

STATEMENT DC-170-1  
WHAT THINK YE OF ROME? (Part One):  
**An Evangelical Appraisal of Contemporary Catholicism**  
by Kenneth R. Samples

## Summary

A crucial starting point in an appraisal of the Roman Catholic church is to understand some of the unique sociological features of contemporary Catholicism. Erroneous classifications of Catholicism frequently fail to grasp the significant diversity within the church. While the church's unity is of central importance, Catholicism possesses incredible diversity — the church is anything but monolithic. This diversity is illustrated by the six major theological types of Catholics: ultratraditionalist, traditionalist, liberal, charismatic/evangelical, cultural, and popular folk. A Protestant appraisal of Catholicism should then examine the areas of genuine doctrinal agreement between Catholicism and Protestantism (especially evident in the creeds), before moving on to analyze the significant areas of difference.

One of the most perplexing issues evangelical Protestants face is how to understand, evaluate, and ultimately classify the Roman Catholic church. Few topics prove to be as controversial as the question of just how Protestants view and relate to Catholics. There exists no universal agreement or consensus among conservative Protestants in this regard. The spectrum of opinion ranges from one extreme to another.

On the one hand, some people hold to an optimistic but seemingly naive ecumenism that sees no essential or substantial differences between the church of Rome and historic Protestantism. This camp views Catholicism as authentically Christian, but largely ignores the doctrinal controversies that sparked the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. They seem to only take into account the vast areas of agreement between Protestants and Catholics. At the other extreme is a band of Protestant fundamentalists who are literally rabid in their denunciation of Catholicism. This assemblage (usually led by vociferous ex-Catholics) dismisses Catholicism outright as an inherently unbiblical and evil institution. They not only consider the Roman church to be doctrinally deviant, but also the efficient cause of many or most of the social, political, and moral ills evident in the world today. Genuinely "anti-Catholic," this faction views the Catholic church as the "Whore of Babylon," a pseudo-Christian religion or cult. They seem to concentrate exclusively on those various doctrines that sharply divide Protestants and Catholics.

I believe most evangelical scholars who are knowledgeable about Catholicism would feel uncomfortable with both of these positions. Unfortunately, however, these two camps often operate as if their own views are self-evident and exhaustive. Both camps (especially the anti-Catholics) virtually anathematize anyone who is not squarely in their camp. If one is critical of Catholicism because of Reformational doctrinal distinctives, the first camp accuses that person of being divisive, not supporting Christian unity in this important age of ecumenism. In contrast, if one defends certain Catholic beliefs as being authentically Christian, the second camp accuses that person of being a betrayer of the Protestant Reformation and fraternizing with the enemy. *Both* camps fail to see that there is an acceptable alternative position between the two extremes.

This series of articles will attempt to provide some needed balance to this important discussion by doing several things. First, we will seek an accurate understanding of contemporary Catholicism by exploring some of the unique sociological features of the Catholic religion. We will consider the Catholic church's size and sphere of influence, as well as its unity and contrasting diversity. We will look at the major theological types or classifications of Catholics, and explore the uniqueness of the American Catholic church. Second, we will begin our theological appraisal of Catholicism by probing the common areas of agreement between classical Catholicism and historic Protestantism.

In Part Two we will consider serious problems with both the anti-Catholic and uncritically ecumenical Protestant views of Catholicism. Then, in Parts Three and Four, the most important doctrines on which Catholics and Protestants disagree will be carefully examined. At the close of this series the necessary groundwork will have been laid to reach some conclusions about how evangelical Protestants should view Roman Catholics.

Our goal will be to steer clear of the extreme and erroneous classifications of Catholicism described above by providing an evaluation which is fair and representative of Catholicism, but genuinely evangelical in its perspective, and squarely rooted in the central theology of the Protestant Reformation.

### **Defining "Evangelical"**

Before we begin our evangelical appraisal of Catholicism, we need to give some definition to what is meant by the often vague and ambiguous term "evangelical." The term is derived from the Greek noun *euangelion*, which has been translated "good news," "glad tidings," or "gospel." Therefore, at the most fundamental level, being an evangelical Christian means being a believer in and proclaimer of the gospel (the good news that sinful humanity can find redemption in the doing and dying of Christ [1 Cor. 15:1-4]).

If this were all there was to being an evangelical, however, virtually every Christian group would claim this title. Obviously, the term carries a deeper historical and theological meaning. Lutheran theologian and apologist John Warwick Montgomery has summarized well the historical roots and doctrinal foundations that stand behind evangelical Christianity:

To my way of thinking, "evangelicals" are bound together not by virtue of being members of the same Protestant confessional stream, but by their firm adherence to certain common theological tenets and emphases. These latter would summarize as follows:

- (1) Conviction that the Bible alone is God's objectively inerrant revelation to man;
- (2) Subscription to the Ecumenical creeds as expressing the Trinitarian heart of biblical religion;
- (3) Belief that the Reformation confessions adequately convey the soteriological essence of the scriptural message, namely, salvation by grace alone through faith in the atoning death and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ;

(4) Stress upon personal, dynamic, living commitment to Christ and resultant prophetic witness for Him to the unbelieving world; and

(5) A strong eschatological perspective. Whether a member of a large "inclusivist" church or of a small "separated" body, whether Anglican or Pentecostal, an evangelical regards himself in home territory where the above theological atmosphere exists<sup>1</sup>

This concise summary cogently sets forth the belief system that stands behind authentic evangelical Christianity. And it is this broad base that evangelicals affirm to be the very bedrock of Christianity itself. It is from this historic evangelical perspective that we begin our appraisal of contemporary Roman Catholicism.

## UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S CATHOLICISM

Some of the more striking features of Catholicism include its imposing size, its vast sphere of influence, its unity, and its contrasting diversity. Gaining an appreciation of each of these characteristics can help us better understand contemporary Catholicism.

