spirit's explicit revelation to Paul "that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons," Paul reassures the young preacher Timothy, "In pointing out these things [i.e. the truth in opposition to the false teaching, vv. 3-5], you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 4:1-6). Consistently paying close attention to one's life and doctrine insures salvation for the preacher's congregation (1 Tim 4:16). The difficulty lies in trying to differentiate between differences of interpretation that believers can have (and yet still be believers), and those absolutes of "the faith" which must

³ A quick reading of the New Testament can give a starter list of absolutes. For example: the Trinity (Matt 28:19; 1 John 2:22-23), Jesus' full deity (John 8:24), Jesus' incarnation (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7; 1 Tim 3:16), Jesus' bodily resurrection (Rom 4:22-24; 10:9-10), bodily resurrection in general (1 Cor 15:16-17; 2 Tim 2:18), Jesus' lordship (Rom 10:9-10), the existence of God (Heb 11:6), God rewards those who seek Him (Heb 11:6), substitutionary atonement (1 Cor 15:3), and the second coming of Christ (1 Thess 1:8-10).

The list could be greatly expanded. Of particular importance to the Catholic-Protestant rift is the Galatian heresy, which Paul emphatically declared to be damning (Gal 1:8-9; 5:2-4). For other brief lists of absolutes, see Donald Macleod, "Preaching and Systematic Theology," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986), pp. 257-58); Francis Schaeffer, *The Church before the Watching World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), pp. 83-105.

be contended for (Jude 3) because rejecting them shipwrecks one's faith (1 Tim 1:19).⁴

Evangelicals and Catholics Together

The difficulty in differentiating between opinions and absolutes has been especially sensitive with regard to the almost 500-year-old rift between Catholicism and Protestantism. Twenty years ago, Francis Schaeffer observed, "In our generation the whole direction is toward being unwilling to say that any system is right or wrong. Even many who consider themselves evangelicals are embarrassed by the Reformer's saying that the Roman Catholic system as a system was wrong."⁵ Today this embarrassment has widened to a full confession that continuing the Reformation division is a mistake. Maintaining the

⁴ Francis Schaeffer beautifully likened this distinction between differing interpretations and absolutes to circles and cliffs (*The Church before the Watching World*, pp. 83-105). In his words, "The Christian doctrinal and intellectual position lays down a circle rather than a point. Or, to say it another way, doctrines are not merely lines to be repeated. This gives freedom to express the doctrines in various ways...Our study here should lead us to a circle of such a nature that will warn us when we come to a place of danger. We should see the edge of the circle as an absolute limit past which we 'fall off the edge of the cliff' and are *no longer Christians* at this particular point in our thinking. Nothing, it seems to me, could be more valuable than to recognize some of the places where the ultimate borderline rests" (*ibid.*, p. 85, emphasis added).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

identity of Protestantism as a *protest* against Roman Catholicism is in crisis.

Recently, a group of twenty Catholic leaders and twenty Protestant leaders made this confession of guilt explicit in a document entitled "Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium" (ECT).⁶ In the introduction, the drafters make clear that this document is not the official product of any evangelical Protestant or Catholic organization, but is these leaders' recommendation to their respective communities.⁷ This document is not significant because of official endorsement, but because it has provided many respected evangelical leaders an opportunity to make public their opinions of the Roman Catholic church.⁸ In other words, many evangelical Protestants have been silently holding these opinions all along, and

⁶ The document was composed by eight Protestants (leader Charles Colson) and seven Roman Catholics (leader Richard John Neuhaus), and endorsed by 12 more Protestants and 13 more Roman Catholics. For the full manuscript, see *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 15-22. From now on this article will be referred to by ECT and page number.

Regarding a confession of guilt, the document's third paragraph ends, "We together, Evangelicals and Catholics, confess our sins against the unity that Christ intends for all his disciples" (ECT, p. 15).

⁷ ECT, p. 15.

⁸ These leaders include Charles Colson, John White, Bill Bright, Os Guinness, Ralph Martin, Richard Mouw, Mark Noll, James J. I. Packer, and Pat Robertson.

living by them. Indeed, as one signer has pointed out, “ECT is playing catch-up,...formulating at the level of principle a commitment into which many have already entered at the level of practice.”⁹ Examples include the anti-abortion movement, Billy Graham’s cooperative evangelism, and charismatic get-togethers.¹⁰ However, with this new explicit plea to join with Catholics, many more evangelical Protestants may reconsider their opposition to Roman Catholicism and join the confession of guilt. This power of persuasion gives the document its significance.

The ECT manifesto is built on several axioms. First, evangelism and subsequent discipleship is the number one priority of the church.¹¹ Even social action is said to be secondary, despite the call to political activeness occupying the largest section of ECT.¹²

⁹ Packer, “Why I Signed It,” p. 36.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “To proclaim this Gospel and to sustain the community of faith, worship, and discipleship that is gathered by this Gospel is the first and chief responsibility of the church. All other tasks and responsibilities of the church are derived from and directed toward the mission of the Gospel” (ECT, p. 18).

“The church lives by and for the Great Commission” (ECT, p. 16).

¹² This “responsibility for the right ordering of civil society” (ECT, p. 18) includes contending for religious freedom, anti-abortion laws, parental choice and cultural heritage in public education, anti-pornography and anti-violence in media, anti-

Second, the completion of this mission requires the visible unity of Christians.¹³ This unity, however, is not to compromise the truth.¹⁴ Consequently, in ECT’s second section, the composers list the doctrines which they believe are necessary for constituting Christian unity.¹⁵ Third, the true church includes both the Evangelical and Catholic churches.¹⁶

discrimination, free enterprise, “a renewed appreciation of Western culture,” family protection laws, and the defense of democracy and human rights in U.S. foreign policy (ECT, p. 18-20). Even though Christians are commanded to seek the good of all men (1 Thess 5:15), this political agenda seems to ignore Jesus’ testimony to the corrupt Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36).

Interestingly, these Evangelical and Catholics’ “discovery of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ” occurred “in the exercise of these public responsibilities” (ECT, p. 18).

¹³ “There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ,” as seen in John 17:21 (ECT, p. 15).

“Unity and love among Christians is an integral part of our missionary witness to the Lord whom we serve” (ECT, p. 17).

¹⁴ “We reject any appearance of harmony that is purchased at the price of truth...The only unity to which we would give expression is unity in the truth” (ECT, p. 16).

¹⁵ These truths are as follows: (1) “Jesus is Lord.” (2) “We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.” (3) “All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ...there is but one church of Christ.” (4) “We affirm together that Christians are to teach and live in obedience to the divinely inspired Scriptures, which are the infallible Word of God.” (5) “We further affirm that Christ has promised to his church the gift of the Holy Spirit who will lead us into all truth in discerning and declaring the teaching of Scripture. (John 16) We recognize together

In light of these three axioms, ECT makes these assertions. First, conflict between Evangelicals and Catholics should cease.¹⁷ Legitimate differences should not be denied, but they should not be used as excuses for maintaining divisions.¹⁸ Second, more mutual dialogue

that the Holy Spirit has so guided his church in the past.” As an example, the apostle’s creed is quoted in full (ECT, p. 16).

¹⁶ “Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ” (ECT, p. 16).

“The one Christ and one mission includes many other Christians, notably the Eastern Orthodox and those Protestants not commonly identified as Evangelical” (ECT, p. 15).

¹⁷ “The shameful reality is that, in many places around the world, the scandal of conflict between Christians obscures the scandal of the cross, thus crippling the one mission of the one Christ...

...As Evangelicals and Catholics, we dare not by needless and loveless conflict between ourselves give aid...to the enemies...of Christ.

The love of Christ compels us and we are therefore resolved to avoid such conflict between our communities...we are called and we are therefore resolved to explore patterns of working and witnessing together in order to advance the one mission of Christ” (ECT, p. 16).

