

Changing American Evangelical Attitudes towards Roman Catholics: 1960-2000

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Introduction

In 1960, Presidential campaign historian Theodore H. White observed that “the largest and most important division in American society was that between Protestants and Catholics.”¹ As a vital part of American Protestant life, evangelicalism reflected the strains of this conflict.² Anti-Catholicism, according to church historian George Marsden, “was simply an unquestioned part of the fundamentalist-evangelicalism of the day.”³

This posture of outright public hostility was evidenced in many ways. It could be seen in the opposition of many evangelical leaders to the presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy in 1960. It could be read in the missions textbooks used at seminaries such as Fuller, which saw Catholicism, along with communism and modernism, as one of the three massive world forces threatening Christianity.⁴ It could be heard in the founding documents and speeches of the National Association of Evangelicals.⁵ And it could be sensed in the opposition to appointing American ambassadors to the Vatican. Yet nearly forty years later, due to various cultural, political and theological shifts, there has been a significant change in the way many evangelicals perceive Roman Catholics.⁶

As early as 1985, Joseph Bayly, writing in *Eternity* magazine noticed that things were changing. Writing on what the evangelical leaders of his generation were passing on to a new generation of leaders, and

summing up forty years of evangelicalism since 1945, Bayly said, “We inherited a Berlin Wall between evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics; we bequeath a spirit of love and rapprochement on the basis of the Bible rather than fear and hatred.”⁷

By the mid 1990s, it was clear that attitudes were changing. On a local level, evangelicals and Catholics were meeting to discuss issues from poverty and welfare reform to abortion. On the national level changes were also apparent. Evangelical publishing houses were printing books by Catholic authors. Some evangelical parachurch ministries began placing Roman Catholics on their boards. Catholic masses were being conducted at an evangelical university. Evangelical scholars held some key teaching posts at Notre Dame University. For the first time a Roman Catholic was invited to give a seminar at InterVarsity’s Urbana Missions conference. Moreover, key evangelical leaders were having audiences with the pope.

In 1994, these changes dramatically came to public attention with the publishing of the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (ECT) statement—a document providing a rationale for evangelical and Catholic dialogue. Then in 1997, ECT was followed up with another proclamation called *The Gift of Salvation* (GOS), which announced that certain evangelicals and Catholics had come to a shared understanding of

salvation.⁸

Such changes and claims are extraordinary when we consider the tortured history between these two groups over the centuries, as well as the hostile climate that existed just four decades ago. There is a remarkable new openness between many Catholics and evangelicals. The ECT statement itself boasted of a new spirit of “historic cooperation.”

Clearly, significant changes were taking place. Attitudes were changing. Whereas once many evangelicals thought of Catholics as theological and cultural enemies, today, many evangelicals think of Catholics as theological and cultural allies.

Of course, the word “many” properly clarifies that not all evangelicals feel this way.

While some see these changes as a sign that evangelicalism is coming to maturity, others see them as indicating serious theological compromise. Still others see it as a mixed blessing. However one assesses these changes, nearly all admit that things have changed!

This article will briefly examine the roots of anti-Catholicism and the historical factors that led to this change in evangelical attitudes. It will not describe in any detail the differences of beliefs since many studies have already done this.⁹ Rather, it will look at the shaping forces that have been at work—those events, movements, and influences that have brought us to where we are at the beginning of a new century.

A Brief Consideration of the Roots of the Conflict

The roots of evangelical anti-Catholicism run very deep. They extend to the Protestant Reformation. At its core, the

Reformers believed that Rome abandoned the pure gospel of grace. The Reformers responded with a call to *sola fide*—the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and *sola scriptura*—the supreme authority of Scripture. There were also protests against all the extra-biblical traditions of Rome that obscured the gospel.

Early American colonialists from New England Puritans to Virginia Anglicans feared Rome’s claim to political and spiritual supremacy. These fears were present in American culture right up to the mid 20th century. Furthermore, anti-Catholicism was not an exclusively evangelical stance. Secularists, like John Dewey, and mainline Protestants as represented by the *Christian Century*, held similar sentiments.

American anti-Catholicism is complex and has taken various forms. Sometimes anti-Catholicism took a nativist form. Nativist anti-Catholicism feared the power-threatening influx of immigrants to the United States. It reached its zenith in the 1920s and seemed to die out by the 1960s. Sometimes anti-Catholicism took patriotic forms. Patriotic anti-Catholicism feared the universal claims of the pope. It suspected Rome for its antipathy to democracy and American liberty and its claims of ultimate authority in both the spiritual and temporal realms (*Unam sanctum*, 1302). Anti-Catholicism also took a theological form. Theological anti-Catholicism focused on doctrinal objections to what Rome does and who Rome is.