**Size.** The size of the Roman church is astounding. Just less than eighteen percent (17.7) of the entire world population is Roman Catholic (a whopping total of over 928 million people, soon to be a billion).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the church is truly universal in scope, having parishes in virtually every major part of the world. There is a significant Catholic presence on every continent, with the possible exception of Asia. The following are some percentages of Catholics in the world: Africa, 13.9; North America, 24.2; Middle (central) America, 86.6; South America, 88.9; Europe, 39.9; Oceania, 26.5; and Asia, 2.7.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of other religious bodies, the Roman Catholic population is larger than the other two main branches of historic Christianity combined (Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism). There are approximately the same number of Catholics in the world as there are Muslims. The Catholic population in the United States is presently well over 55 million (approximately 22 percent of the U.S. population),<sup>4</sup> and by some Gallup estimates may actually be significantly higher.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, the second largest Christian denomination in the United States is the Southern Baptists with approximately 14 million members.

**Sphere of Influence.** The influence that the Catholic church has had on the world is incalculable. One of Western civilization's greatest influences has undoubtedly been Roman Catholicism. In many respects, European culture has been directly shaped and molded by events surrounding the Vatican. From the fourth century to the present, Roman Catholic thought has had a momentous influence in the areas of politics, economics, history, science, education, theology, philosophy, literature, art, and numerous other areas of culture. The church has wielded great power over the centuries, often spreading enlightenment and benevolence among humanity, but at some points corruption and tyranny.<sup>6</sup>

While modern-day Catholicism does not exert the kind of control over Western culture that it did in the high Middle Ages, it is still, as the great Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan put it, "the most formidable religious institution in the history of America and of the world."<sup>7</sup> Evangelicals should

be interested in the study of Catholicism if for no other reason than its immense size and vast sphere of influence. This broadly based system of religious and philosophical thought has captured the hearts and minds of untold millions through most of Christian history.

**Unity.** The unity of the church is of central importance within Catholicism. The Catholic church is understood to be a *union*. This oneness is spoken of when Catholics refer to the "four marks of the church": (1) one, (2) holy, (3) catholic, and (4) apostolic. Ideally, this essential oneness is to be expressed in many aspects within the church: doctrine, ethical teaching, authority, the visible and concrete institution, historical continuity, and sacraments.<sup>8</sup> Unquestionably, one of Catholicism's greatest strengths over the centuries has been its sense of unity and historical continuity. Many converts to Catholicism identify this as their central reason for considering the claims of the Roman church.

Catholic apologists frequently try to marshal the argument that it is this oneness that identifies the Roman church as the one true and authentic church of Jesus Christ. And in certain respects the Catholic church has fared better in terms of unity than its rival — Protestantism. However, the Protestant evangelical rejoinder is that they, rather than Rome, are more faithfully unified in *authentic* apostolic doctrine. Additionally, if we are to take the Catholic argument seriously, then it could be pointed out that the Eastern Orthodox church has remained more consistently unified in certain respects than has the Roman church. Regardless, this strong emphasis on unity within Catholicism has left many non-Catholics with the impression that Catholicism is in actuality a monolith — a church completely uniform in belief and practice and marching to the same tune.

**Diversity.** Catholicism has probably never been the strict monolith that outsiders have perceived it to be. However, even 50 years ago it still carried many of the unyielding and inflexible characteristics associated with a monolithic structure. In many respects this era of seeming invariability and immutability came to an end with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). This council truly revolutionized the church.<sup>9</sup> It was not so much a revolution in doctrine as in perspective. Vatican II allowed the "wind of change to blow through the church." This change created an environment that allowed for greater freedom in theology and practice — and a greater tolerance of diversity.<sup>10</sup> In times past the measure of being Catholic was submission to the teaching and discipline of the magisterium (official teaching office). Since Vatican II, however, being Catholic may mean many different things.

Today the Catholic church is incredibly divergent. Its diversity is actually on the level of that within Protestantism. This diversity is evidenced in the various types of Catholics one finds in the church. While the *genus* (class) remains Catholic, there are several different *species* (varieties). Evangelical theologian Kenneth Kantzer calls it "the Catholic montage."

### **Different Types of Catholics**

The following varieties of contemporary Catholics should not be understood as exact classifications. Not every Catholic fits neatly into one particular type — there is significant overlapping. (Unfortunately, this overlapping has sometimes caused outside observers to lump differing viewpoints together.) In addition, the types reflect both a sociological and theological assessment, and are best understood in terms of a paradigm (an example or model).

***Ultratraditionalist Catholics.*** Ultratraditionalist Catholics consider themselves nonrevisionist Catholics. They are extremely critical of the changes brought about by Vatican II and wish the church would return to its earlier course. They can be somewhat radical in their defense of "old time" Catholicism. For example, they would be happy if the mass (liturgical service centered around the Eucharist) were still recited in Latin. They hold the traditions and hierarchy of the church in highest esteem (except when the hierarchy steps on their nonrevisionist toes). They would strongly affirm classical Catholicism as revealed in the ancient creeds, councils, conciliar documents (i.e., documents produced during councils), and papal encyclicals (i.e., letters). They are generally suspicious and intolerant toward other divergent groups within Catholicism.

One of the best examples of an ultratraditionalist was the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre of Switzerland who stated that the reforms of Vatican II "spring from heresy and end in heresy."<sup>11</sup> During his reign as archbishop, Lefebvre continued to ordain priests even after the pope ordered him to stop, and he continued to use the form of the mass as prescribed at the Counter Reformation Council of Trent instead of its modern form.<sup>12</sup>

While staunch in their beliefs and commitment to nonrevisionist Catholicism, the ultratraditionalists are small in number and their influence within the church is not of great significance. The ultratraditionalists should probably be seen as the more extreme segment within the traditionalist camp.

***Traditionalist Catholics.*** The traditionalist Catholics in many ways make up the backbone of the church hierarchy. A *Christianity Today* editorial described the group this way: "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."<sup>13</sup> The traditionalists are very critical of liberalism and modernism within the church, but they are generally accepting of the reforms found in Vatican II. Although this group's influence diminished somewhat after Vatican II, they have enjoyed a revival during John Paul II's reign as pope. While Pope John Paul may be considered progressive in many of his decisions concerning the church, at heart his doctrinal views are those of a traditional Catholic. This is especially illustrated in his beliefs concerning the Virgin Mary.