“Our communal and ecclesial separations are deep and long standing. We acknowledge that we do not know...the way to the greater visible unity for which we hope. We do know that existing patterns of distrustful polemic and conflict are not the way. We do know that God who has brought us into communion with himself through Christ intends that we also be in communion with one another” (ECT, p. 17).

¹⁸ “That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways [e.g. ‘the different forms that authentic discipleship can take’ (ECT, p. 21)]. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission” (ECT, p. 15).

should be done to explore the differences between the two communities and to seek a resolution.¹⁹ Third, cross-proselytizing between Evangelicals and Catholics should cease.²⁰ Similarly, any new convert should be clearly presented with the differences between the two communities, given the freedom to join either, and thereafter assiduously respected for his decision.²¹ Because these measures have not been pursued the past five hundred years, this document represents a clear confession of guilt and a resolve to mend the Protestant-Catholic rift.

In examining these axioms and subsequent assertions, one finds many things that can be agreed with. For example, the chief task of the church is world evangelization (Matt 28:19-20), though worship is the chief reason for both the church’s task and existence.²² Evangelism is furthered through a visible oneness of

¹⁹ The fourth section “We Search Together” is devoted to this theme. Examples given for exploration include the sole authority of Scripture, “soul freedom”, apostolic succession, grace via sacraments, eucharistic sacrifice, Mary and saints, and baptismal regeneration.

²⁰ “We call upon Christians to refrain from [proselytizing or ‘sheep stealing’]” (ECT, p. 21).

²¹ ECT, pp. 21-22.

²² See the discussion in John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p. 11.

love among those who are true Christians.²³ However, the real kicker is identifying who these true Christians really are.

The entire argument for cooperative evangelism and against “sheep-stealing” and conflict rests on the one grand assertion: “Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.”²⁴ If this is true, the subsequent directives should probably be followed; but if this assertion is false, true Christians would be disobeying Paul’s command, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers” (2 Cor 6:14). Moreover, if false, ECT could potentially harm the souls of many Catholics because their Evangelical friends will never call them to repent and believe the true gospel of Christ.²⁵ Thus the mission of the true church could be hampered.

²³ John 13:35 and the example of the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:46-47) seem to indicate this. Cf. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970); Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1984), p. 57-59.

²⁴ ECT, p. 16.

²⁵ This assertion is clearly manifested in ECT’s reasoning against cross-proselytizing: “In view of the large number of *non-Christians* in the world and the enormous challenge of our common evangelistic task, it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among *active adherents* of another Christian community” (ECT, p. 21, emphasis added).

Because the stakes are high, let us examine more closely what led J. I. Packer, one well-known proponent of Reformed theology, to endorse this document. Packer makes the bold declaration that “good evangelical Protestants and good Roman Catholics—good...in terms of their own church’s stated ideal of spiritual life—are Christians together.”²⁶ Please note: this does not merely assert the possibility of a Catholic becoming a believer and remaining in the Catholic church briefly due to ignorance. This asserts that the “faithful” of the Catholic church (to borrow their own term) are genuine believers. Can Packer legitimately make such a declaration?

Packer himself asks that very question: “May ECT realistically claim...that its evangelical and Catholic drafters agree on the gospel of salvation?”²⁷ His answer here is very enlightening. Of course, Catholics and Protestants do not agree on “the same small print” of justification by grace through faith (due to the Tridentine assertion of merit),²⁸ but “what brings salvation, after all, is not any theory about faith in Christ, justification, and the church, but faith itself in

²⁶ Packer, “Why I Signed It,” p. 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

²⁸ Cf. Packer’s long list of disagreements on *ibid.*, p. 35.

Christ himself.”²⁹ The threat of baptism giving someone a false security is ruled out by ECT’s evangelistic goal of “transactional trust in the living Christ.”³⁰ The key (and what makes a person a “good” Catholic as opposed to a “bad” one) is conversion, “not only as an initial step but as a personal life-process.”³¹ This emphasis on a life-long process of conversion (which is very Catholic)³² is what provides the basis for ECT and its endorsers to assert that good Catholics and good Evangelicals are all genuine believers.³³

Therefore, when all the talk has been scraped away, the crux remains: Can a faithful adherent to the Catholic church be a genuine believer in Jesus Christ? Is the “small print” regarding justification and the Mass an

²⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Christ’s call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This *second conversion* is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church who, ‘clasping sinners to her bosom, [is] at once holy and always in need of purification, [and] follows constantly the path of penance and renewal’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994], 1428 [citations will hereafter be given as they are in the catechism, by section number, after the abbreviated title CCC]).

³³ Quoting from the Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversation (1988), ECT asserts that conversion is “a continuing process so that the whole life of a Christian should be a passage from death to life, from error to truth, from sin to grace” (ECT, p. 21).

absolute, or simply an opinion over which true believers can disagree? Is a “transactional trust in Jesus Christ” through a life-long process of conversion the only real goal of evangelism and locus of genuine belief, or must a Catholic repent of the Romish doctrines of mass and penance in order to become a true believer? If so, then the believer can no longer be a “good Catholic” since no person can be a “good Catholic” who leaves the Roman Catholic system of mass and penance.³⁴ This study aims to answer these questions (though the author admits to be a novice on Catholic doctrine). The honor of Jesus Christ’s high priesthood and the eternal welfare of scores of Catholics make it imperative that at least an attempt be made to answer these questions.

Roman Catholic Salvation

Without the Protestant Reformation, ECT would have never existed. Until the Reformation, the only major rift the church had seen was between the Eastern

³⁴ The most recent Catholic catechism plainly asserts, “Ecclesial communities derived from the Reformation and separated from the Catholic Church, ‘have not preserved the proper reality of the Eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the sacrament of Holy Orders.’ It is for this reason that Eucharistic intercommunion with these communities is not possible for the Catholic church” (CCC 1400). In fact, the eucharist will only be given to “Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church...provided they give evidence of holding the Catholic faith regarding these *sacraments*” (CCC 1401, emphasis added).

Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. In contrast, the sixteenth to twentieth centuries splintered the church into thousands of denominations and sects. Now, the call is to reunite (hence, ECT). Therefore, to understand the purported need for ECT, the original reason for the division must be reexamined.³⁵ This is a necessity, for if the original reason for departing from the Roman Catholic church is still valid, then reunion is not valid. Without knowledge of the two systems, ecumenism is probably inevitable.³⁶

Second-hand information is not usually as reliable as first-hand testimony. Solomon quipped, “The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him” (Prov 18:17). Accordingly, rather than amassing the testimonies of many noteworthy Protestants regarding Rome’s errors, this paper will attempt to examine Rome directly—first from the time of the Reformation, and then from the time after Vatican

³⁵ Packer, in fact, calls for this in saying that “the historic disagreements at theory level urgently now need review” (“Why I Signed It,” p. 37).

³⁶ Almost prophetically, Loraine Boettner wrote long before ECT, “The widespread indifference toward doctrine as revealed in the modern ecumenical movement, which is affecting so many of our churches, makes it all the more imperative that Christians everywhere should know precisely what these two major systems teach” (*Roman Catholicism*, 5th ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962], p. x).

Council II (1962-65). In the next section, these views will be compared to Scripture. May God give enlightenment regarding His truth.

Beliefs during the Reformation

The Roman Catholic church has not been shy regarding its beliefs. Rather than letting the Reformers get the last word, the Romish church met at the council of Trent from 1546 to 1563 to define her beliefs. Of particular note, the sixth session (January 13, 1547) promulgated the distinct views of the Church on justification, for the stated reason that “there is being disseminated at this time, not without the loss of many souls and grievous detriment to the unity of the Church, a certain erroneous doctrine concerning justification.”³⁷ Astonishingly, over four centuries later, ECT reversed this sixteenth-century judgment in stating, “We affirm *together* [as Evangelicals and Catholics] that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.”³⁸ How can this be? ECT rightly recognizes that

³⁷ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1941), pp. 29-46), quoted at length in *John Calvin & Jacopo Sadoletto: A Reformation Debate*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 114, Introduction. Hereafter, citations from this council will be under the abbreviation *Trent* followed by chapter or canon number.