Ten Shaping Forces that Have Altered the Landscape

Given the fact that the roots of this conflict are nearly 500 years old, what explains this shift in American evangelical attitudes? What shaping forces have been at work to bring about a change in

attitude? There are at least ten that I would like to identify. Looking at them will help us better understand ourselves and the context in which we do ministry in the first decade of a new century.

The 1960 election of John F. Kennedy

In 1960, anti-Catholicism was not merely an evangelical phenomenon. It was an American phenomenon. Both secularists and Christians, both evangelicals and non-evangelical Protestants, worried about the universal claims of Rome. The prospect of having a Roman Catholic president frightened many. For this reason John F. Kennedy's candidacy in the 1960 presidential election caused a major controversy.

Evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike shared the belief that the Roman Catholic Church could never change. It would not embrace religious freedom, and it would not renounce its universal claims over civil governments, let alone its attitude towards non-Catholics. On the Protestant spectrum, voices ranging from Norman Vincent Peale to Harold John Ockenga to Carl McIntire expressed fear that electing Kennedy would be a terrible thing for our nation. Opposition to Kennedy's election also came from *Christianity Today* and the Southern Baptist Convention. Donald Grey Barnhouse argued that his election would be "perilous."

The issue is simple. The Roman Catholic Church will not allow Kennedy the right to carry out his own desires. They have made it unmistakably clear that Senator Kennedy must be a Roman Catholic first and a United States president second, where the interests of the Church are concerned.¹⁰

The debate over religion seemed to take central place in the campaign. Our coun-

try had never elected a Catholic president. The last time one ran for office (Al Smith, 1928), he was decisively rejected. Kennedy himself brought things to a defining moment when he spoke to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. It was an event heavily covered by the media. In his speech Kennedy said that he believed in an America "where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners how to vote."¹¹ He said religion should be a private affair. He promised to uphold the First Amendment's guarantees of religious liberty. In addition, he expressed his opposition to the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican and to the granting of aid to parochial schools.

The speech persuaded many. It emerged as the turning point of the election that led to Kennedy's victory. A Catholic was in the White House, but he turned out to be a strong advocate of the separation of church and state. Some wondered how seriously committed Kennedy was to Catholicism. Others joked that he seemed to "out Protestant the Protestants!" Still others mused that he was, by his stance, really the first Southern Baptist president of the United States!

Kennedy's election is significant because it signaled the full acceptance of Catholics into American life. While nativism was not dead in America, nativist anti-Catholicism was on the ropes. Four years later, when Republican candidate Barry Goldwater chose a Roman Catholic as his vice presidential running mate, it was clear that anti-Catholicism was no longer an issue in American politics.

Vatican II

If the first nail in the coffin of political anti-Catholicism was the 1960 Kennedy election, the second nail was Vatican II (1962-1965). The Vatican council was convened under Pope John XXIII for the purpose of *aggiornamento* or “up dating” the church so it would be more relevant to the present age. Whereas the last two Catholic Councils, Trent (1545-63) and Vatican I (1869-1870), took a defensive and antagonistic stance toward Protestantism, Vatican II had a different spirit. Among other things, the council called for a revised liturgy, allowed the vernacular language in the Mass, defined a new view of calling for the laity, opened up the church to inter-faith dialogue, revised its view of non-Catholic Christians (they were identified as “separated brethren”), encouraged Bible based preaching, Catholic Biblical scholarship, and Bible translation in common languages.

The most controversial ruling of the council was its *Declaration of Religious Freedom* where it affirmed religious liberty as a fundamental human right. This marked a radical break from the former views, say, of the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, in which the church restated its right to be a temporal power and use force, and argued against both religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Vatican II, in contrast, affirmed limited government and religious freedom as the first human right.

This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs.¹²

Perhaps most striking was its admission that “the American experience of religious freedom is not only an advance in Church history: it is also an important breakthrough in government.”¹³

This unambiguous affirmation of religious liberty not only calmed many fears, but also silenced critics such as Paul Blanshard and others who said that the Catholic church was anti-freedom and believed in a policy of coercion.¹⁴ Even *Christianity Today* admitted that “no one can safely predict the possible extent of reform and renewal within the Roman Church.”¹⁵

Vatican II revealed several things about the Catholic church. It showed that it was not a monolith. The ambiguity of some of its rulings showed that a measure of dissent was tolerated within the church. It also showed that the church was capable of change. Those who said it could not change, now modified their criticism to say that it might be able to change in some areas, but not its essential theological position. Vatican II offered a glimpse into how the Catholic church changed, not by renouncing previous papal statements, but simply by adding new pronouncements. Finally, the council made it clear that many theological barriers still remained between evangelicals and Catholics. While nativistic and patriotic anti-Catholicism were effectively silenced, theological anti-Catholicism was not.

