

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

What Separates Evangelicals from Roman Catholics?

Everything and nothing!

Nothing separated us from our Roman Catholic charismatic brothers as we sat together at dinner sharing the good things of Christ. Rarely had we sensed such a oneness in Christ, even with other evangelicals. Their whole-souled commitment to Christ as the all-sufficient Savior brought a unity of faith and piety that transcended all else. As we discussed the meaning of the gospel and what Christ meant to us, it became abundantly evident that we shared a common faith. The same Lord and Savior was the object of our one faith, the source of our mutual hope, and the single focus of our love that bound us together as one in the fellowship of Christ.

Evangelicals and Roman Catholics Have Much in Common

Nothing separates evangelicals from Roman Catholics in their common loyalty to the great ecumenical creeds of the ancient church. This noble heritage that gave framework and direction to the church across the centuries does not separate, but serves to draw evangelicals and Roman Catholics together in mutual support and strength.

Not even the Reformation with its great reaffirmation of central biblical truths continues to separate evangelicals from many Roman Catholics. An increasing number of Catholics are recognizing the essential truth of those biblical themes to which the Reformers in their own way sought to bear witness and thus to preserve the gospel from suffocation in a decadent era of the church. This warmer acceptance of evangelical doctrine and greater willingness to reexamine what Protestants are really saying has broken down many a barrier.

Neither are we separated from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters by their recent emphasis upon Bible study and its importance for their faith and life. One quarter of all Roman Catholics do not turn first to the church to settle religious questions, but to Holy Scripture. And the church now exhorts its people to read the Bible and to apply it to their lives.

Again, the necessity of a personal incorporation into Christ, insisted upon by many Roman Catholics, does not separate them from evangelicals, but rather draws them

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together in a unity of a shared Christian experience. One quarter of all Roman Catholics claim to be born again, and 20 percent insist that their only hope for heaven and eternal life is to be found through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Evangelicals Need to Learn from Roman Catholics

None of these things separates evangelicals from the many Roman Catholics with whom they share these precious elements of their faith. On the contrary, evangelicals have much to learn from Roman Catholics. One such lesson is reverence. Catholics exemplify a mystical awe and wonder at the greatness of God that is strangely lacking in most Protestantism, and especially among evangelicals. This is a needed corrective against the all-too-frequent attempts by some evangelicals to reduce God to a sort of heavenly pal whose chief function is to provide spiritual entertainment.

Again, evangelicals have much to learn about the nature of worship and its appropriate forms. They have acquired such a phobia about “liturgy” that they have lost the art of bringing dignity and beauty to the worship of God.

Roman Catholic can also teach evangelicals something about the nature of the church as a body of mutually dependent believers. Too often evangelicals are Christians in isolation. Each individual believer builds the Christian life on his own private relationship to God. There is a crucial piece of truth in this, of course. In the final analysis, every person is responsible to God for his own acceptance or rejection of the gospel. But God also deals with man through his church, and on biblical ground, the role of the body is neglected only at great peril to our souls.

Finally, with no attempt to be complete, we must note the Roman Catholic stress not only on divine authority, but also on the importance of acknowledging the legitimate role of human authority under God. When an evangelical is disciplined, his typical reaction is to pick up his marbles and head for another church. But Scripture stresses the necessity of the Christian’s submission to the authority of the body. In home, in church, and in every legitimate structure of society the Christian is dependent, being submissive to others.

Evangelicals have much to lose by walling themselves off from all Roman Catholics. Instead of being turned off by strange vocabulary and unaccustomed ways, we evangelicals should be open to dialogue with Roman Catholics and be willing to listen to them—not merely to wait until they stop speaking so we can resume our own witness. If we are truly willing to listen, we can discover the essential values that lie beneath many of the positions we deem unbiblical. Even in areas where we must clearly disagree, usually (one is tempted to say invariably) a basic motif or theological conviction underlies

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the error and gives it its justification in the minds of those who propound it. We need to learn what this basic truth is and incorporate it into our own faith. We grow richer in our faith as we appropriate more and more of the biblical revelation, thereby making our own witness to biblical faith more attractive. In all these areas, nothing should separate evangelicals from Roman Catholics.

Everything Separates Roman Catholics from Evangelicals

Yet sometimes everything seems to separate evangelicals from Roman Catholics. In spite of their staunch creedal defense of biblical authority, Roman Catholics often lose the force of that authority for their faith and life in a morass of tradition and in the teaching ministry of the church. And in spite of their faithful commitment to an orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ and his objective atonement for human sin, even the biblical way of salvation is lost in the footnotes of history. We do not detect a clear witness to the gospel of salvation through repentance and personal faith in Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Savior. Rather, the gospel becomes muffled in concessions to the pride of man.