³⁸ ECT, p. 16, emphasis added.

cooperation requires agreement (Amos 3:3). But does this recent affirmation merely consist of hollow words? Just what does either side *mean* by “justification”, “grace”, and “faith”?

According to the Council of Trent, justification consists of two aspects: *remission* of sins and *renewal* of the inward man.³⁹ Thus, justification means making the sinner actually righteous in his character. That is, at baptism (which is the “laver of regeneration”⁴⁰), God endows the unjust man with “the justice of God, not that by which He Himself is just, but that by which He makes us just.”⁴¹ The Council emphatically declared that justification is something *experienced* inwardly, and not just God’s different view of that person.⁴² Consequently, justification is said to increase, as the person’s character advances from virtue to virtue.⁴³ Justification involves “infused” righteousness.⁴⁴

³⁹ *Trent*, ch. VII.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. IV.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, ch. VII.

⁴² In justification, those regenerated (i.e. baptized) are “renewed in the spirit of our mind, and not only are we reputed but we are truly called and are just, receiving justice within us” (*ibid.*).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, ch. X.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, chs. VII, XVI.

In contrast, the Reformers viewed justification as a *positional* reality. In justification, men are declared to be righteous, rather than being made righteous. In John Calvin’s words,

Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the *imputation* of the righteousness of Christ.⁴⁵

In contrast to the Catholic idea of a sinner being justified by infusing righteousness into him, Calvin responded, “When God justifies us through the intercession of Christ, he does not acquit us on a proof of our own innocence, but by an imputation of righteousness, so that though not righteous in ourselves, we are deemed righteous in Christ.”⁴⁶ Therefore, in the sixteenth century, justification meant “to make righteous” to the Catholics, and “to declare righteous” to the Reformers.

The differences do not stop here. To the Council, the “grace of justification” meant the infused power given by the Holy Spirit that produces faith, hope,

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), Book III, ch. xi., section 2, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, section 3.

and love.⁴⁷ In contrast, Calvin saw God's grace as His "free mercy".⁴⁸ Instead of faith as the instrumental cause,⁴⁹ the Catholics saw faith as just "the beginning of human salvation."⁵⁰ To the Council, faith alone cannot justify, but love and hope must be added.⁵¹ Justification can be said to be by faith only because faith is merely the initial virtue that begins a good work.⁵² Really, faith cooperates with good works, which actually merit eternal life.⁵³ As is well-known, both Calvin⁵⁴ and Luther⁵⁵ (as well as the other Reformers) championed the slogan, "Justification by faith *alone!*" Thus, in the sixteenth century, both the Protestants and the Catholics believed in "justification by grace through faith," yet

⁴⁷ *Trent*, ch. VII.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III, ch. xiv, section 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Trent*, ch. VIII.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, chs. VI, VII.

⁵² *Ibid.*, ch. VIII.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, chs. X, XVI.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III, chapter xi, section 19.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Martin Luther purposely left the translation "justified by faith alone" in his German translation of the New Testament, when the original did not include the word "alone" (see Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* [New York: Mentor Books, 1950], p. 261).

they believed two very different things by that one phrase.

This difference in meaning comes forth clearly in the opposite views of assurance (or certainty) of having eternal life. The Council of Trent explicitly taught that "no one can know with the certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God."⁵⁶ This statement is based on two assertions: (1) a justified person may lose the grace of justification through sin;⁵⁷ and (2) a justified person's effort must cooperate with the grace in order to retain it.⁵⁸ Consequently, justified men "*ought to fear* for the combat that yet remains with the flesh, with the world, and with the devil, in which they cannot be victorious unless *they be with* the grace of God."⁵⁹ The possibility of assurance is cut off due to each man's "own weakness and indisposition."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Trent*, ch. IX. Similarly, with respect to election, "except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God has chosen to Himself" (*ibid.*, ch. XII).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. XIV.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. XIII.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁶⁰ *Trent*, ch. IX.

In contrast, Calvin taught that even though good works may give added proof that one is truly a child of God, this is not a sure footing on which to base evidence of God's personal favor. The ultimate ground for assurance is in the fact that "the goodness of God is sealed to them by nothing but the certainty of the promise" of His "free favour."⁶¹ Men are justified by simply believing the promise. Therefore, to the Reformers, assurance of eternal life is possible because of the unchanging promise of God to be freely merciful to believers; whereas to the Council, assurance was impossible because of the unreliability of one's personal virtue to continue cooperating with the grace of God to produce good works that truly merit eternal life. Can there a wider difference in theology than this? The practical significance of this for one's personal peace-of-mind alone is staggering. Yet ECT maintains that evangelicals and Catholics can together affirm justification by grace through faith.

But just how heated was the split of the Reformation? Perhaps even at that time, a compromise could have been worked out by basing some sort of cooperation on the common beliefs of the two camps (as ECT is advocating today).

Perhaps unknown to many modern evangelicals, the Council of Trent doomed any such possibility of compromise and cooperation by appending 33 canons (or rules) to their decrees on justification. These 33 canons pronounced anathema (a curse to hell) on anyone who "says that the Catholic doctrine of justification as set forth by the holy council in the present decree, derogates in some respect from the glory of God or from the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, and does not illustrate the truth of our faith" (Canon 33). Accordingly, anathemas were attached to many Protestant doctrines, including the following:

- Canon 4: irresistible grace
- Canon 9: justification by faith alone
- Canon 11: justification by the "sole imputation of the justice of Christ"
- Canon 11: grace as being only the good will of God
- Canon 16: the assurance of perseverance for believers
- Canon 18: the impossibility of perfection for those justified
- Canon 23: eternal security
- Canon 24: good works are merely signs and not causes of justification
- Canon 25: every good work is tainted with at least some sin
- Canon 30: a denial of purgatory
- Canon 32: good works never have true merit to attain eternal life

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III, ch. XIV, section 19.

The list is impressive. And this is for just this session. Other sessions of the Council of Trent condemned Protestants for teaching other purported heresies. With these pronouncements, the amputation of the Protestants from the Roman Catholics was cauterized. No amount of surgery could repair the damage. At least this was believed until recently.

Present Roman Catholic Beliefs

After the second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Catholic church has apparently been changing. Latin is no longer the sole language of the liturgy. Many individual Catholics are even reading their Bibles and attending Bible studies. The aroma in the air hints that the old Roman church is perhaps finally willing to compromise. But is this possible?

At this point, let the modern reader beware. The 1546 decrees of the Council of Trent were not mere memos by a business committee. The Catholic church contends that its decrees on the doctrine of justification were originally taught by Jesus and the apostles, and have been retained by the Catholic church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁶² The Church contends

⁶² *Trent*, Introduction.

that the official decrees of any Council are infallible.⁶³ Consequently, the Council of Trent strictly forbade anyone (including the Church itself) from that time onward (1546 to the present) to “believe, preach or teach otherwise than is defined and declared in the present decree.”⁶⁴ In fact, they expressly warned that “whosoever [including later Catholics] does not faithfully and firmly accept [this Catholic doctrine on justification] *cannot* be justified.”⁶⁵

What does that mean for today? The Roman Catholic church cannot compromise on its beliefs lest it fall under its own condemnation. Modern evangelicals must remember how detailed and dogmatic the Council of Trent delineated its beliefs. As Loraine Boettner aptly noted, “An infallible church simply cannot repent. Nor can it change doctrines that have been promulgated with all the dignity and authority that its rulers can muster.”⁶⁶

Is this charge of irreformability verifiable? Is the Catholic church abiding by its own dogmas? Again, in

⁶³ CCC 891.