***Liberal Catholics.*** Liberal Catholics have substantially departed from traditional Catholicism, and one might say from traditional Christianity as a whole. While liberals differ among themselves in the degree to which they depart from classical Catholicism, like their Protestant counterparts they have conceded much to the rationalistic unbelief so prevalent in Western culture since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period. They have in effect replaced the Bible and church authority with the authority of human reason.

Many liberal Catholic scholars, such as the German scholar Hans Kung, have questioned the infallibility of the pope, church councils, and the Bible. Others, going farther, have clearly abandoned traditional Christological beliefs and the miracles of the New Testament, and have forsaken almost completely the orthodoxy of the ecumenical creeds. Liberals also question the ecclesiastical practice of an exclusively male priesthood, and many have cast off the church's

teaching regarding such moral issues as birth control, abortion, and homosexuality.

Some within the liberal camp have been strongly affiliated with liberation theology, especially in Latin America. Liberation theology interprets the gospel in terms of liberation from poverty and social oppression, and the reconstruction of society — usually along Marxist lines.<sup>14</sup> Catholics who embrace liberation theology often show an amazing disregard of traditional doctrinal issues.

Another subset within the broader category of liberal Catholics is what might be called "Eastern mystical" or "New Age" Catholicism. This group seeks to blend Catholic and New Age spirituality. Orthodox Christian beliefs about God and Christ are, to varying degrees, replaced with distinctive New Age beliefs such as pantheism (God is all and all is God), panentheism (God is intrinsically in the world and the world is intrinsically in God), and emphasis upon the Cosmic Christ (a universal, impersonal spirit or cosmic force). Probably the leading "Catholic guru" is Dominican priest Matthew Fox with his "creation-centered spirituality."<sup>15</sup>

Since Vatican II, this liberal camp as a whole has grown significantly within the scholarly ranks of the church, and to a lesser degree among the laity (although both the liberation theology and New Age subsets have strong lay components). Pope John Paul has attempted to curb this influence, however, by disciplining some of the more outspoken liberal scholars (for example, both Kung and Fox have been disciplined by the church). This crackdown has been met with some resistance, especially in America.

***Charismatic/Evangelical Catholics.*** 1992 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Catholic charismatic renewal movement. Emerging from humble beginnings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1967, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the Catholic charismatic renewal flourish in the church. While it experienced slow decline in the 1980s, it remains one of the most energetic forces in the Catholic church. It is estimated that 10 million American Catholics have been involved in the renewal, and that worldwide Catholic involvement may be as high as 50 to 65 million.<sup>16</sup> Catholics now make up more than a fifth of the worldwide Pentecostal-charismatic constituency.

Like the broader movement, charismatic Catholics emphasize the *charisma* or gifts of the Holy Spirit, the importance of being baptized in the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit-filled life. Charismatic Catholics tend to be more evangelical in belief, emphasizing personal faith and trust in Christ, and the assurance of salvation.<sup>17</sup> Reformed theologian J. I. Packer comments concerning charismatic Catholic piety:

It is a fact that in charismatic Catholicism, joyful trust in Christ as one's sin-bearing Savior and loving fellowship with him in his risen life have shifted the traditional devotional focus away from the somber disciplines of self-denial and suffering and away, too, from the anxieties about merit and destiny to which the formulations of the Council of Trent naturally give rise. Does Catholic doctrine as Trent defined it permit assurance of salvation based on once-for-all justification through faith? Opinions, both Protestant and Catholic, differ about that. Nevertheless, Catholic charismatics do observably enjoy this assurance, while yet maintaining humility, a sense of sin, and a life of repentance often more successfully than do their Protestant counterparts. And Protestant and Catholic charismatic teaching on the Christian life is to all intents and purposes identical. Is this not significant for the Christian future?<sup>18</sup>

It is true that many charismatic Catholics describe themselves as "born again, Spirit-filled Catholics."

Along with possessing a Pentecostal piety, charismatic Catholics generally tend to give Scripture more of an authoritative place in their personal spiritual lives. However, many (though by no means all) charismatic Catholics also have a strong devotion to Mary. While the issue of Marian devotion tends to be a stumbling block between evangelical Protestants and charismatic Catholics,<sup>19</sup> evangelical Protestants surely have more in common with charismatic Catholics than with any other type of Catholics.

Long-time renewal leader, Ralph Martin, is one of the most recognizable American Catholic charismatics/evangelicals.

**Cultural Catholics.** The majority of Catholics in the world probably fit into the category of cultural Catholics. This group is unlike any other type we have considered above. Their identification as "Catholic" is simply more cultural and social than religious. They might rightly be called "womb to tomb Catholics." They often are born in a Hispanic, Irish, Polish, or Italian family — and are therefore baptized, married, and buried in the Catholic church — but have little or no concern about spiritual matters.

Cultural Catholics do not understand Catholicism, nor do they seriously follow its ethical teaching. But they nevertheless have an emotional commitment to the Catholic church. When they attend mass, it is out of habit or family obligation, not religious conviction. Being Catholic to them is essentially a cultural identity (they may even be secular or humanistic in their thinking). This is not unlike how some Jews are merely ethnically or culturally Jewish, rather than adherents to Judaism. It is also like the person who is Lutheran *only* because he happens to be born into a German family, or the Anglican who is *only* Anglican because she was born into a British family. You see, it happens in Protestantism as well. Nominal Catholics, like nominal Protestants, do not understand Christianity, and they do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ. With all due respect, President John F. Kennedy would seem to have fit well the mold of a cultural Catholic.<sup>20</sup>

**Popular Folk Catholics.** Popular folk Catholics are found especially in Central and South America. These Catholics are very eclectic in their religious thinking and practice. They often combine elements of an animistic or nature-culture religion (the primitive religious beliefs that associate the forces of nature and culture with myriads of spirits) with a traditional medieval Catholicism. The result is a syncretistic nightmare. People in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina frequently engage in a religion composed of polytheism, occultic spiritism, and a superstitious form of Catholicism. This spiritual smorgasbord enslaves millions of Latin America's peasantry.

