

## **ECUMENICITY AND CATHOLICISM: WHY WE MUST EVANGELIZE ROMAN CATHOLICS**

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Today there is considerable confusion regarding our relationship to Roman Catholics. Are they truly believers? Is it possible for a Roman Catholic priest to be a true Christian? Can we have spiritual fellowship with the local Catholic church, even as we work toward the same moral goals in our community and society at large? Has the Roman Catholic Church changed from the old days, so that it now accepts the Bible as the only word of God, and salvation by grace through faith? Is it merely another Christian denomination, which we therefore should recognize?

Traditionally, Protestant Christians have considered the Roman Catholic Church to be apostate from the true biblical faith. Protestants have assumed that Catholics needed to be saved by faith in Christ alone, and then to separate from the Roman church and join a Bible-believing Protestant church. Many of our most active members are indeed former Roman Catholics, and they often have a great zeal to convert other Catholics. Is this attitude wrong? Today, influenced by the toleration found in the new evangelical movement, many Protestants and Catholics feel that such an attitude is misguided and unloving. This is a burning issue which demands careful thought and study.

### ***Believers in the Roman Church***

First, it is possible for true Christians to be members of the Roman Catholic Church. This was true certainly in the time before the Reformation, and even during Reformation times. For example, both Luther and Calvin found Christ as their Savior while they were still Roman Catholics. Luther's "father in the faith," Johann Staupitz, was his superior in the Augustinian order, and remained a Catholic until his death. Since the Reformation, of course, there is the option for many Catholics to join Protestant churches. But even now, it is entirely possible for one to come to Christ through the study of Scripture or through someone's personal witness or other such means, regardless of the church to which he belongs. And it is possible for that person to remain in that church, even if it is the Roman Catholic Church, some apostate Protestant church, or even a cultic group. The person's level of understanding, strength of conviction, and surrounding circumstances all come into play. In the same way, it is possible for an unbeliever to be a member of an evangelical Protestant church. Many people are in churches to which they do not naturally belong. However, a true Christian should be growing in faith and understanding; such natural growth normally will lead that person to obedience to God's word and the fellowship of a biblical church.

## ***Non-Believers in the Roman Church***

Second, while it is possible for a Roman Catholic to be a true believer, that is not the assumption we should make. We need to be guided by what the church officially teaches, not by the exceptions. We are not able to judge individual souls; God alone knows who is saved. But we can and must judge doctrine and practice. It is our duty to identify orthodox beliefs and heresies, and to form and maintain churches that are orthodox. True churches of Christ are identified by their submission to the word of God, their faithful preaching of biblical truth, their administration of the sacraments, and their exercise of church discipline. Churches which fail in these areas should be identified and avoided by Christian people. Members of churches which preach a false gospel should not be assumed to be Christians; rather, we should generally assume that people share the beliefs of their church.

Dealing with Catholics, one will find two major groups which indeed do need to receive the gospel of salvation. The first group is the vast number of “nominal Catholics.” The Catholic church exercises great latitude in its membership. There are a few external requirements to belong to the Roman church; and many people meet that minimum, are in good standing, and yet have very little spiritual interest at all. They feel that, as long as they passively submit to the church, they will be “taken care of.” Of course, this faith is misplaced. The second group is those people who seek to follow and practice their church’s teaching, and thus attain salvation. It is this second group about which we hear the most controversy. In order to know where they stand, we must examine their church’s teaching regarding salvation.

## ***Roman Catholic Doctrine of Justification***

With the initial success of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman church responded in the sixteenth century with the Council of Trent, in which they solidified and codified their doctrines of salvation, especially contrasting them with those of Luther and the other reformers. This Council produced lengthy and detailed statements about the Catholic doctrine of salvation. In its Sixth Session it emphasized the relation of justification to faith. For them, justification was not an act of God’s declaring the sinner righteous in his sight, but a process of making him righteous; therefore, they said, works along with faith are required for justification:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema. (Canon 9)

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema. (Canon 11)

In these anathemas the Council of Trent mixed the true Protestant doctrines with some heretical ones opposed by the Reformers as well. But in any case, they made it clear that the biblical

doctrine of justification through faith alone in Jesus Christ, apart from works, which follow justification, would not be permitted in the Catholic church. They therefore would exclude the faith of Paul, who said to Peter,

“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:15-16 NIV)

Many Protestants have written since the Reformation, defending the vital biblical teachings of salvation by grace through faith alone, along with other Protestant doctrines; a fairly modern example in our own country is Lorraine Boettner’s *Roman Catholicism*. An excellent recent treatment and defense of the Protestant doctrine of justification is a collection of essays edited by Don Kistler, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995; essays by John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, Joel Beeke, John Gerstner, and John Armstrong).