⁶⁴ *Trent*, Introduction.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. XVI, emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, p. xii.

the spirit of Proverbs 18:17, we will let the Catholic church speak for herself.

In 1985, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II agreed with the request of the Synod Fathers to have a catechism composed of all catholic doctrines regarding both faith and morals in contributing to the Church renewal begun by Vatican II.⁶⁷ Consequently, a committee of twelve cardinals and bishops formulated a draft of the catechism, which was extensively consulted among all Catholic bishops to such an extent that the Pope declared “this *Catechism* is the result of the collaboration of the whole Episcopate of the Catholic Church.”⁶⁸ Hence, all “share the responsibility” for its content.⁶⁹ Finally, on October 11, 1992, the Pope wrote:

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which I approved June 25th last and the publication of which I today order by virtue of my Apostolic Authority, is a statement of the Church’s faith and of catholic doctrine...I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion...This catechism is given to [all

⁶⁷ CCC, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

the Church’s Pastors and the Christian faithful] that it may be a sure and authentic reference text for teaching catholic doctrine...It is meant to support ecumenical efforts that are moved by the holy desire for the unity of all Christians, showing carefully the content and wondrous harmony of the catholic faith.⁷⁰

Two things are of note: (1) The Pope himself offers this Catechism as a “sure norm” for representing present-day Roman doctrines; and (2) he also intimates that this document is meant to support any future ecumenical unity between professing believers. Therefore, the Catholic church herself wants the world to evaluate both the church and any ecumenical unity between Protestants and Catholics on the basis of this document. Thus this Catechism will be used to voice the present official teachings of the Roman Catholic church.⁷¹

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the Apostle’s Creed. The exposition of this creed forms a major portion of the catechism’s doctrinal content. Moreover, ECT quotes it in full as an example of the Holy Spirit guiding the church into all truth.⁷² Once

⁷⁰ CCC, pp. 5-6.

⁷¹ For a quick summary of the Roman Catholic way of salvation from a Reformed Protestant perspective, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), p. 421.

⁷² ECT, pp. 16-17.

again, the focus will be on what is meant by the words, rather than the fact that both Protestants and Catholics use the same terminology. Since the ultimate concern is determining whether a good Catholic can be forgiven, this paper will focus on one phrase: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

In five entries explaining this line, the catechism lays out the current official Catholic way of salvation:

1. Christ conferred on the apostles (and so on the Catholic priesthood) his own divine power to forgive.⁷³
2. “Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ.”⁷⁴
3. Even though at the split-moment of baptism, the forgiveness of sins is absolute (totally effacing all previous sins as well as original sins), “the grace of Baptism delivers no one from all the weakness of nature.”⁷⁵ In other words, baptism only brought forgiveness of past sins. Sins from that point onward must be forgiven in a different manner (though still through the Church).⁷⁶
4. Consequently, “it is through the sacrament

⁷³ CCC 976.

⁷⁴ CCC 977. Adults must profess the faith in order to be baptized (CCC 978).

⁷⁵ CCC 978.

⁷⁶ CCC 979.

of Penance that the baptized can be reconciled with God.”⁷⁷

Therefore, even though forgiveness is assigned to baptism, in all practicality, on a day-to-day basis, forgiveness is obtained through the sacramental system, especially through the eucharist and penance. Thus begins the Catholic’s life-long conversion.

Before proceeding, some clarification is already required with respect to terminology. The Roman Catholic church teaches that there are two kinds of sins (venial and mortal) as well as two kinds of punishments (eternal and temporal). With regard to sins, venial sins are “everyday faults.”⁷⁸ Mortal sins are deliberate, knowledgeable violations of the Ten Commandments.⁷⁹ Mortal sins also produce eternal punishment, i.e. the permanent, irreversible “exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell.”⁸⁰ In opposition to this, those who will eventually obtain eternal life must undergo temporal punishment in purgatory in order

⁷⁷ CCC 980. Here the catechism quotes the Council of Trent in affirming, “This sacrament of Penance is *necessary* for salvation for those who have fallen after Baptism.”

⁷⁸ CCC 1458.

⁷⁹ CCC 1857-58.

⁸⁰ CCC 1861.

to be purified from “unhealthy attachment to creatures.”⁸¹ Every sin, even venial, must be purified, either here on earth (through increasing love) or after earth in purgatory.⁸²

Please note: in Catholic terminology, “the forgiveness of sin...[entails] the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains.”⁸³ Forgiveness of eternal punishment does not also imply the forgiveness of temporal punishment. Thus a forgiven person still faces purgatory unless he dies (1) with perfect love,⁸⁴ or (2) with an indulgence,⁸⁵ or (3) at baptism, or (4) as a martyr.⁸⁶ On earth, the two sacraments of eucharist and penance contribute to the forgiveness of these two categories of sins—venial and mortal, respectively.

Technically, venial sins are remitted by a “perfect contrition” promoted by love for God (in

⁸¹ CCC 1472.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ CCC 1473.

⁸⁴ CCC 1472.

⁸⁵ An indulgence is when the church (as God’s representative) grants the partial or full forgiveness of temporal punishment by applying to one sinner the extra satisfaction made for sins by somebody else (CCC 1471).

⁸⁶ CCC 1434.

contrast to fear of punishment). The eucharist wipes away venial sins by strengthening love for God.⁸⁷ This should be like regular eating, since constant sin requires a constant remedy.⁸⁸ The eucharist has this purifying power because, on a larger scale, “as sacrifice, the Eucharist is offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead and to obtain spiritual and temporal benefits from God.”⁸⁹ How can the eucharist be a sacrifice, since the epistle of Hebrews teaches that Christ offered Himself up “once for all”?⁹⁰ Two doctrines make a stab at answering this paradox: (1) the priests who offer up the bread and wine are Christ’s representatives;⁹¹ and (2) the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ.⁹² Therefore, at every eucharist, “it is Christ *himself*...who, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. And it is the *same* Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine who is the offering of the

⁸⁷ CCC 1394.

⁸⁸ CCC 1393.

⁸⁹ CCC 1414.

⁹⁰ The catechism repeats this phrase often, e.g. 1353, 1364, and 1369.

⁹¹ CCC 1348.

⁹² This is called “transubstantiation” (CCC 1376).

Eucharistic sacrifice.”⁹³ Even more startling, the church herself is also offered up to God as part of the eucharistic sacrifice (in her sufferings), since she is His body.⁹⁴

Mortal sins place a baptized person back under the threat of eternal punishment due to the loss of grace.⁹⁵ Hence, these sins require a new initiative of God’s mercy and a second (or third...) conversion, which occurs in the sacrament of penance.⁹⁶ The catechism explicitly states that this important sacrament has not changed, but still exhibits the same fundamental structure and steps as in Reformation times: contrition, confession, and satisfaction.⁹⁷ Contrition is sorrow and hatred of the sin committed with resolve not to commit it again.⁹⁸ Confession is given to a priest,⁹⁹ who absolves the penitent upon the promised fulfillment of

⁹³ CCC 1410.

⁹⁴ CCC 1368; cf. *ibid.* 618, 1460.

⁹⁵ CCC 1861.

⁹⁶ CCC 1856, 1458-59.

⁹⁷ CCC 1448.

⁹⁸ CCC 1451.

⁹⁹ CCC 1456.

satisfaction, which is “to make amends for the sins.”¹⁰⁰ Here is the ultimate kicker against Protestant doctrine. Penance consists of works: e.g. “prayer, an offering, works of mercy [such as almsgiving], service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial [such as fasting], sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear.”¹⁰¹ The rationale behind requiring satisfaction from the sinner himself to God is both to *restrain* the penitent from committing future sins and to *remove* the remaining sinful habits from his past life.¹⁰² Apparently, the Catholic church fears that granting the removal of punishment without requiring the sinner to make up for his sins will give the sinner a license to sin all he wants (cf. Rom 6:1). Penance decreases the

¹⁰⁰ CCC 1459. The penitent must “‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’” The real essence of penance is not the priest’s absolution of sins. On the contrary, “the matter, as it were, of this sacrament...consists in the acts of the penitent himself, namely contrition, confession, and satisfaction. These...are required...for the full and perfect remission of sins” (Council of Trent (1551): DS 1673, quoted in *The Companion to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: A Compendium of Texts Referred to in the Catechism of the Catholic Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994], p. 517).