Certainly, official Catholic teaching does not sanction this kind of syncretistic religiosity. In certain respects, however, the Catholic church remains culpable. First, the Catholic church has been negligent by failing to train these people to reject all forms of paganism and to embrace solely the Triune God of Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the unhealthy and unbiblical aspects of the Catholic understanding of the communion of saints (i.e., the belief in the unity and cooperation among believers in both this world and the next) has contributed to the problem. Even some Catholics in the United States virtually worship saints and the church has failed to take aggressive measures to correct this serious problem of idolatry. It is actually much worse when it comes to devotion to the Virgin Mary, where on a practical level millions of Catholics commit idolatry on a daily basis by worshipping the virgin. This is certainly contrary to official church teaching (i.e., teaching set forth by the Vatican as standard Catholic doctrine), but the Catholic church has been derelict in correcting this serious problem. If the Catholic church wants to convince evangelical Protestants that they merely *honor* Mary, but do not *worship* her, then they must step in and stop this gross idolatry.

Third, the Second Vatican Council's openness to forms of religious pluralism has greatly exacerbated the problem. Ideas such as the "anonymous Christian" (the belief in the possibility of salvation without explicit Christian faith — even through non-Christian religions) as set forth by the influential German theologian, Karl Rahner, has acute and distressing repercussions.<sup>22</sup>

We have discussed six different species of the one genus: Roman Catholicism. Certainly there are other viewpoints expressed in today's Catholicism, but these appear to be the major types of Catholics. We will now turn our attention to the American Catholic church.

### **American Catholicism**

Just as Americans in general exhibit a different ethos from the rest of the world, American Catholics have a mindset distinct from other Catholics. Generally speaking, American Catholics tend to be both more independent and more selective in their practice of Catholicism. This attitude certainly contributes to the fact that many American Catholics follow their conscience over church authority, especially when it comes to some of the issues regarding sex and personal lifestyle. In fact, in 1990 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops was so concerned about the inroads the pro-choice element was making into the American church that it hired a public relations firm to "jazz up its public appeal on the abortion issue."<sup>23</sup> (This was the same public relations firm, by the way, that handled former President Ronald Reagan!)

Russell Chandler comments on the extent of this American Catholic individualism: American Catholics are more likely to follow their own conscience or personal preference than to assent unquestioningly to papal pronouncements. In no area is this more true than matters of sex and lifestyle. Not only do a large majority of U.S. Catholics disapprove of the church's teaching against contraception, they also favor a limited pro-choice position on abortion.

And many Catholics agree with dissident theologian Father Charles Curran who says that homosexual behavior, masturbation, premarital sex, and divorce aren't always sinful. (About one-fourth of U.S. Catholics have been divorced and a half of these have remarried.)<sup>24</sup> This is certainly powerful evidence that American Catholics tend to think for themselves. The fact is, there is a defiant attitude among a significant number from the clergy down to the general laity.<sup>25</sup> This also seems to illustrate just how strong the cultural and liberal factions of Catholicism are within the American church. American Catholicism, like American Christianity



as a whole, suffers from a growing secularization of both society and the church.

Another area of great concern in Catholicism worldwide, but especially in America, is the growing shortage of priests and nuns. One estimate reported that one out of ten U.S. parishes had no regular priest in 1990.<sup>26</sup> What has made this problem more acute is the fact that the American church continues to experience rapid growth. The church's demand concerning celibacy is the central reason given for men not entering the priesthood. This would only seem to exacerbate the already explosive issue of women's ordination. However, on the positive side, this shortage of clergy has led to a great increase of lay involvement in ministry. As of 1989, an "authorization allows bishops to designate a deacon, non-ordained sister, brother, or lay member to lead prayers, read Scripture, preach, and perform a Communion service if bread and wine consecrated by a priest is available."<sup>27</sup> In today's church, the laity is performing many of the duties once performed exclusively by the priest.

A continuing bright spot for American Catholicism is its educational system. From elementary schools to colleges, the Catholic church has some of the best educational institutions in the country.

Having gained some appreciation and understanding of many of the facets of contemporary Roman Catholicism, we are now in a position to examine Catholicism from a theological perspective.

## **AN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT APPRAISAL**

In appraising the Roman Catholic faith, we must first identify which Catholic faith we are speaking about, for as the previous discussion has clearly shown, Catholicism is actually more of a montage than a monolith. Nevertheless, while there are many competing contemporary interpretations of the Catholic faith, there remains the so-called "official teaching of the church." This body of official teaching is quite fluid in many respects, but, nevertheless, it represents what may be considered the classical or orthodox position of the Catholic church. Our focus must therefore be directed toward classical or orthodox Catholicism (as found in the ancient creeds, councils, and official documents of the church) as interpreted by the magisterium.

### **Standing on Common Ground**

The appropriate place to begin our appraisal of Catholicism is with the vast amount of doctrinal agreement found between classical Catholicism and historic Protestantism. This doctrinal agreement is especially evident in our mutual commitment and loyalty to the great ecumenical creeds of historic Christianity. The creeds, which attempt to summarize the essence of Christian truth,<sup>28</sup> are believed and recited in both Catholic and Protestant churches.

The common points of agreement between orthodox Catholics and evangelical Protestants extend to: belief in the Triune nature and full theistic attributes of God; assent to God as the sovereign creator and sustainer of the world; acceptance of Christ's incarnation as the God-man, including trust in His virgin birth, attesting miracles, atoning death on the cross, bodily resurrection from the grave, ascension into heaven, future return in glory, and work of judgment

and resurrection of mankind; affirmation of the Holy Spirit's personality, deity, and involvement in redemption; the acknowledgment of sin, the necessity of grace, and the need of salvation; and confidence in God's preservation and guidance of the Christian church. And, while not mentioned explicitly in the creeds, both camps have a high view of Scripture, affirming both the inspiration and infallibility of the Old and New Testaments.