The Cooperative Evangelism of Billy Graham

In the 1940s and 1950s the ministry of Billy Graham gained a high profile in the United States. Graham’s ministry, which included reaching out to Catholics, has greatly influenced the evangelical movement. He has been called the evangelical

“pope,” not only because he has preached the gospel to more people than anyone else in history, but also because, more than anyone else, he has been a spokesman for the evangelical movement.

Part of Graham’s appeal, and we could say part of the strength of the entire evangelical movement, has been the simple proclamation of the gospel. To his credit, Graham has been committed to reaching people from all kinds of backgrounds—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and unchurched. In so doing, Graham, as well as the evangelical movement, has not only appealed to Catholics, but brought many crossovers from Catholicism into evangelical churches.

Graham has often admitted that early in his life he spoke against and did not cooperate with Roman Catholics. Coming out of a Fundamentalist background that took him from Bob Jones University to the Florida Bible Institute to ordination in the Southern Baptist Convention to Wheaton College, he was not shy about speaking out against Modernism, Romanism and Communism. Not only did Graham take a negative view of Catholics, they also took a negative view of him!

By the late 1940’s Graham began to moderate his tone. He began to seek a broader sponsorship for his meetings. He adopted a policy of not criticizing other religious groups. All this took place while his associates were denying that any changes were taking place. Jerry Beven, Graham’s executive secretary wrote to Fundamentalist critics saying:

You asked if Billy Graham had invited Roman Catholics and Jews to cooperate in the evangelistic meetings. Such a thought, even if the reporter did suggest it as having come from Mr. Graham, seems ridiculous to me. Surely you must

know that it is not true. . . further, that you should give any credence to the idea that Mr. Graham would ever turn over any decision card to the Roman Catholic Church seems inconceivable.¹⁶

Over time, the inconceivable took place. While he did not modify his basic message, he did modify his strategy. Kennedy’s election prompted him not to speak critically of Catholics. Cooperation seemed to be a matter of evangelistic necessity when he visited Latin American nations where there was a small Protestant base. He was ready to work with whomever was willing. The same could be said of his ministry in Communist nations.

Billy Graham’s Catholic strategy evolved over time. Early on he called the Catholic bishop in an area to acquaint him with his ministry and invite him to the meetings. In his 1964 New England Crusade, he received an unprecedented endorsement by Cardinal Cushing. Then came invitations to sit on the platform. In 1977 at his University of Notre Dame Crusade he made an effort to tailor the invitation to his audience. Catholics were invited to make “commitments to Christ” or to “reconfirm their confirmation” as opposed to his more typical appeal to make a “decision for Christ.”¹⁷ In 1978 he had the opportunity to preach a full evangelistic sermon in a Roman Catholic church in Poland. In 1981 he met with the newly elected pope, John Paul II. Early in the Reagan administration he recommended the President appoint a full U.S. ambassador to the Vatican (a move that deeply disappointed his fellow Baptists). By the 1980s, Graham had adopted a position of close and careful cooperation with Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Graham’s cooperative evange-

lism and ecumenical outreach attempted to exploit the common ground of “mere Christianity” with all denominational groups. When Crusades were set up in American cities, an entire strategy to win Catholic cooperation was set in motion. He believed that blessing and sponsorship by an archdiocese meant wide Catholic participation. After a crusade, the archdiocese was provided with names and addresses of Catholics who responded. By the late 1980s, Roman Catholics made up the largest single religious group attending his citywide crusades.

In pursuing “an ecumenism of the gospel” Graham had many critics. Some, like Bob Jones, Sr., said he was “selling our crowd down the river.” Other less strident voices, like those of Martin Lloyd-Jones in Britain, and Carl F. H. Henry in the United States, thought that Graham won Catholic endorsement at too great a price. Graham and his defenders, who referred to the Catholic question as “the great controversy,” pointed to the fact that his basic message had not changed. Besides, they said, his cooperative evangelism followed in the steps of Paul, Whitefield, Wesley, Finney, and Moody.

This pattern of cooperative evangelism that Graham modeled was soon adopted by other evangelical groups such as Campus Crusade for Christ and Promise Keepers. As Bill Bright’s ministry went international, he invited Catholic participation and cooperation. Promise Keepers, which was founded by a born again Catholic, set out the aim of full participation with Catholics right from the start. They even amended their statement of faith so that it would be less offensive to Catholics.

The Charismatic Movement

Long before anyone was talking about evangelicals and Catholics coming together (ECT), there was talk about Pentecostals and Catholics coming together. Pentecostalism and what is sometimes called “neo-Pentecostalism” (the Charismatic Movement) experienced phenomenal worldwide growth from the 1960s on. The Charismatic Movement is often seen as a “second wave” of Pentecostalism. It brought aspects of Pentecostalism to the mainline churches and helped give birth to the Catholic Charismatic renewal movement. By the mid-1970s, contact between Catholics and Pentecostals increased. Focusing on a common experience of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Charismatics, at least initially, managed to avoid the doctrinal controversies of the past. They met not just for mass evangelistic gatherings but for mass praise and worship rallies, local prayer fellowships, and formal dialogue.