¹⁰¹ CCC 1460; cf. *ibid.* 1434-39.

¹⁰² CCC 1460, citing the Council of Trent (1551): DS 1690 (quoted in *Companion to the Catechism*, p. 530).

amount of purifying needed after death in purgatory.¹⁰³
Hence, penance is like a “purgatory on earth.”

Two conclusions can be made.

First, forgiveness can only be found by adhering to the Catholic sacramental system and its priesthood.¹⁰⁴ Without the eucharist, one cannot be united to Christ. The eucharist is the foundation for participating in the only satisfaction available for forgiving sins. Only the Catholic priesthood is Christ’s representatives to transubstantiate the species into His very own body. But in order to receive the eucharist, one must believe Roman doctrines to be true.¹⁰⁵

Second, full forgiveness is not a day-to-day reality. Even the best of Catholics faces purgatory in the future. The best the collective wisdom of the Catholic church could offer the faithful is to “strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace.”¹⁰⁶ There is no final, absolute forgiveness in the system (except for the extraordinary cases of martyrdom and some indulgences). This stems from the Catholic church’s

¹⁰³ CCC 1473.

¹⁰⁴ CCC 987.

¹⁰⁵ CCC 1355.

¹⁰⁶ CCC 1473.

incomplete basis for forgiveness. For instance, Christ’s sacrifice is never complete since He is continually offered up in reality at every eucharist. Moreover, the sufferings of the church participate in His satisfaction for sins. After baptism, life is just a continual “struggle of conversion directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us.”¹⁰⁷ The church is “always in need of purification, [and] follows the constant path of penance and renewal.”¹⁰⁸ Forgiveness is just a hypothetical reality for the ideal case of one who through fervent love completely purifies himself before death.¹⁰⁹ On a practical level, the best the ordinary good Catholic can hope for is to reduce the amount of purifying required in purgatory by many different works, every one of which “contributes to the forgiveness of our sins.”¹¹⁰

Where does justification fit into all this inch-by-inch removal of temporal punishment? Why has it not entered into the present discussion of the recent catechism until this point? Simple. The Roman church

¹⁰⁷ CCC 1426.

¹⁰⁸ CCC 1428.

¹⁰⁹ CCC 1472.

¹¹⁰ CCC 1437.

has not altered her view of justification since 1546, when the Council of Trent pronounced anathema on anyone who might alter her view. As in the days of Luther and Calvin, today's Catholic church still defines justification as God's grace (i.e. power) to both cleanse from sins and actually make men righteous.¹¹¹ This definition of justification enters the sacramental scheme through the idea of love. Recall: love wipes away venial sins, and perfect love purifies one entirely and exempts one from purgatory. Justification enters in here, because the Catholic church defines the righteousness given in justification as "the rectitude of divine love" which is poured into one's heart at baptism by the Holy Spirit.¹¹² In a word, love within the person himself is the true ground for Catholic forgiveness from future punishment.

So did Vatican II change the Catholic church's teaching? Obviously not, according to the Church's own official organ—the recent catechism. As Loraine Boettner observed, "The [second Vatican] Council did nothing toward removing the more than one hundred anathemas or curses pronounced by the Council of Trent on the Protestant churches and beliefs." In fact, this sca-

¹¹¹ CCC 1987.

¹¹² CCC 1991.

thing curse from the Council of Trent was cited in the recent catechism:

If anyone says that the whole punishment, together with the guilt, is always pardoned by God, and that the satisfaction of penitents is nothing other than faith, by which they perceive that Christ has made satisfaction for them: let him be anathema.¹¹³

Therefore, we can safely conclude that although some peripheral practices may have changed since the Reformation, the Roman Catholic teaching on personal forgiveness before a just God has not.

At this point, we are ready to examine whether Rome's dogmatic doctrines disagree with Scripture. If they do, how much? Is the Catholic doctrine of forgiveness so opposed to Scripture that all good Catholics who believe it cannot be forgiven by God? Such a question is fair, since the Roman Catholic church believes that anyone disagreeing with her doctrines of justification cannot be justified. The next section attempts to answer this sticky, but very crucial, question.

¹¹³ Council of Trent (1551): DS 1712 (cited in *Companion to the Catechism*, p. 530).

Apostasy or Error?

All men believe some falsehoods. No one's thinking is wholly according to truth. Even the apostle Peter at one time was not straightforward with the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:14). The Roman Catholic system of beliefs has errors. But so does every Protestant system. However, the issue at hand is not to simply pinpoint the errors within Catholic teachings (many of which have been aptly targeted by five centuries of Protestant artillery), but to discern whether the Catholic *system* of belief is merely in error or has lapsed into apostasy. If the errors within the Catholic system are so antithetical to the truth of the gospel that one cannot believe *both* the gospel and the Catholic doctrinal system *simultaneously*, then the Roman Catholic church is apostate.¹¹⁴ Such apostasy means rejecting the gospel; and no one can reject the gospel and enter heaven (1 Cor

¹¹⁴ It should be noted at this point that an implicit assertion has already been made. Contrary to the Roman church (Dei Verbum 21, quoted in *Companion to the Catechism*, p. 489), this paper does not assume that the Catholic councils are inspired. This paper leaves open the possibility that the Catholic councils may contradict the inerrant Scriptures, which antedate the councils. Whether they do so or not requires further examination. Moreover, this paper asserts that the apostles' personal testimony to the truth of the gospel (called the New Testament) is so clear in its fundamental teaching, that any unbiased individual can judge whether any system of doctrine (including Catholicism) agrees or disagrees with that apostolic witness to God's truth.

15:1-2; 2 Thess 1:8). With this narrow lens we now ask God to guide our critical search for fatal errors.

The Roman Catholic system contradicts three absolutes necessary for belief in the gospel: Christ's atonement, justification, and the abolition of the Law.

Christ's Atonement

Sin always requires the death (Ezek 18:4; Rom 6:23). Only the violent loss of valuable life (concretely symbolized by blood—Lev 17:11) can satisfy the just penalty of sin, i.e. atone for sin (Heb 9:22). Justice demanded the straight-forward execution of the offender (e.g. Num 25:13; 35:33; 2 Sam 21:3ff). God revealed this to mankind up-front, before man ever sinned (Gen 2:17). Since man has sinned, the sin-death continuity has not been broken (Rom 5:12; Jas 1:15).

Praise God, however, for His grace. Fourteen centuries before Christ, God officially recorded for all future generations that He allows for the life of a substitute to atone for the sin of another. When an Israelite sinned unintentionally (i.e. not within the context of a life resolutely opposed to God and His law—Num 15:30-31; Heb 10:26-28; e.g. Num 15:32-36), God commanded him to bring a pure goat (or some such animal) to the tabernacle as a sin offering (Num 15:27-29). The person would slay the animal while

placing his hand of the animal's head, thereby symbolizing the transfer of guilt to that animal (Lev 4:29; cf. 1:4). That animal's blood atoned for the offender's sin. This was the God's means of granting forgiveness to the offender (Num 15:28).