There is certainly much common ground between the two traditions, but seldom is this carefully and reflectively considered. Most discussions concentrate almost exclusively on the differences between the two camps, which are unquestionably quite significant, as we shall see in detail in future installments of this series. But, the areas of common commitment are also quite significant. We should not gloss over these areas of agreement simply because there remain serious differences.<sup>29</sup>

Further areas of agreement are also apparent. For example, a number of Catholic scholars who would otherwise be considered traditionalist Catholics (strong in their defense of the Catholic views on authority, the nature of the church, the sacraments, etc.), nevertheless set forth the gospel in very evangelical-sounding terms. Catholic philosopher and apologist Peter Kreeft fits this category. Kreeft, a prolific author whose books sell well among evangelical Protestants, describes himself as an "evangelical Roman Catholic."<sup>30</sup> He made the following provocative comments in his book *Fundamentals of the Faith*:

How do I resolve the Reformation? Is it faith alone that justifies, or is it faith and works? Very simple. No tricks. On this issue I believe Luther was simply right; and this issue is absolutely crucial. As a Catholic I feel guilt for the tragedy of Christian disunity because the church in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was failing to preach the gospel. Whatever theological mistakes Luther made, whatever indispensable truths about the Church he denied, here is an indispensable truth he affirmed — indispensable to union between all sinners and God and union between God's separated Catholic and Protestant children.

Much of the Catholic Church has not yet caught up with Luther; and for that matter, much of Protestantism has regressed from him. The churches are often found preaching one of two "other gospels": the gospel of old-fashion legalism or the gospel of new-fangled humanism. The first means making points with God and earning your way into heaven, the second means being nice to everybody so that God will be nice to you. The churches, Protestant and Catholic, may also preach the true Christian gospel, but not often enough and not clearly enough and often watered down and mixed with one of these two other gospels. And the trouble with "other gospels" is simply that they are not true: they don't work, they don't unite man with God, they don't justify.<sup>31</sup> Kreeft is just one of an increasing number of Catholic scholars who see validity in the Reformation concept of justification by faith.<sup>32</sup> Kreeft goes on to say: "Catholicism as well as Protestantism affirms the utterly free, gratuitous gift of forgiving grace in Christ, free for the taking, which taking is faith. Good works can only be the fruit of faith, flowing freely as a response to the new life within, not laboriously, to buy into heaven."<sup>33</sup> While we will examine the crucial issue of justification in some detail in Part Three, it is important to note that a number of Catholic scholars have an appreciation for the insights of the Protestant Reformers. Certainly this trend does not insure that there will be a change in the church's official teaching on justification; but neither should it be dismissed as insignificant.

Another point that should be understood and weighed, in terms of Protestant-Catholic agreement, is that evangelical Protestants actually have far more in common with orthodox Catholics than they do with liberal Protestants. And orthodox Catholics have much more in common doctrinally with evangelical Protestants than they do with liberal Catholics. Both camps continue to face the challenge of religious liberalism which in many respects denies the very essence of Christianity.

Even with the significant areas of agreement that I have discussed above, a notable number of evangelicals remain utterly convinced that the Roman Catholic church is a non-Christian cult.<sup>34</sup> They frequently charge that "Romanism" is: (1) an apostate religious system, (2) an invalid expression of Christianity, and (3) the largest and most influential non-Christian cult in the world. In Part Two I will demonstrate just why Catholicism should *not* be classified as a cult. At the same time I will highlight several aspects of Catholicism which should be of serious concern to Protestants.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals, and Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), 16-18. While this writer holds firmly to the full and complete inerrancy of Scripture (and believes that the "limited inerrancy" view is seriously flawed), some would be reluctant to exclude those who are, except for their rejection of inerrancy, clearly evangelical in belief and practice. For further discussion concerning the proper definition of the word "evangelical," see Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), s.v. "Evangelicalism," 379-82.

<sup>2</sup> *1993 Catholic Almanac* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1992), 367.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>5</sup> A recent Gallup survey estimates that the present U.S. Catholic population may be as high as 65 million (28%). See Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 109.

<sup>6</sup> See Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 245-71. Kreeft discusses several other ways in which the Catholic church expresses its essential oneness.

<sup>9</sup> See David F. Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> George Carey, *A Tale of Two Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 7-15.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew T. LePeau and Noel Becchetti, "Understanding Roman Catholicism," *His Magazine*, April 1981, 22-25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> "What Separates Evangelicals and Catholics?" *Christianity Today*, 25 February 1983, 12-15.

<sup>14</sup> See Ron Rhodes, "Christian Revolution in Latin America: The Changing Face of Liberation Theology," *Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1991, 8-14.

<sup>15</sup> See Mitchell Pacwa, S.J., "Catholicism for the New Age: Matthew Fox and Creation-Centered Spirituality," *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1992, 14-19, 29-31.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Duin, "Charismatics on the Pentecostal Trail," *Christianity Today*, 22 June 1992, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Board, "Are Catholic Charismatics 'Evangelicals'?" *Eternity*, July 1978, 12-16.

- <sup>18</sup> J. I. Packer, "Rome's Persistent Renewal," *Christianity Today*, 22 June 1992, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> See Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).
- <sup>20</sup> See Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (Toronto: The Free Press, 1991).
- <sup>21</sup> Some Catholic scholars and clergy have been greatly troubled by this syncretism, and have attempted to reform the Latin wing of the church in this regard. However, as a whole the church has virtually neglected this problem.
- <sup>22</sup> We will return to the issue of religious pluralism later in this series. For more discussion of Rahner's concept of the "anonymous Christian," see Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), s.v. "Anonymous Christianity," 25-26.
- <sup>23</sup> "Catholic Soul-Searching in America," *Insight*, 14 May 1990, 52.
- <sup>24</sup> Russell Chandler, *Racing Toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 173.
- <sup>25</sup> See Richard N. Ostling, "Drawing the Line on Dissent," *Time*, 9 July 1990, 62.
- <sup>26</sup> Chandler, 168.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Some Protestants, especially those from noncreedal or nonconfessional churches, experience discomfort when one appeals to the ecumenical creeds of Christendom as having some authority. This is unfortunate, however, because while the creeds are certainly not inspired or inerrant, and while they are subservient to Scripture in terms of authority, they nevertheless adequately convey biblical truth and are thus authoritative statements.
- <sup>29</sup> On this see Carey, 61.
- <sup>30</sup> Peter Kreeft, "The Catholic Market," *Bookstore Journal*, February 1992, 28.
- <sup>31</sup> Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, 290.
- <sup>32</sup> See Carey, 44.
- <sup>33</sup> Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, 291.
- <sup>34</sup> See Dave Hunt, "Heeding the Berean Call," *The Berean Call*, April 1992; Albert James Dager, "Roman Catholicism: Is It a Cult?" *Media Spotlight*, 1991.