### ***How Has the Church Changed?***

However, Roman Catholics today claim that the church has changed much since Reformation times, and that the traditional criticisms against it no longer apply. European Catholic theologian Hans Küng, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, strongly presented this case in his book *The Council, Reform and Reunion* (1961; it is interesting to note that the book was highly praised on its dust jacket by the liberal Episcopalian bishop James A. Pike). However, in the area of personal salvation, Küng concurs with the formulas of Trent; he states, “The decree on justification, which is the glory of the Council, accepts what is valid in the Reformers’ position to a surprising degree” (p. 78).

There was no significant change when Vatican II met in the 1960’s. The decrees of that council still required works along with faith for justification. The recently published massive *Catechism of the Catholic Church* likewise defends the traditional Roman teaching, referring to the Council of Trent for authority (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Liguori Publications, 1994, No. 1987-2029). Pope John Paul II heartily approved this catechism, as “indispensable, in order that all the richness of the teaching of the Church following the Second Vatican Council could be preserved in a new synthesis and be given a new direction” (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 164). In spite of this “new direction,” the old Roman doctrines still predominate. It is important for us to realize that this new catechism also still teaches that our faith should come not from the Bible alone, but from the Bible and church tradition:

The Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 82; quoting from the Vatican II statement *Dei Verbum*)

To further confuse the issue, the current pope, John Paul II, is an attractive and intelligent theologian who is seeking to emphasize the similarities of the Roman Catholic Church to other churches, and even other religions. His book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) is a personal testimony to his own faith and thoughts as pope. In it he also explains his opinions about salvation, the world at large, and the various major movements of thought and religion, including Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. The pope writes with skill and diplomacy. While not denying Catholic dogma, he does seem to indicate that all these people are in a positive relation to God. One example is his statement concerning his childhood memories of a Jewish friend in Poland: “Both religious groups, Catholics and Jews, were united, I presume, by the awareness that they prayed to the same God” (p. 96). This statement contradicts that of Jesus, when he declared that those who do not recognize the Son do not recognize the Father either (John 5:23).

John Paul II’s recent papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (English translation *The Gospel of Life*, Random House, 1995) illustrates the modern Roman Catholic approach to salvation and the gospel. The major thrust of the proclamation is the defense of human life as a divine right and its preservation as a human duty. Evangelical Christians can heartily agree with much in this encyclical, such as its strong opposition against abortion and euthanasia; however, not all would agree with his opposition to any form of contraception or his opposition to the death penalty for criminals. But his strong stand against abortion, especially, puts many Roman Catholics alongside of evangelical Protestants in the current social and political conflicts in America and Europe. For this reason, we must be careful not to let down our guard and compromise in the more important area of the gospel message itself, for spiritual life far outweighs physical life. Carefully reading the encyclical, one will find many statements which are true in themselves, yet, of course, there is an absence of a clear statement of the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ alone. The pope accepts the documentary hypothesis about the book of Genesis (referring to the “Yahwist account” in Genesis 2, as distinct from Genesis 1; *E.V.* 35), showing his agreement with modern critical scholarship. When he discusses the spiritual life promised in the gospel, he ties it in closely with the Catholic sacraments (“the waters of Baptism” in *E.V.* 79 and “the Sacrament of Reconciliation” in *E.V.* 99). At the same time we see a universalistic tendency in such statements as these: “[The Gospel] is the proclamation that Jesus has a unique relationship with every person, which enables us to see in every human face the face of Christ” (*E.V.* 81).

### ***We Must Evangelize Roman Catholics***

It is clear that one can say many things about God, Christ, and the gospel, which are true as far as they go. But that does not constitute one as a Christian in the biblical sense. Each of us is called upon to believe personally in Christ, to trust in him alone for justification, adoption, and sanctification. The Roman Catholic Church includes a wide spectrum of belief, along with various degrees of superstition. It recognizes its traditions as equal to Scripture, and denies the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. Many of its teachings and practices continue to contradict Scripture. In addition, the Roman church in our day is deeply influenced by modern critical scholarship and by universalism. Those Catholics who follow their church’s teachings still need the gospel of Christ, and any who are saved in that church need to honor the

gospel by joining a church that clearly preaches it. Evangelical Christians need to renew our efforts to reach Roman Catholics with the true, simple gospel, and to encourage them to leave that communion. We do not view this as evil proselytizing, but as obedience and loyalty to our Savior.