A problem became apparent early. The atoning capacity of the substitute's blood was dependent upon the value of the substitute's life (Lev 17:11). Thus greater sins required the blood of more valuable animals to atone for them (e.g. Lev 4:13-31). In fact, the Law never provided an atoning sacrifice for murder (Num 35:33). Presumably, the image of God in man made murder so great of a sin (Gen 9:6), that no animal (not in God's image) could even ceremonially atone for this sin (cf. Heb 9:13). The problem was this: sacrifices were continually offered. Therefore, the worshiper, who drew near to offer his bull, goat, or lamb, knew that these animal lives were not valuable enough to fully put away his sin once for all time. His conscience was never fully clear of the guilt from these sins (Heb 10:1-4). Where could a life be found so pure and valuable so as to completely atone for the sins once-for-all-time, leaving no remembrance of those sins?

The Old Testament predicted that someday, God would send a righteous, sinless individual (called "My

Servant") to be a human guilt offering (Isa 53:9-11). This Servant would bear the sin of God's transgressing people (Isa 53:6, 8, 11, 12; cf. Matt 1:21), thereby giving them peace with God (Isa 53:5). Because of the Servant's willing obedience, God promised to resurrect and promote Him (Isa 53:10-12). Both Jesus Himself and the apostle Peter identified this coming Servant as Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 22:37; 1 Pet 2:22-25). Jesus bore the sins of His people on the cross (1 Pet 2:24).

But what was the fallout of this sacrifice of the sinless Son of God in history? Jesus said that His blood was the blood of the new covenant (Luke 22:20), shed for the forgiveness of many people's sins (Matt 26:28). By Jesus associating His blood with the new covenant, Jesus asserts that His cross-work fulfilled the Old Testament promise that someday God would forgive the sin of His people, remembering their sin no longer (Jer. 31:34). Therefore, the result of Christ's self-sacrifice was total and final forgiveness. God's people were no longer guilty in His sight.

But how does that apply to the Catholic doctrinal system? Simple. The letter to the Hebrews explicitly states after quoting the new covenant promise of forgiveness (Heb 10:17), "Now where there is

forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb 10:18). In contrast to Catholicism, which explicitly asserts that Christ offers Himself up at every eucharist,¹¹⁵ the writer of Hebrews often asserts that Christ offered Himself once for all time (Heb 10:12; cf. 9:26; 10:10, 14).

The reader should not be fooled by the Catholic catechism, which in one sentence asserts both transubstantiation and Christ’s “sacrifice offered on the cross once for all.”¹¹⁶ This blatant contradiction is double-talk. Just as any common man dies *once*, in the same way Christ died just *once* (Heb 9:27-28). The New Testament is clear on this point. In contrast to the Old Testament priests who continually offered sacrifices, which could never take away sins (Heb 10:11), God did not appoint His Son as high priest so “that He should offer Himself often” (Heb 9:25). Christ had *one* offering (10:14), which He offered *once* and sat down (Heb

¹¹⁵ CCC 1410. Rather than a sacrifice, the biblical view seems to be that the celebration of the Lord’s table is a memorial, done (as Jesus commanded) in remembrance of Him until He returns (1 Cor 11:25-26). Paul likens the Lord’s table to eating the sacrificial animal *after* it had been offered (1 Cor 10:16-18). After Christ was sacrificed once (around A.D. 30), His followers have been symbolically eating His flesh ever since. Thus the Lord’s table primarily symbolizes the fact that believers continually enjoy the beneficial results of Jesus’ once-for-all-time sacrifice.

¹¹⁶ CCC 1353.

10:11-12). Christ sat down at His exaltation immediately after His resurrection (10:12; cf. Acts 2:33; Heb. 8:1; 1 Pet 3:22). This sitting down in the first century A.D. marked the end of Christ offering sacrifices. At one instant in real temporal history, Christ “put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb 9:26).

Based on this explicit New Testament teaching, the Catholic doctrine of the eucharist stands in error. But is this error fatal? Does the eucharistic mass mark the Roman Catholic church as apostate?

Christ’s one-time sacrifice purified (Heb 1:3), sanctified (10:10), and perfected God’s people “for all time” (10:14). This means that the sinner’s conscience is freed from the remembrance of his sins as something calling on God to punish him (10:1-2; cf. 9:9). How can Christ’s blood accomplish this feat? In accordance with the Law (Lev 17:11), Christ’s “better sacrifices” (9:23; i.e. His body) is more able to atone for sin than animal’s blood. The infinite value of Christ’s sinless life gives His blood the infinite ability to atone for an infinite amount of sin, thereby completely cleansing the conscience for all time (9:13-14; cf. 10:19- 22).

By continuing to offer sacrifices in the eucharist, the Catholic church has effectively denied Christ’s blood its infinite value. The logical

contrapositive of Hebrews 10:18 asserts that wherever offerings for sin are continually made, there is no forgiveness. Anyone who has “regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified” can only expect severe punishment—the fury of fire that will consume the adversaries (Heb 10:27, 29). At the very center of the gospel which we must hold fast in order to be saved from God’s wrath is the foremost important fact that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor 15:1-3). When the Roman Catholic church officially cursed anyone denying that the eucharist is not a sacrifice of the “whole Christ”¹¹⁷ as well as anyone saying that “the satisfaction of the penitents is nothing other than faith, by which they perceive that Christ has made satisfaction for them,”¹¹⁸ she fell into apostasy. Surely these pronouncements are not holding fast the confession of Christ’s true work as a high priest (Heb 4:14). If that is the case, they have ceased being partakers of Christ (3:14).

All modern readers must be aware of the consequences for joining the Roman Catholic church. Understandably confessing the teaching of the Church

¹¹⁷ Council of Trent (1551): DS 1651, quoted in *Companion to the Catechism*, p. 494.

¹¹⁸ Council of Trent (1551): DS 1712, quoted in *Companion to the Catechism*, p. 530.

means denying the value of Christ's blood. To such a person, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Heb 10:26)—no chance of forgiveness.

Justification

The New Testament clearly presents an irrevocable link between justification and glorification (Rom 8:30). All those who are justified can boast in hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:1-2). Hope means that the thing hoped for will certainly come, though as yet it has not, but remains unseen (Rom 5:5; 8:25). The Roman Catholic church could technically affirm this as well, because in her view, anyone dying with the grace of justification will certainly obtain eternal life—eventually. The “catch-22” lies in the insertion of temporal punishment in purgatory between death and eternal life. Is this fine print Scriptural?

Purgatory is entirely not found within the Jewish canon Jesus possessed (i.e. the Old Testament) and the apostolic writings Jesus pre-endorsed (i.e. the New Testament; see John 16:13).¹¹⁹ Instead, Paul affirms that as soon as any believer dies, he is “at home

¹¹⁹ See Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 228-31 for how this falsehood developed. In actuality, Jesus taught that every sin is mortal in the sense of making the sinner liable to eternal death in hell (Matt 5:22; cf. Jas 2:10). There is no escape from hell to heaven (Luke 16:26).

with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:7-8, “we”). In fact, Paul prefers dying to remaining in this life (5:6, 8; cf. Ph. 1:23—“much better”). If Paul knew purgatory was in store immediately after death for the average believer, surely he would not have preferred death to this life.

How can Paul make the general assertion that any believer will immediately go to heaven without any purifying fires in purgatory? Paul can do this, because (to use his own words), “There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). This statement does not just apply to the elite Christians (such as Paul). The statement is general, including all believers united to Christ through faith.¹²⁰ Anyone believing Christ’s message “has eternal life”, but not via purgatory because he “does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). No one can lay a charge against God’s chosen person or condemn him, because Christ’s blood has interceded for him (Rom 8:33-34). In other words, God justifies (Rom 8:33). Justification is simply the opposite of condemnation (Deut 25:1; 1 Kgs 8:32; Isa 50:8).

The Roman Catholic church really has no doctrine of justification. Justification is a forensic (i.e.