## GLOSSARY

**Counter Reformation:** A period of reform and revival in the Roman Catholic church following the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The goal was to stem the tide of Protestantism by genuinely reforming the Catholic church. This reform included among other things the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the establishment of The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1540.

**fundamentalist:** This term, like "evangelical," suffers from ambiguity, and has changed much in meaning since its first usage early in this century. Fundamentalists have always stood in opposition to liberalism within the church. But today the term conveys certain additional characteristics which set fundamentalists apart from other evangelicals, including: a general suspicion of scholarship, a separatist mentality which includes a rejection of the entire ecumenical movement, an anti-historical (anti-creedal) or restorational view of the church, and a rigid approach to what constitutes appropriate Christian conduct.

**papal encyclical:** A letter of instruction from the Pope which circulates throughout the church.

**Reformation:** A wide-ranging, predominantly religious movement of sixteenth century Europe which attempted to reform Western Christianity, but in effect resulted in (1) the rejection or modification of some Roman Catholic doctrine and

STATEMENT DC-170-2  
**WHAT THINK YE OF ROME? (Part Two):**  
**An Evangelical Appraisal of Contemporary Catholicism**  
by Kenneth R. Samples

## Summary

Catholicism possesses a foundational orthodoxy reflected in its affirmation of the crucial doctrines expressed in the ancient ecumenical creeds. Nevertheless, Protestants detect serious problems in Catholic theology in that the church affirms teachings that are extraneous and inconsistent with its orthodox (Christian) foundation. These doctrinal errors are of such a serious nature that aspects of orthodoxy are undermined, thus warranting the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the continued separation of present-day Protestantism from Catholicism. These divergent views, however, do not warrant classifying Catholicism as a non-Christian religion or cult. The doctrinal disputes of the Reformation era remain substantially unchanged today, extending to: (1) religious authority, (2) the doctrine of justification, (3) beliefs concerning the Virgin Mary, and (4) sacramentalism and the Mass. The twentieth century trend toward religious pluralism has also become a serious concern.

A prominent evangelical theologian was asked the pointed question, "What separates Catholics from evangelical Protestants?" The theologian retorted, "Nothing and everything!" This response, though paradoxical, is actually keenly insightful. When one examines the common doctrinal ground between the two camps, it seems *nothing* separates Catholics from evangelicals. When one explores the areas of difference, however, it seems that virtually *everything* separates Catholics from evangelicals.

In Part One of this series we gained some appreciation and understanding of contemporary Catholicism by exploring some of its unique sociological features. We also began our theological appraisal by probing the common areas of doctrinal agreement between classical Catholicism and historic Protestantism — especially those crucial doctrines succinctly summarized in the ancient ecumenical creeds.

In the present article we will extend our appraisal of Catholicism by, first, discussing to what extent evangelical Protestants consider the Catholic church to be an authentic Christian church. Second, we will respond to the charge made primarily by popular fundamentalists that Catholicism is a completely invalid expression of Christianity, and therefore a "non-Christian" or "anti-Christian" cult or religion. In this connection we will also address the common errors in reasoning and methodology made by those who insist that Catholicism should be classified as nothing more than an apostate, non-Christian cult. Third, we will begin our own critical evaluation of Catholicism by outlining the central doctrinal issues that sharply separate evangelical Protestants from Roman Catholics.

## **IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH A CHRISTIAN CHURCH?**

My research convinces me that the majority of evangelical Protestant theologians and scholars who are knowledgeable concerning Catholicism would be perplexed to hear Catholicism

classified *simply* as a "non-Christian religion" or an "anti-Christian cult."<sup>1</sup> This perplexity would stem from the fact that no matter how theologically deviant Catholicism might be — even if in some respects apostate — it certainly does possess a structural or foundational orthodoxy, reflected in its adherence to the ancient ecumenical creeds (see Part One).<sup>2</sup> As such, it should be considered at least provisionally a Christian church body. Certainly most evangelical Protestant scholars would also insist that the unfortunate unbiblical elements found in Catholicism mitigate against, or in some instances tend to undermine, aspects of that foundational orthodoxy. Recognizing and understanding this *tension* in Catholic theology of the *right hand giving* (foundational orthodoxy) and yet the *left hand taking away* (affirming teaching that is inconsistent with that orthodoxy) is, in this writer's opinion, a key to formulating a sound Protestant evaluation of Catholicism. Despite this tension, however, most evangelical scholars believe that the core orthodoxy is never entirely eclipsed. For example, though very critical of Catholicism at numerous points, evangelical theologian John Jefferson Davis of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary stated that "conservative evangelicals could affirm about 85 percent of what Catholics believe."<sup>3</sup>

Even the Protestant Reformers<sup>4</sup> themselves clearly acknowledged that Catholicism as a system affirmed the basic articles of the historic Christian faith. The Reformers simply charged that in both belief and practice the medieval Catholic church compromised its formal adherence to orthodoxy — specifically as related to its obscuring and undermining the gospel message. Because the Catholic church would not itself reform, the Reformation became an unavoidable though tragic necessity. However, while the Reformers called into question the Catholic church's right to be called a "true church" (because it was failing to preach the true gospel), they did not think it had lost all the qualities of a true church. For example, they did not require the rebaptizing of those who had once been baptized as Roman Catholics.<sup>5</sup> In a book discussing the relationship of heretical doctrine to historic Christian orthodoxy, theologian Harold O. J. Brown of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School made this insightful comment concerning Catholicism: The strongest accusation that can be made against Roman Catholicism from this perspective is not that it is heretical in structure, but that it is heretical in effect, in that it effectively undercuts its own formal adherence to the major Christological stands of its official creeds. In other words, Reformation Protestantism acknowledges that Catholicism possesses the fundamental articles of the faith, but claims that it so overlays them with extraneous and sometimes false doctrines that the foundations are no longer accessible to the majority of Catholic believers.<sup>6</sup>