Catholics were beginning to realize that the Pentecostal movement represented a large and growing segment of worldwide Christianity. They were also concerned about strained relations between Catholics and Pentecostals in Latin America. Inspired by Vatican II and a quest for renewal, the International Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue was officially initiated in 1972 and continued through the 1990s. Initial contacts for this dialogue began with David du Plessis, who had been an observer at Vatican II and who became an unofficial ambassador-at-large for the Pentecostal Movement.

In what set out to be a dialogue on spirituality, participants found they had many surprising areas of agreement. They discovered what has been called “an ecumenism of Jesus” or “an ecumenism

of the Holy Spirit”—a unity born out of experience. Some of the Catholic Charismatics even referred to themselves as “evangelical Catholics.” They spoke the language of evangelicals, saying that salvation cannot be earned but is a free gift, that there is only one mediator between God and man—Jesus Christ, that the Eucharist is not a repetition of Calvary since Jesus died once for all. Some Catholic Charismatics were even boasting of their ability to affirm all the tenets of the evangelical Lausanne Covenant of 1974.¹⁸

Of course, not all Catholic Charismatics were this evangelical. In fact, Catholic evangelicals remain a small minority. Many Catholic Charismatics continue to adhere to Catholic doctrine, sacramental theology, and devotion to Mary. Ongoing talks in the International Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue have also pointed out these disagreements (e.g., disagreements about the Bible, baptism, the Holy Spirit, the church, and Mary).

Political Ecumenism of the 1980s and 1990s

Yet another factor that contributed to the changing of American evangelical attitudes was their re-entry into the political arena. One consequence of the neo-evangelical call to forsake Fundamentalist isolationism and to “penetrate the world for Christ” was the contact evangelicals have with others in the political arena—including Catholics. The practicalities of local political involvement brought evangelicals on the Right and the Left to discover “an ecumenism of the trenches.”

On the Right, the discovery was prompted by the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which liberalized abortion laws. When the court made its ruling, evangelicals were divided. The

strongest condemnation came from the Catholic church. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, passed a resolution in 1971, affirming a woman’s right to have an abortion if giving birth posed any physical or emotional dangers.¹⁹ *Christianity Today*, on the other hand, came out immediately and condemned the *Roe v. Wade* decision. The majority of evangelicals were not ready to act on this issue. Through the efforts of the Christian Action Council and especially the influence of Francis Schaeffer, things began to change.

Schaeffer’s books and films highlighted the issue and argued for an evangelical co-belligerency. Co-belligerency for the cause of social justice is good. Schaeffer made a distinction between a co-belligerent and an ally. Co-belligerency is temporary and focused at specific points. Schaeffer warned against allying with groups that have a non-Christian base. But he encouraged co-belligerency and criticized evangelicals for leaving the battle for human life to the Catholics.²⁰ Schaeffer’s influence on evangelical and Fundamentalist leaders was immense. He had a major role in Jerry Falwell’s political awakening, which in turn prepared Falwell for his 1979 encounter with Catholic activist Paul Weyrich. That meeting laid the foundations for the Moral Majority. Schaeffer’s co-belligerency arguments also influenced the leaders of Operation Rescue. Moreover, religious freedom battles brought together Catholic and evangelical activists. In the mid-1970s the IRS and other government agencies had a series of run-ins with the Christian School movement. Catholics and evangelicals joined together to fight them. Then came a similar collaboration on religious freedom in broadcasting in 1979.

Just as socially conservative Catholics and evangelicals were getting together, their socially liberal counterparts were drawing strength from each other as well. From its inception, *Sojourners*, a prominent voice of the evangelical Left, was drawing inspiration from Catholics such as Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, and Gary Wills. In its early years, *Sojourners* magazine often expressed surprise at discovering Catholic Christians in the midst of a social protest who were committed to “orthodox Christianity.” Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners*, called it an “ecumenism of the soup kitchens and homeless shelters.” In recent years, the Call to Renewal movement led by Wallis and others, has sought an even broader alliance for biblical faith and spiritual politics that includes evangelicals, Catholics, and Mainline Protestants.

The net effect was that as the evangelical Right and Left rediscovered the social implications of Christianity, both gained a new-found appreciation for the depth of Catholic thinking and social teaching on public issues. This appreciation and common cause in the trenches forged a wide-ranging political ecumenism.