Yes, so we hear, we are saved by grace and on condition of our faith, but not on condition of faith alone. Good works are also necessary. Churchly works and Christian love represent the divine condition for our justification and forgiveness by God. Water baptism with no personal appropriation becomes the means of entrance into the kingdom of God, and we are preserved in God's good grace by our union with the Roman church and its power to work the miracle of transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the body of Christ. Only thus can we nourish our souls unto life everlasting.

For daily guidance, we are instructed not to turn to Holy Scripture and there expect the Holy Spirit of God to illuminate its truths and apply them to our lives, but we are to ask the teaching church (the local priest, the bishop, and finally, the pope) to tell us what we are to believe and what we are to do. Mary and the saints become objects of personal adoration. Call it worship, or give it Latin labels of *doulia* and *hyper-doulia*, it makes no difference: Mary and the lesser saints become the center of personal devotion and get in the way of God. And that is idolatry. Fear of purgatory becomes a dominant motif of the Christian life. The believer must wait for the final judgment to be assured of the forgiveness of God, and he lives in suspense and agony of doubt.

For evangelicals, all of this represents a wholly warped understanding of biblical religion.

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Roman Catholics Are Not All Alike

But not every Roman Catholic espouses this perversion of biblical faith—certainly not the Roman Catholic charismatics with whom we shared a living faith as we rejoiced together in the gospel around the dinner table. Clearly everything depends on which Roman Catholic one is relating to. The fact is, like Protestants, some Roman Catholics are evangelical and some are not. Some Roman Catholics affirm and others deny every foundational truth of traditional Roman Catholic and Christian theology. To confound the matter even more severely, some Roman Catholics today will affirm and others will deny every aspect of biblical faith precious to the heart of a traditional Protestant.

Roman Catholics have never been as monolithic as most Protestants assumed. Even before Vatican II, wide divergences prevailed within traditional Roman Catholicism. For some uninstructed lay devotees of the church, baptism was the entrance into the kingdom of God, and good standing depended upon the faithful observance of the sacraments, obedience to the local priest, and the avoidance of mortal sin. But alongside such uninstructed Roman Catholicism were the church's creeds, its formal decretals, and the teaching office of the church. These were far less restricted, but much more complex. And even beyond them stood the theologians who taught that all who intended to do right were in reality members of the true Roman Catholic church whether they knew it or not.

Since Vatican II, moreover, there has been a widespread movement away from traditional doctrines. The Roman church has become like the Protestant churches—a vast Noah's ark of beasts clean and unclean.

Four Kinds of Roman Catholics

It is as difficult to classify neatly the Roman church today as it is to classify Protestant churches. Any classification is bound to lump together those who feel uncomfortable at the association; we must allow for much overlapping and various combinations of viewpoints. It is useful, nevertheless, to group contemporary Roman Catholics into four types.

Still vigorous, and, under the administration of Pope John Paul II, continuing strong and influential within the Catholic hierarchy, are the *traditionalists*. This important segment of the church, specially powerful among the laity of the national churches, the older clergy, and the bishops and upper level of the hierarchy, adheres to the whole of creedal Roman Catholicism and obedience to the church as interpreted by the pope. In recent years, these traditionalists have come to assume less and less importance in the church, yet Pope John Paul II has certainly sought in some ways to nudge the church back in this direction.

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A second group is often identified with the *charismatic* movement. It tends to be more evangelical and lays great emphasis upon faith as a personal commitment, the New Birth, personal piety, and loyalty to the Scripture. Particularly, it stresses the necessity for a conscious “actualization” or personal appropriation of one’s faith, and an active acceptance of the Bible not just as divine revelation, but also as the means of grace by which the Holy Spirit guides one’s thought and action.

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A third group is composed of *liberals*. These vary greatly in the degree to which they have departed from the traditional position of the church. From the Protestant perspective, naturally, some of these departures seem to be good because they are moves in the direction of evangelical doctrine. When Hans Küng wrote a book in defense of justification by faith and another against the infallibility of the pope and of the church councils, Protestants recognized a voice proclaiming the truth. However, when he went on to cast doubts upon the infallibility of the Bible as well, and even questioned the traditional Christology of the church, evangelical Protestants regretted his move as an unnecessary and unwise concession to modern rationalistic unbelief stemming from the Enlightenment, not from his biblical roots.