While Catholicism is foundationally or structurally an orthodox Christian church (affirming the creeds), Reformed theologian Roger Nicole is nevertheless correct in stating: "Reformation Protestants believe that much in Catholic theology tends to undermine and compromise that orthodox Christian confession — especially as it relates to the crucial issue of the gospel message."<sup>7</sup> In agreement with most evangelical scholars, then, the Christian Research Institute regards Roman Catholicism as neither a cult (non-Christian religious system) nor a biblically sound church, but a historically Christian church which is in desperate need of biblical reform.<sup>8</sup> The compromises in Catholic theology are so serious as to warrant the sixteenth century Reformation and the continued separation on the part of present-day Protestantism. At the same time, however, these compromises are *not serious enough* to warrant the extreme classification of Catholicism as a non-Christian religion or anti-Christian cult. Some have criticized this position for not being more definite; however, rarely does one find simple black and white

answers to complex theological issues. As theologian Desmond Ford has articulately stated: "Theological truths are seldom pure, and almost never simple." The task of correctly understanding and evaluating the long history, intricate doctrine, and diverse practices of Roman Catholicism is no simple chore.

## **IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN CULT?**

Even with the significant areas of doctrinal agreement between Catholics and Protestants (*see* Part One), a notable number of Protestant fundamentalists insist that Catholicism is an anti-Christian cult. Organizations and individuals (some of them quite popular) who classify Catholicism as a cult include: Chick Publications, Alberto Rivera's Anti-Christ Information Center, Tony Alamo's Christian Foundation, Bill Jackson's Christians Evangelizing Catholics, Albert James Dager's *Media Spotlight*, and Dave Hunt's *The Berean Call*. (This is not to say that all of these people belong in the same category — the latter three are more respectable than the former three.) Actually this is just a few of many individuals and organizations that classify Catholicism as an anti-Christian cult. Because their position receives a wide hearing in some evangelical circles, we must address their claim.

### **Ten Reasons Why Catholicism Is Not a Cult**

What those who label Catholicism a cult do not seem to understand is that even if one considers Catholicism to be unscriptural and greatly mistaken on many important doctrinal issues (certainly this writer does), it is simply misplaced and erroneous — for a variety of reasons — to classify Roman Catholicism as an anti-Christian cult. Let me give ten reasons why I say this.<sup>9</sup>

(1) Cults, generally speaking, are small splinter groups with a fairly recent origin. Most American-based cults, for example, have to a greater or lesser degree splintered off from other Christian groups, and emerged in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Catholicism, on the other hand, is the largest body within Christendom, having almost a two-thousand-year history (it has historical continuity with apostolic, first century Christianity), and is the ecclesiastical tree from which Protestantism originally splintered.

(2) Cults are usually formed, molded, and controlled by a single individual or small group. The Catholic church, by contrast, has been molded by an incalculable number of people throughout its long history. Catholicism is governed by creeds, councils, and the ongoing magisterium.

(3) Cults typically exercise rigid control over their members and demand unquestioning submission, with disobedience punished by shunning and/or excommunication. While Catholicism has exercised a triumphalism and an unhealthy control over its members in times past, this is far less true today, especially since the Second Vatican Council. Contemporary Catholicism's broad diversity as illustrated in Part One of this series certainly proves this point.

(4) An appropriate description of a cult is "a religious group originating as a heretical sect and maintaining fervent commitment to heresy."<sup>10</sup> Regardless of one's criticism of Catholicism, even if it *is* heretical at certain points, it does not fit this description. It does not *originate* in heresy,



and, as was mentioned before, it possesses a structural orthodoxy that other cults simply do not have (*see* comparison chart).

(5) Cults (when defined as heretical sects) are classified as such because of their outright denial or rejection of essential Christian doctrine. Historically, this has principally been a denial of the nature of God (the Trinity), the nature of the incarnate Christ (divine-human), and of the absolute necessity of divine grace in salvation (the Pelagian controversy).<sup>11</sup> While Protestants have accused Catholicism of having an illegitimate authority and of confusing the gospel (two serious charges to be examined later), Catholicism *does* affirm the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and that salvation is ultimately a gift of God's grace (a rejection of Pelagianism).<sup>12</sup> I challenge anyone to name a recognized cult that affirms the Trinity or the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ (*see* comparison chart).

(6) Cults frequently have a low view of the Bible, replacing or supplementing it with their own so-called "sacred writings." In fact, cults often argue that the Bible has been, to some extent, corrupted and therefore their writings are needed to restore the truth. While Catholicism's acceptance of noncanonical writings (the Apocrypha) and placing of apostolic tradition on par with Scripture are fundamental problems to the Protestant, Catholics nevertheless retain a high view of the Bible (inspired and infallible) and see it as their central source of revelation.

(7) Cults usually have some kind of authoritarian, totalistic leader or prophet. While some feel that the pope fits this category, in reality the pope governs the church with heavy dependence upon the bishops (college of cardinals), and within the restrictions of the official teaching of the church. Protestants clearly disagree with the authority and exalted titles given the pope, but he still does not fit the category of a cult leader.

(8) A frequent characteristic of cults is their emphasis on a "remnant identity" — that is, they claim to be God's exclusive agent or people who restore "authentic Christianity," which has been corrupted or lost. Usually this type of restorationism has an accompanying anticreedal and antihistorical mindset. While Catholicism has at times been guilty of an unfortunate exclusivity<sup>13</sup> (some Protestant churches have also), they emphatically deny restorationism, and strongly emphasize the continuity of God's church throughout history.