Evangelical Dialogue with Catholics

ECT is often mistaken as the beginning of evangelical and Catholic dialogue. We have already spoken of the Pentecostal dialogues. Before 1994, other dialogues were taking place, such as the discussions between the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity from 1988 to 1997. An even more significant discussion was the Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984 (ERCDOM). Granted, this was an international dialogue, but it

did include several American evangelicals along with British evangelicals, such as John Stott and David Wells, who have had extended ministries in the United States.

The unique focus of ERCDOM was missions. The talks were undertaken to reduce misunderstanding, bring to light areas in which major disagreements still exist, and highlight common doctrinal ground especially in light of their shared concern for missions. While the dialogues confirmed consensus on areas such as a Chalcedon based Christology, there was no flinching from the trouble spots. Even though there was agreement on the necessity of revelation, the objectivity of God’s truth, and the divine inspiration of the Bible, there were disagreements as to the nature of biblical authority (i.e., Catholics echoed Vatican II’s assertion that sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form the Word of God, while evangelicals pointed to the normativity, the primacy, and the perspicuity of Scripture). Another flash point came in discussions on Mary. Salvation was yet another controversial topic. While both sides agreed that there is one savior and one gospel, and that we are saved by grace through Christ, they differed in their understanding of human nature and need. Catholics speak of a weakened free will and are more optimistic about humanity’s ability to respond to the grace of God. Whereas evangelicals place more emphasis on humanity’s inability to save itself and emphasize justification by grace in Christ through faith alone.

ERCDOM ended with a discussion of the possibility of common witness in light of the truths that unite us and the convictions that divide us. The talks agreed that there was much room for common witness in areas such as Bible translation,

publishing, media influence, community service, emergency relief, development, justice issues, marriage, and family. In the area of common worship, ERCDOM encouraged evangelicals and Catholics to join in common prayer and Bible study. But it admitted to the “major problems” that arise in sharing communion. It also raised caution about common witness in evangelism because “common evangelism necessarily presupposes a common commitment to the same gospel.” ERCDOM said that outstanding differences make common witness in evangelism premature because “each side regards the other’s view of the gospel as defective.”²¹

The Radicalizing of the Mainline Churches and American Culture

Another influential force at work has been the radicalizing of liberalism and the decline of the mainline churches. As the old Protestant mainline churches became progressively more liberal, evangelicals and Catholics discovered that they had more in common than they had previously thought.

During the 1960s, American political liberalism took a radical turn. The classical or traditional liberalism of the 1940s and 1950s, which affirmed liberty within the context of law, morality, religion and God, was abandoned. In its place came a new relativistic liberalism that abandoned the old context. The twin thrusts of modern liberalism are radical individualism and radical egalitarianism. The influence of this new liberalism had a twofold effect. On the one hand, it led to a reversal of American values and a redefinition of deviancy. What was once considered moral was redefined as immoral and *vice versa*. On the other hand, it put tremen-

dous pressure on the culturally prominent mainline churches to accommodate to the spirit of the times. Consequently, many mainline churches changed their convictions about key doctrines and altered their institutional structure. They often stopped speaking of the uniqueness of Christ. Emphasis in missions switched from an interest in salvation to an exclusive interest in temporal liberation. As this was happening the mainline churches began losing members. Theological liberalism led to decreasing levels of commitment in the pew. Mainline churches constituted half of the Protestant churches in the 1950s but have dropped to just a third of that number today. Millions have left for other options.

While the mainline churches were redefining themselves, evangelicals and Catholics began to notice what they had in common. When Rome was starting to reform itself toward the Bible, mainline Protestantism was moving further away from Scripture even to the extent of demythologizing Jesus. We arrived at the strange situation where a conservative Baptist or conservative Presbyterian had more in common with an Orthodox or a Catholic Christian than with a liberal Baptist or a liberal Presbyterian! The ground beneath our feet was heaving.

The Broadening of Evangelicalism

While the mainline was drifting Left, evangelicalism did not remain static. As the movement grew up and distanced itself from its Fundamentalist roots, it broadened. The broadening of evangelicalism made it more open to other movements and traditions. In some cases this openness is healthy and good. In other cases it has caused a serious fraying at the edges of what it means to be an evangeli-

cal. Commitment to previous theological positions has weakened, and thus created more tolerance for other theologies.

On the more positive side, this broadening is seen in the spiritual formation movement. Spiritual formation is now the rage in all the main evangelical institutions from Moody to Gordon Conwell. The formation movement draws heavily on ancient—including Catholic—sources. It usually contends that in breaking from the Catholic church, Protestants threw out a great deal of spiritual wisdom and insight. Many evangelicals want to move beyond a head centered faith, or an activist faith, or even a feeling centered faith to something deeper. So they explore the “inward journey” and study some of the early church fathers, desert mothers, ancient martyrs, scholastics, and responsible Christian mystics. In so doing they discover some of treasures of ancient Christian spirituality through such masters as Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence, and others. They adopt spiritual directors and disciplines.