No doubt the majority of Roman Catholics fall within a loose fourth category often labeled *cultural Roman Catholics*. They were born into the church. They are committed emotionally to their “mother church,” but do not understand its doctrine and are not really obedient to its ethical instruction. They remain within it more because of convenience than because of religious conviction. Their values and lifestyle do not flow from their understanding of the gospel, but are molded by the predominant culture around them. In the U.S., Roman Catholicism is their way of being an American and of finding their own identity in modern society.

The Crux of the Matter that Separates

Traditional Roman Catholics and evangelicals fall apart right at the very heart of the gospel: how can a sinful, guilt-ridden human being find acceptance with a just and holy God? Here the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification by faith is that we are justified or brought into forgiveness and acceptance with God solely on the basis of faith. Salvation is by faith alone—not that saving faith ever stands alone, but that faith viewed as a personal commitment and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is the only condition for our being forgiven for our sins and being received into the mercy and favor of God.

Roman Catholics traditionally have taught that we are saved on condition not simply of faith, but also of an infused righteousness. God first changes us to make us better and then “justifies” us or receives us into his forgiveness and favor. Both faith and good

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works—good works of an ecclesiastical sort, and works of love—are the prior conditions of the divine justification of the sinner.

Protestants often misunderstand the traditional Roman doctrine because they think that salvation by grace alone rules out a divine justification of the sinner on the condition that God first makes him good (infuses righteousness). Not so. Traditional Roman Catholics accept the doctrine of grace alone because they believe that it is only by God's grace that anyone can meet this condition. God requires that the sinner become righteous before he is willing to forgive him and to receive him back into his favor. Yet, since it is only by the grace of God that man meets this condition of becoming righteous, they can say that salvation is by grace alone, but not by faith only.

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Has the Contemporary Roman Church Found the Gospel?

In recent years, many Roman Catholics have made a shift to a more Reformation like and biblical understanding of faith and justification. Hans Küng, for example, has argued that the Reformers were right: biblical teaching is that salvation or justification is on condition of faith and only faith and not on the condition of infused righteousness or good works. Some have even argued that this is consistent with the teachings of the Council of Trent and of the Roman church since that day. But according to the most thorough poll of American clergy yet made, over three-quarters of Roman Catholic priests reject the view that our only hope for heaven is through personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They hold instead that "heaven is a divine reward for those who earn it by their good life."

This represents the sharpest cleavage separating Roman Catholics from Protestants, for it is the focus of the gospel. Other matters are important in other contexts, but this is the gospel itself and is crucial. Where the gospel is adhered to and we find personal faith in Jesus Christ as the all-sufficient Savior of sinners—Roman Catholic or Protestant, it matters not—there we have true unity. There is the gospel, and there is power to overcome all other forces that would make for disunity. The gospel brings Roman Catholics and Protestants together. They share the promise of the Father that they have been accepted by him, and so they, his children, had better accept each other.

Where the gospel is preserved intact in all of its fullness, there is nothing that separates evangelical Protestant from Roman Catholic, for they share together in the life of faith and in fellowship with Christ and each other. Unity in the gospel surmounts all other problems, and is basic for a truly ecumenical fellowship.

Unfortunately, many Roman Catholics, like many Protestants, do not adhere to the gospel. They may give mental allegiance to the creeds and the encyclicals of the church,

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but they have not entered into an experience of the New Birth and have not really committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And even when evangelicals share with individual Roman Catholics a new-found faith and delight in their fellowship in Christ and in the gospel, they find the official teaching of the church an insurmountable barrier to formal ecumenical unity.

A Second Barrier that Separates Evangelicals and Some Roman Catholics

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Second only to the gospel in importance is the closely related doctrine of the authority of Holy Scripture. Historically, Roman Catholics have defended the authority of the Bible. For them, it is the infallible (inerrant) revelation from God. Given to us in the words of men, it is, nonetheless, God's Word and never wanders from the truth.

But this high view of the infallible authority of Holy Scripture is compromised seriously by the role Roman Catholics give to tradition and the teaching office of the church. On the basis of its tradition, it adds the apocryphal books to the Old Testament accepted by the Jews, by Christ, and by his apostles. More disturbing to most Protestants than these additions to the biblical canon is the fact that Roman Catholics also accept as revealed truth the supposed oral teaching of the apostles handed down outside Scripture. Evangelicals question whether everything the apostles said orally should be placed on the same level with Scripture as the word of God; they are not convinced the apostles really taught these tenets that have been handed down, and they find in them accretions that are not only unauthentic, but actually contradictory to the written teaching of the apostles as set forth in Scripture. Most decisive of all, evangelicals reject the idea that the Roman church can decide infallibly what must be accepted as divinely revealed.