¹²⁰ Cf. Romans 8:2 employs the general pronoun σε (“you” singular), showing that the principle in v.1 is grounded on a truth applicable to every individual Christian.

judicial) term. When a judge justifies someone, he declares him innocent of whatever was charged against him (e.g. Deut 25:1). Justification cannot be the infusion of grace thereby making a person righteous because:¹²¹

1. The context of righteousness, law, and a judge is judicial in nature.
2. If justification means “to make righteous”, why does God find fault with the man who “justifies” the wicked (Prov 17:15; Isa 5:26)?
3. Men are said to justify God (Luke 7:29, i.e. vindicate Him verbally).
4. Linguistically, the Greek verb ending -όω (as in δικαιόω = “to justify”) means “to declare something to be in a certain way” (cf. ἀξιόω = “to deem worthy”). The idea of “to make righteous” would have required the verb ending -άζω.

In reality, the Catholic doctrine of justification is really the Protestant doctrine of sanctification (i.e. ἀγιάζω = “to make holy”).¹²² Not having forensic justification, Rome logically also denies the possibility of knowing for certain that one is going straight to heaven at death (commonly called “assurance of salvation”). In contrast,

¹²¹ These are adapted from Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, 1984, 1985), pp. 956-57.

¹²² See Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law* (reprint ed., Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), p. 99. At times, this can make some of the statements in the catechism seem correct, until one realizes that the catechism is wrongly applying a few truths about sanctification to justification.

the New Testament commands every believer to gain assurance (2 Pet 1:10; cf. 1 John 5:13).¹²³

But if justification signifies a judge declaring an accused person innocent of the charges laid against him, how can Paul assert that forgiven people must believe that “God justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:5)? A judge justifying (i.e. vindicating) a sinner raises doubt about the judge’s justice. How can a perfectly just God do this?

God can do this based on the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Isaiah predicted that the coming Servant “will justify the many as he will bear their iniquity” (Isa 53:11; cf. Rom 3:24-25). Because the sins of God’s people were charged to Jesus (as if He had done them), God did not charge these sins to the His people, who had actually committed them. Consequently, the means of justification was the non-imputation of sins.¹²⁴ In other words, since God does not

¹²³ Note, however, that assurance of salvation is not necessary for entrance into heaven. Some who are truly justified may not know it for certain in times of doubt. Moreover, assurance of salvation is not sufficient for salvation either (as the Rome rightly recognizes, *Trent*, ch. IX). However, true justification means at least the possibility of assurance, because justification in its very nature implies peace with God the Judge (Rom 5:1).

¹²⁴ Calvin wrote, “The mode of obtaining this righteousness he explains [in 2 Cor 5:19-21] to be, that our sins are not imputed to us” (*Institutes*, Book III, ch. xi, section 22); Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (London: Tyndale, 1965),

charge any sins to a believer, God as Judge can justly acquit that person and justify him (Rom 4:6-8; 2 Cor 5:19). The great exchange took place: Christ fully suffered for sins he did not commit, thereby giving to believing sinners full standing in God’s sight as righteous individuals (without any satisfaction for sins made by these sinners) (2 Cor 5:21). Thus justification is based on forgiveness of all our sins through the cross alone (Col 2:13-14).¹²⁵

Now the relationship between this error and the last becomes clear. The Catholic church has no actual doctrine of justification *because* she has no true doctrine of Christ’s once-for-all atonement for the sins of His people. Temporal punishment (in purgatory) cannot coexist with real justification, because real justification automatically means there is no condemnation toward

p. 260; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 165, 168.

¹²⁵ Erickson has a good definition of divine justification: “In the New Testament, justification is the declarative act of God by which, *on the basis of the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death*, he pronounces believers to have fulfilled all the requirements of the law which pertain to them” (*Christian Theology*, p. 956, emphasis original).

Because Calvin saw so close a relationship between justification and forgiveness, he penned, “It is evident, therefore, that the only way in which those whom God embraces are made righteous, is by having their pollutions wiped away by the remission of sins, so that this justification may be termed in one word the remission of sins” (*Institutes*, Book III, ch. xi., section 21).

the believer whatsoever. Moreover, Christ's once-for-all atonement eliminated any supposed need for purifying in purgatory since God is faithful and just to not only forgive the believer but also to cleanse him from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9) through the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7; cf. Heb 1:3; 10:10,14). Instead of forgiveness being based on the Holy Spirit's action in making believers holy (as the Catholic system advertises), the New Testament clearly shows that the sanctifying Holy Spirit came *after* Christ's once-for-all-time atonement (Rom 8:3-4; Gal 3:13-14; cf. Jer 31:33 is based on 31:34's forgiveness).

Therefore, in light of the New Testament teaching of justification, the Catholic system appears to be grossly in error. Again, however, the question at hand is deeper than just recognizing error: Is the Catholic church in apostasy at this crucial point of doctrine? Having denied the Pauline view of righteousness (as especially explained in Romans 3:21-5:11), the Catholic church has denied the righteousness revealed in the gospel (Rom 1:17). Therefore, adhering to the Catholic system on this point of doctrine means denying the truth of the gospel and severing all hope of forgiveness.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Admittedly, Paul's view of righteousness and justification can be deep. However, this does not excuse the Roman Catholic bishops or anyone else from blameworthiness. After all,

Abolition of the Law

The last fatal error of the Roman Catholic system (cited in this paper) is the Church's practical denial of the Law's obsolescence (cf. Heb 8:13). Unlike the last two fatal errors, which pertained to specific doctrine, this fatal error covers the day-by-day foundation of the entire superstructure—the sacraments, especially works of penance. This fatal error covers Catholic continual “conversion”, which remarkably now, some Protestants are claiming as constituting the root of genuine Christian life.¹²⁷ Before the fatality of this error can be demonstrated, however, a brief introduction into Paul's view of the Mosaic Law is in order.

Paul essentially delineated two reasons why God gave the Law of Moses: (1) that sin might increase (Rom 5:20; probably cf. Gal 3:19), causing (2) people to be aware of indwelling sin within their flesh (Rom 3:20).¹²⁸ Since the Law on stone tablets never provided

Peter himself admitted that Paul's letters contain “some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own *destruction*” (2 Pet 3:16).

¹²⁷ ECT p. 21; Packer, “Why I Signed It,” p. 37.

¹²⁸ Both of these purposes are neatly found in Romans 7:13.

the sinner with any new capacity to obey (2 Cor 3:6), the Law (though good in itself—Rom 7:12) became the power of sin (1 Cor 15:56), arousing the sinful passions in the flesh to do all sorts of sin (Rom 7:5). In this way, indwelling sin became extremely visible, and enslaving. Consequently, Paul presented being under the Mosaic Law as being under bondage to sin (Gal 3:22). This bondage lasted until Christ redeemed His people through the cross and provided the Holy Spirit in the new covenant as the effectual means of obedience (Gal 4:4-6; Rom 7:22-8:4). The Spirit indwells and leads all believers in Christ (Rom 8:9, 14). Therefore, believers after the cross are no longer under the Mosaic Law (Gal 5:18).

Here is the crucial connection with Roman Catholicism. Even though the Gentile Galatian believers were formerly pagan idolaters (Gal 4:8), their pagan religions enslaved them to the same type of “weak and worthless elemental things” (4:9) to which the Jews were also enslaved under the Mosaic Law (4:1-3). That is why Paul could describe their desire to be under the Mosaic Law (4:21) as becoming enslaved “again” to the “weak and worthless elemental things” (4:9). Therefore, Paul’s comments regarding the Law apply to any religious system which makes people slaves to “weak

and worthless elemental things”—even present-day Roman Catholicism.

Like the Mosaic Law, Roman Catholicism enslaves people to these elemental things, such as observing “days and months and seasons and years” (Gal 4:10).¹²⁹ Moreover, the coming of Christ has also meant the abolition of any food laws. “Therefore,” Paul commands, “let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival...—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:16-17). Do not become a slave to these things according to the tradition of men, because it cannot coexist with the freedom in Christ (Col 2:8, “rather than Christ”; cf. Gal 5:1). Being a good Catholic, however, requires one to observe fasts, Lent, liturgical seasons, and feast days.¹³⁰ But Paul declares such laws to be sin because they do not honor the fullness of grace brought by Christ’s appearing. In fact, in Christ, the believer “died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world...decrees, such as ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in

¹²⁹ See the list of “Holy Days of Obligation” in CCC 2042-43, 2157, 2180, 2185, 2187-88, 2192, 2193.