Another example of positive broadening is seen in the area of worship. There is a new interest in learning from other worship traditions that go beyond the contemporary. This “call to rediscover the past” was first announced by the Chicago Call of 1978 when a group of evangelical scholars worried about the shallowness of an evangelicalism that ignored its historical, creedal, and confessional roots. In some ways the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals focuses on this same concern. The movement towards “convergence worship” as articulated by Robert Webber appears to be gaining ground. Millennials hunger for a worship that highlights mystery, contemplation, and ancient roots.

In both of these examples, the broadening of evangelicalism is evidenced by an exploration of our Reformation or pre-Reformation past. This exploration often involves a positive encounter with some form of Catholic Christianity.

On the other hand, some of the broadening taking place among evangelicals has not been so positive. George Marsden has written about the broadening at Fuller Seminary over the issue of biblical inerrancy.²² Richard Quebedeaux and James Davison Hunter have written of the liberalizing tendency among young evangelicals.²³ They have demonstrated that increased openness has led to embracing views previously associated with liberal movements. David Wells has written about both the increased theological illiteracy in evangelical churches and the declining passion for truth in evangelical seminaries. He thinks that the evangelical movement is losing its confessional dimensions.²⁴ One could also cite the movement of theologians calling themselves “post conservative evangelicals,” who seek to move away from classical Christian theism toward an “open view of God.”²⁵ In these latter examples it is easy to see how a significant broadening of the evangelical movement not only makes it difficult to say what an evangelical is, but also makes the contrasts with Roman Catholicism less clear.

Evangelicals and Catholics Together: ECT I and ECT II

The *Evangelical and Catholics Together* statement, along with its follow-up statement *The Gift of Salvation*, are sometimes conveniently referred to as ECT I and ECT II. These statements simply could not have been written in the 1950s or 1960s. Together they serve both as an indicator

of our changing attitudes as well as an influencing factor themselves.

ECT I put a name on what was already happening. In many ways it was a continuation of an existing dialogue. ERCDOM said that “every possible opportunity for common witness should be taken except where conscience forbids.”²⁶ In this sense, ECT was simply taking up the mandate that ERCDOM handed them.

Both ECT documents seek to persuade evangelicals and Catholics to “contend together.” While ECT I includes some loaded theological statements that are left intentionally vague, its burden seems to be a call for a common Christian witness in the public square. It emphasizes the church’s responsibility to proclaim the gospel and to stand for righteousness and justice. Its main affirmation is that politics, law, and culture must be secured by moral truth. Moral truth is secured by religious truth. And evangelicals and Catholics must stand together to contend for this in our culture.

ECT I was published in 1994. It was not an official church document. But it did contain some amazing affirmations, which elicited an intense reaction. Some people welcomed ECT. Others flatly denounced it. And some, like Kenneth Kantzer, wisely gave it mixed reviews: “[the ECT statement] rightly calls our attention to the importance of working together for the good of our nation and all of society.” But then he adds that “unfortunately, it does not make . . . clear how important are the doctrinal differences that still divide Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.”²⁷

As a cultural statement ECT had much to say. As a theological statement it was ambiguous at best and misleading at

worst. Justification is listed as a common agreement but in a way that reflects the traditional Catholic understanding and ignores the Reformation qualifier “alone.”

In 1997, further discussions among ECT participants issued in a new statement called *The Gift of Salvation*, or ECT II. Acknowledging the short-comings of the first statement, the second statement attempted to deal with justification head on. ECT II claimed that both the Catholics and evangelicals who met were in agreement “with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).”

This in itself was a remarkable claim. But once again it was not without ambiguity. Catholic participants added that the understanding of salvation affirmed in ECT II “is not the understanding condemned by the Catholic church in the sixteenth century.” In 1545, the Council of Trent said that justification is not an event but a process, that it takes place by an infusion of grace and not by imputation, that it was not forensic, but transformational, and that we can have no assurance that we are justified until we are in heaven.

ECT II participants, on the other hand, claimed to have agreed that justification was central to Scripture, that it was not earned by good works or merit of our own, that it is declaratory, that it is by faith alone, and that it brings to us an “an assured hope for the eternal life promised.” ECT II went on to list issues left undiscussed (questions such as baptismal regeneration, sacramental grace, questions of imputation, purgatory, and indulgences). Critics of ECT II rightly point out that the interconnectedness of these issues cannot be overlooked.

It must be remembered that ECT II was

not an official accord but rather a good faith effort between some Roman Catholics and some evangelicals. Like ECT I, it did not claim to be a complete agreement but a significant first step.