A final aspect of this barrier over the authority of Scripture is that the church decides through its teaching office what is the true meaning of the Scripture as well as what traditional revelations are truly genuine. This authority of the church to decide what is true doctrine resides infallibly in the universal councils of the Roman church and in the pope when he speaks *ex cathedra* (in his role as bishop of Rome and teacher of the entire church). But to Protestants, as often as not, it seems that what the church teaches to be the meaning of the biblical revelation is clearly not what they can readily see to be its true meaning. And Protestants are convinced that the only time the pope has availed himself of his apostolic teaching office, since in 1870 he declared himself to be infallible, he taught what is clearly false.

Although most Roman Catholics obviously do not reckon themselves morally bound by the teaching of the pope (as, for example, his teaching on birth control), it is still true today that nearly four-fifths of all priests reject the Bible as the first place to turn in

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deciding religious questions; rather, they test their religious beliefs by what the church says.

What then Separates Roman Catholics from Evangelicals?

Here we have the second of the two areas of Roman Catholic teaching most troublesome to evangelicals. The first was the nature of the gospel: How does man become rightly related to God? The second is, How do we tell what is right and wrong—the principle of authority?

By contrast, with these two essential areas of difference between evangelicals and traditional Roman Catholics, all other matters are surely secondary. In other contexts, no doubt, these secondary matters can become important—matters such as the worship of Mary, the worship of saints, prayers to the saints, the worship of images, the veneration of relics, purgatory, the seven sacraments, and the exact role of baptism and the Lord's Supper. But they are clearly secondary to the two fundamental principles: the gospel, and authority. They are secondary because they have secured their place in Roman Catholic doctrine and popular piety in dependence upon these more fundamental doctrines. Our deepest concern, therefore, must not be over the peripheral matters, but over the two principles that lie at the heart of what separates a true evangelical from some Roman Catholics. On these two principles, the evangelical cannot budge. With them, his religious life is at stake.

What then separates evangelicals from Roman Catholics? For some Roman Catholics, it is the same as that which separates evangelicals from many who call themselves Protestants. The gospel itself is the barrier: salvation by personal faith in Jesus Christ as the divine Lord and Savior.

For others, nothing at all separates evangelicals from fellowship with Roman Catholic believers in Christ. Beyond this, the matter varies from Roman Catholic to Roman Catholic, as it does from Protestant to Protestant. Many doctrinal divisions are important to the evangelical, but none is so crucially important as these two basic doctrines of his faith: first the gospel, and second the authority of Scripture (and it is important to keep them in that order).

Although other doctrines insisted upon by traditional Roman Catholics may be relatively unimportant, the evangelical often cannot accept them. The mere fact that the Roman church has taught them is not sufficient grounds for him to believe they are true. They remain, therefore, a barrier to full union so long as the Roman Catholic insists upon adherence to them or retains them officially in the creeds and confessions of the church.

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The Value of Evangelical/Roman Catholic Dialogue

The evangelical sees much danger in contemporary ecumenical dialogue and movements. Dialogue in itself, of course, is good so long as it is not based upon deception or doctrinal indifference. Evangelicals have much to gain by fellowship with evangelical Roman Catholics who have accepted the gospel and have placed their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They have much to learn from Roman Catholics who can teach them about worship and about the mystery of God, and the importance of the visible church and authority.

But contemporary ecumenism is often a union without regard to truth. It represents on the part of both Roman Catholic and Protestant a dissolving of the wonderful heritage of faith that each possesses. It represents a disregard of biblical revelation and the instruction that God himself has given for his church.

But the evangelical has high hope. His hope is based on the increasing openness of the Roman Catholic to reexamine ancient positions of the church. And most of all, his hope is nourished in the renewed concern on the part of Roman Catholics to turn to the Bible as the place from which we draw our spiritual resources and determine our doctrine and our lifestyle. The Bible is a dangerous book for anyone seeking the truth—dangerous for Roman Catholics. Yes, and dangerous for evangelicals, too.¹

¹ "What Separates Evangelicals and Catholics?" (1981). *Christianity Today*, 25(18), 1361–1364.