¹³⁰ CCC, p. 770.

accordance with the commandments and teachings of men” (Col 2:20-22).¹³¹ If Roman Catholicism’s material, physical, earthly sacramental system (which did not originate with the New Testament) does not fit into this category of commandments of men, one is hard-pressed to know what might! In fact, the Roman Catholic church may be taking part in Paul’s prophesy that in later times, many will fall away from the faith, paying attention to hypocrites who “forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods” (1 Tim 4:1-3).

If this is so obvious, why does the Catholic church promote them? Acts of penance¹³² are said to purify oneself. Penance becoming a means of forgiveness of temporal punishment, since they are said to “put off...the ‘old man’ and to put on the ‘new man.’”¹³³ This sounds reasonable. Who typically does not respect the disciplined religious man?

This core doctrine (which consumes a vast amount of the good Catholic’s time) falls under Paul’s condemning axe in two respects. First, Paul astutely warns us all, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-

¹³¹ Christ’s blood cleanses believers from dead works (Heb 9:14).

¹³² See CCC 1434-39 for a list.

abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of *no value* against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:23). Acts such as penance do not purify the soul. Only the Holy Spirit can put to death the deeds of the flesh through His leading in the freedom that Christ provides from these elemental laws (cf. Rom 8:13-15). Second, seeing these efforts as a means of forgiveness truly falls under Paul’s phrase “seeking to be justified by law” (Gal 5:4). Sadly, many unsuspecting people have bought into this system, and are with their Church, “severed from Christ” and “fallen from grace” (Gal 5:4).

The other two fatal errors regarding the atonement and justification have provided a background for this larger overarching spiritual suicide. Christ’s perfect atonement cleanses “the conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). Dead works include offerings which relate “only to food and drink and various washings [e.g. ritual baptisms], regulations for the body” whose time ended with the cross (Heb 9:10). If the present reader is caught in such a system, it is not too late. God is slow to anger and abundant in mercy. One simply must repent from these dead works and have faith in God’s mercy alone to atone for his sins completely through Christ’s once-for-all-time sacrifice

¹³³ CCC 1473.

on the cross (cf. Heb 6:1). For “good” Catholics, repentance from dead works will require departing from the Roman Catholic church and its sacramental system of “weak and worthless elemental things” (Gal 4:9). God will then replace the spirit of fear with His very own Holy Spirit, making the repentant one His very own son in an intimate relationship without fear of temporal punishment. However, if one does not repent from these dead works, let the reader beware: the Galatians’ desire to go back under a Law-system provoked Paul to write his harshest extant letter as well as his harshest curse, “If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:9).

Conclusion

The recent document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” has recently expressed what many evangelicals are feeling, a desire to end the “cold war” (as it were) between Catholics and Protestants. The contention is that since both parties are Christians, there should be no unnecessary division among them. This paper has questioned the premise that good Catholics are true believers by attempting to demonstrate that both historical and modern Roman Catholic dogma

contradicts the truth of the gospel clearly presented by the New Testament.

Going back again to the introduction and recalling to mind the “good” Catholics we all know, perhaps one feels that this paper has been a bit harsh on the Catholic system. After all, these people are ignorant of many of these truths. How can we blame them for sincerely following their beliefs, when these beliefs focus on the Bible, Christ, and many upright moral values?

Granted, as people saved by grace alone, we recognize our own tendency to slip into error and we can relate to others caught in falsehood. Like a faint resemblance of the apostle Paul, we too may “have great sorrow and unceasing grief” in our hearts over our countrymen separated from Christ (Rom 9:2-3). Yet restraint is in order. This same apostle a chapter later recognized that even ignorant people zealous for righteousness need salvation still (Rom 10:1-3). Ignorance is no excuse (and we should seek to alleviate it). It is a sinful ignorance (Rom 1:21-22; Eph 4:17-18), for like the first-century Jews, devout Catholics “have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the

law of righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:2-4). Few will make it to heaven ultimately (Matt 7:14). Many will be deluded as to their relationship to Christ and eternal destiny (Matt 7:21-23). Therefore, let us keep praying for their salvation (Rom 10:1).

Let this final somber note from one long-time Catholic observer cause reflection as to the wisdom of efforts such as ECT:

The Roman Church has no intention of revising any of her basic doctrines, but only of up-dating her methods and techniques for more efficient administration and to present a more attractive appearance. That is designed to make it easier for the Eastern Orthodox, the Anglican and the Protestant churches to return to her fold...Her purpose is not union but *absorption*...The age-long danger that Protestantism has faced from the Roman Church has not diminished; in fact it may well have increased. For through this less offensive posture and this superficial ecumenism Rome is all the better situated to carry out her program of eliminating opposition and moving into a position of world dominance.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, p. xii.

Postscript

This research paper examined Roman Catholicism with respect to one article of the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” Even though Protestants and Catholics use the same terminology, the Catholic church lacks a true doctrine of justification. Instead, acceptance with God rests upon a life-long conversion process of sanctification. In contrast, the gospel gives to every believer in Christ the permanent declaration of righteousness through the once-for-all-time blood atonement of Christ on the cross. As a result, the gospel enables believers to have assurance of heaven, which is something impossible in the Catholic system, apart from special circumstances. Therefore, the Catholic system of doctrine is opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, just as the canons of Trent make clear in condemning many Protestant teachings.

Other fruitful lines of inquiry remain, which extend beyond the scope of this paper. Evangelicals differ with Roman Catholics over the worship of Mary, over prayers to the saints and for the dead, over the extent of the canon, and over the authority of the pope. Again, at issue are not simply differences, but differences that deny the gospel and put conscientious adherents outside the bounds of genuine Christianity.

Of utmost importance may be the authority of the pope in the church. If Luther was correct, the Roman papacy practices spiritual abuse in binding the individual's conscience to manmade rules under human authority—in contradiction to the liberty of the gospel, as explained in Galatians. Moreover, if this spiritual abuse is substantiated, then Rome qualifies as an antichrist religion—literally, replacing Christ with a man. In keeping with this eschatological theme, it would be insightful to trace the significance of Rome throughout the book of Revelation, which pictures the earthly city of Rome as a whore, in contrast to the heavenly city of New Jerusalem, pictured as a bride. If this contrasting picture applies today (and it well may, given that Rome still stands, contrary to Rev 17:15-18)—if this picture applies today, then joining with the false woman constitutes spiritual adultery (i.e. apostasy).

In addition to these doctrinal differences is the difference over doctrine itself. According to evangelical David Wells, theologians of Vatican II actually followed a liberal Protestant approach to doctrine. Taking their cues from John Henry Cardinal Newman, who first proposed the modern theory of doctrinal development, the Roman church emphasized experience over propositions. (Often such communal experience has

been credited to the Holy Spirit.) Other than the worship of Mary, which was kept intact (and even augmented), the Roman Catholic church has emphasized her traditional doctrines less now than in the past. As a result, differences between Protestants and Catholics appear as “fine print” and variations in “theory” (to borrow phrases from J. I. Packer) in comparison to the common experience of life-long conversion. If Wells is correct, then research on the Protestant-Catholic division should concentrate on doctrinal development more than on individual creeds or statements of faith. If the liberal Protestant view of doctrinal development is correct, neither the specifics of Trent nor its canons are binding today in their “fine print.” Only the true spirit of those doctrines would remain.

For further reading, please consider the recommendations listed in the bibliography under “Further Reading.”

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Abbreviations

- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- ECT “Evangelicals & Catholics Together”
- NASB *New American Standard Bible*
- Trent *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*

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