Did this step indicate that Rome was moving away from its historic understanding of justification? Some think so. They point to the renaissance in Catholic theology over the last three decades, which seems to be moving towards a Reformation understanding of certain issues. That is, there is a shift away from scholasticism and toward a more theocentric outlook. They also point to the increased recognition among Catholic Biblical scholars of the forensic character and centrality of justification.²⁸ They point out that some of the Catholic ECT II signers have been influenced by the Charismatic renewal and are more driven by Scripture than tradition. They also point to the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.²⁹ Since we cannot expect everything to change at once, ECT defenders tell us, we ought to be patient and encourage any movement we see.

Others, however, think that Catholic leaders who signed these statements may be influenced more by contemporary models of doctrinal development. John Henry Newman in the 19th century tried to merge Protestant and Catholic ideas on justification to include both imputation and infusion. Avery Dulles, a signer of both ECT I and ECT II, believes that a theological concept can be illustrated by the use of multiple models that are to be kept in tension with each other. Joseph Ratzinger developed the idea of a hermeneutics of unity which involves reading past dogma and historical statements in

the context of the entire tradition and with a deeper understanding of the Bible. Time will tell if the ECT discussions signal a Catholic shift or not. What ultimately matters is whether the official teaching voice of Rome will make the same remarkable affirmations.

Despite the shortcomings of ECT I and II, these meetings got Catholics and evangelicals talking about the very heart of the gospel. It was the first such dialogue of its kind between evangelicals and Catholics on American soil. This is a development that must be welcomed.

ECT also prompted a serious discussion among evangelicals themselves. For the truth is, many evangelical organizations had been downplaying the significance of justification by faith alone. ECT raised the profile of this very critical doctrine. Evangelicalism tends to be minimalistic in its doctrinal affirmation. Evangelicals have not been explicit enough about justification. While it may be an assumed belief, numerous evangelical parachurch organizations do not even mention justification in their statements of faith, fewer still mention justification by faith alone. And hardly anyone mentions imputation explicitly. Evangelical critics who blast ECT II signers for not being explicit enough have overlooked the fact that many of our key evangelical institutions, affirm no more and often much less than ECT I or II. If nothing else, ECT I and II revealed that evangelicals have done a poor job of articulating a doctrine so central as justification by faith alone.

*Americanization,
American Pluralism, and
the Postmodern Mood*

A final factor that may be shaping both

evangelical and Catholic attitudes is the influence of Americanization, which conditions us to adapt to plurality. American life can have a “homogenizing” effect on evangelicals and Catholics. The more distanced we are from old European contexts, the more Americans of all theological persuasions share in the values of our own common culture. This shapes us in many ways. It shapes us by its separation of religion and state. It shapes us through the media. It shapes us through suburbanization—a force that disperses the old urban Catholic village and the old Protestant rural village and places us side by side. It also shapes us through the general postmodern mood with its disinterest in truth. While it would be very difficult to measure such influences, they certainly have exercised an effect on both Catholics and evangelicals and may have contributed to a softening of doctrinal edges on each side.

Where This Leaves Us

The point of detailing all these historical factors is not to suggest that it is inevitable that Catholics and evangelicals will come together anytime soon. Nor is it to minimize the presence of other shaping factors in our lives, such as the power of the gospel, the truth of God’s Word, and the on-going influence of the Reformation. Rather, it is to help us understand what has been quietly molding our own convictions.

Each of these historical factors have influenced the evangelical mind to some degree during the last forty years. Love them or hate them, they have all played a part in nudging us away from a hostile disposition and towards at least minimal cooperation. In the days ahead, there may in fact be other shaping forces that do this

as well.

As we enter the twenty-first century, it looks as if evangelicalism and Catholicism will be the two vital forces for Christianity in the United States and the world. Their primary religious contender will be Islam. We now find ourselves in a post ideological world of a new century where the West is terrorized by the forces of radical Islam, and most of Islam is fearful of the economically and militarily powerful secular West. We also find Islam expanding at such a rapid rate that it is the fastest growing religion in America. Amazingly, the age grows more religious, not less. Will the Islamic threat be another factor nudging evangelicals and Catholics together?

Meanwhile, at the beginning of a new century, evangelicals find that we are more open to Catholics than we were. The neo-evangelical engagement with culture had some very distinct and unexpected consequences. We were forced to look around at those next to us and find out what motivated them to serve by our side.

Evangelicals of the 1960s generation were wrong. The Roman Catholic Church has changed. But then so have we. The Catholic Church became less isolationist. It affirmed religious freedom. It started talking about evangelism. It opened the door to a new emphasis on the Bible. Evangelicals became less nativist. They began learning from other traditions. They welcomed co-belligerents in the fight for a God-honoring cause. Evangelicals discovered that we have more in common with Catholics than we realized. But we also learned that there are still significant disagreements that divide us. While we rejoice in the fellowship we can have with born again Catholics, we still long for the day when the teaching office of the Catho-

lic church unambiguously affirms the very heart of the gospel message, and bows before the supreme authority of the Scriptures.

ENDNOTES

¹Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President* (New York: Atheneum House, 1961) 271.

²Evangelicalism is a post-Fundamentalist renewal movement that includes but is not confined to denominations among Protestant churches. It attempted to avoid the weaknesses of both modernism and Fundamentalism. Theologically, evangelicalism has emphasized the good news of God's grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, it holds to all of the most basic doctrines of the Bible as summarized in its historic confessions, and it recognizes the Bible as the final authoritative source for all doctrine. Yet in saying this, the wide diversity of the evangelical movement must be kept in mind (varieties include: Fundamentalist, Dispensational, Independent, Reformed, Anabaptist, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Radical, African American, and Mainline evangelicals). Estimates for evangelicals in the United States range from 30-66 million.

³George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 84.

⁴Harold Lindsell, *A Christian Philosophy of Missions* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1949) 54, 77, 223.

⁵Joel Carpenter, ed., *A New Coalition: Early Documents of the National Association of Evangelicals* (New York: Garland, 1988) 38; *United We Stand*, May 3-6, 1943, "A Report of the Constitutional Convention of the National Association of Evan-

gelicals," 17, 38, 61. Also see "Evangelical Action: A Report of the Organization of the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action," 26.

⁶American Roman Catholicism is part of a worldwide religious body representing all churches in union with the Bishop of Rome. It asserts equal devotion to Scripture and tradition. There are some 60 million Roman Catholics in the United States, making it the largest religious denomination in the nation. While it is united by a clear structural unity, it is also a complex, diverse body. Its diversity is seen in the ethnic make up of Catholicism (Hispanic, Irish, Polish, Italian, etc.). It can also be seen in the various Catholic subcultures (traditional, liberal, charismatic, centrist, and evangelical Catholics). For a fuller description of these terms, as well as other details in this article, see Donald W. Sweeting, *From Conflict to Cooperation? Changing American Evangelical Attitudes Towards Roman Catholics: 1960-1998* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998).

⁷Joseph Bayly, "The End of an Era," *Eternity*, October 1985, 79.

⁸Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Towards a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995). *The Gift of Salvation* statement was released on 12 November 1997 by the Institute for Religion and Public Life. It was printed in *Christianity Today* on 8 December 1997. It also appeared in *First Things* in January 1998.

⁹See e.g., Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

¹⁰Donald Grey Barnhouse, "The Peril Over the Presidency," *Eternity*, October 1960, 8.

- ¹¹White, 437.
- ¹²Walter M. Abbot, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild, 1966) 278, 279.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 699.
- ¹⁴Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950) 3.
- ¹⁵Klass Runia, "Evangelicals in the Church of Rome," *Christianity Today*, 18 March 1966, 22.
- ¹⁶John Ashbrook, *New Neutralism II* (Painesville, OH: Here I Stand Books, 1992), 35. Also, original Graham Association-Ketcham correspondence was forwarded to me by the author.
- ¹⁷William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1991) 461.
- ¹⁸What is an Evangelical Catholic? 1992 Dublin: Archdiocese of Dublin (www.dublindiocese.ie; also see www.evangelicalcatholic.com). See also Keith A. Fournier, *Evangelical Catholics* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).
- ¹⁹It was not until 1980 that the SBC reversed its stance on the abortion issue.
- ²⁰Francis Schaeffer, *Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1981) 68.
- ²¹Basil Meeking and John Stott, eds., *The Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 88, 89.
- ²²See George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
- ²³Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), and *The Worldly Evangelicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). See also James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ²⁴David Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
- ²⁵Roger E. Olson, "Post-conservative evangelicals greet the postmodern age," *Christian Century*, 3 May 1995, 480, and Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Post-conservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
- ²⁶Meeking and Stott, 91.
- ²⁷Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Should Roman Catholics and Evangelicals Join Ranks?," *Christianity Today*, 18 July 1994, 17.
- ²⁸Works cited include: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Double Day, 1993) 117-118; W. H. van der Pol, *Karakteristiek van het reformatorische Christendom* (Roermond, 1952) 348; Hermann Volk, "Imputationsgerechtigkeit," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1960) 4:641-42; K. Kertelge, *Rechtfertigung bei Paulus. Studien zur Struktur und zum Bedeutungsgehalt des Paulinischen Rechtfertigungsbegriffs* (Munster: Aschendorf, 1971) 286, 295-306; Otto Hermann Pesch, *Gerechtfertigt aus Glauben: Luthers Frage an die Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982); and George Tavard, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983).
- ²⁹The JDDJ is the result of decades of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. While some hail it as a "magnificent breakthrough," resolving the long-standing division between Lutherans and Catholics, other Lutherans view it as an ambiguous statement that carefully avoids precise definition and sacrifices truth on the altar of unity. See the website of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (www.lcms.org/president/statements).