(9) Those who classify Roman Catholicism as a cult (an inauthentic and invalid expression of Christianity) usually also give the Eastern Orthodox church the same classification. What they do not realize, however, is that if both of these religious bodies are non-Christian, then there was no authentic Christian church during most of the medieval period. Contrary to what some Protestants think, there was no independent, nondenominational, Bible-believing church on the corner (or in the caves) during most of the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the schismatic groups who were around at the time were grossly heretical.<sup>15</sup> So much for the gates of hell not prevailing against the church (Matt. 16:18).

Some try to sidestep this argument by reasoning that as long as there were even a few individuals who remained biblically orthodox apart from the institutional or organized church, then those select individuals constituted God's authentic church (a remnant) — thus the church was never truly overcome. This thinking, though containing an element of truth, is not completely correct.

It is true that the church has an invisible<sup>16</sup> and local dimension to it, but it also has a visible and organizational dimension (John 17:21). While the church is primarily a community of believers, it also functions as an institution through which believers encounter the ministry of the Word and the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). Scripture does not allow for the sharp distinction between the spiritual and organizational dimensions of the church that some would like to draw.<sup>17</sup>

(10) Even with the serious problems evident in Roman Catholic theology from a Protestant point of view, Catholic doctrine overall does not fit the pattern of the recognized cult groups (*see* comparison chart). Catholicism affirms most of what the cults deny and possesses an orthodox foundation which all cult groups lack.

In summary, a cult generally emerges as a group that rejects orthodoxy and remains fervently committed to heresy. Catholicism's problem, by contrast, is of a different nature. It affirms teaching which is both extraneous and inconsistent with its historical affirmation of orthodoxy. From an evangelical Protestant viewpoint, Catholicism is definitely "too much" — but the cults are clearly "not enough."

Roman Catholicism is *not* a cult. The classification of Catholicism as given above is much more accurate and preferable to the overly simplistic and misguided classification of Catholicism as a non-Christian cult.

### **Rome's Seduction of Evangelical Christianity?**

There is certainly legitimate room for disagreement among evangelicals as to just how Catholicism should be viewed (though, as previously noted, most scholars would concur in large part with our discussion above). But the approach to Catholicism taken by some Protestant fundamentalists is simply unacceptable. This approach not only condemns Catholicism as a non-Christian religion or cult, but also suggests that anyone who disagrees with that condemnation is somehow being seduced by the allegedly all-powerful Vatican. If one dares defend Catholicism from the unfair charge of being called a cult, then one is either knowingly or unknowingly aiding and abetting the enemy, and betraying the Protestant Reformation.

While this writer derives no pleasure from singling out other Christians for criticism, in this case it is both necessary and appropriate. There are many who take this unfortunate approach to Catholicism, but one fundamentalist writer in particular consistently makes very serious charges: the popular and controversial discernment ministry author, Dave Hunt. Hunt, in an article entitled "A Cult Is a Cult," states that Catholicism is "the most seductive, dangerous and largest cult...."<sup>18</sup> He also states that major evangelical leaders, apologists, and cult experts are cooperating with, and therefore being seduced by, Catholicism as never before.<sup>19</sup>

Hunt does at points raise some legitimate doctrinal concerns regarding Catholicism. However, his overall approach in evaluating and classifying Catholicism is both logically and theologically flawed. As our previous discussion demonstrated, Catholicism simply does not fit the category of a non-Christian cult. Further, Hunt seems unwilling to take into account the vast areas of doctrinal agreement between classical Catholicism and historic Protestantism. While he rightly points to many unbiblical elements and false teachings within Catholicism (issues which, by the

way, have been pointed out by the very apologists he criticizes<sup>20</sup>), he fails repeatedly to identify and draw carefully nuanced theological distinctions. Instead he erroneously asserts that Catholics embrace a "different God, a different Jesus Christ..."<sup>21</sup> Certainly no one has been more critical of the excesses of Catholic theology than were the Reformers. However, even they affirmed that Catholicism embraced the triune nature of God and the two natures of Jesus Christ as expressed in the creedal statements of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon.

What is worse than Hunt's assertion that Catholicism is a cult is his insistence that anyone who arrives at a different position is simply deceived — and thus at risk of compromising their gospel witness. Consequently, Hunt impugns the character of all of those individuals and ministries simply because they disagree with his theological assessment of Catholicism.<sup>22</sup>

The fact is that all of the cult experts and apologists Hunt has criticized have very strong criticisms of Catholicism at numerous points (this writer knows most of them personally). They simply do not classify the Catholic church as a non-Christian cult. They are not being seduced, nor are they compromising — they merely disagree with many of Hunt's conclusions! Cannot evangelicals have honest areas of disagreement without being labeled compromisers?

The last of Hunt's charges which should be addressed is his claim that "to deny that Roman Catholicism is a cult is to repudiate the Reformation and mock the more than 1 million martyrs who died at Rome's hands as though they gave their lives for no good reason!"<sup>23</sup> I find this charge to be personally unsettling. As a Reformed (Calvinist) Christian and apologist, I have great admiration for the sixteenth century Reformers. In fact, as a conservative Presbyterian, I adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith (a Reformed confession of 1647). However, while I am not willing to repudiate the Reformation, neither am I willing to classify Catholicism as a non-Christian cult (though I remain staunchly critical of Catholic theology overall).

Let us examine Hunt's reasoning on this point. His argument seems to follow this pattern: Either one classifies Catholicism as a non-Christian cult, or one is guilty of repudiating the Protestant Reformation. As a Protestant, one could not possibly want to repudiate the Reformation. Catholicism must therefore be classified as a cult. This argument is a classic example of the informal logical fallacy known as the "false bifurcation" (also known as the "black-and-white," "either-or," or "false alternatives") fallacy.<sup>24</sup>

The error in Hunt's reasoning is twofold. First, he assumes *too few* alternatives. There are other possible alternative classifications for Catholicism that would not repudiate the Reformation, including other critical classifications such as the one we discussed earlier. By erroneously reducing the number of alternatives, he has oversimplified the problem and is clearly thinking in extremes. Second he assumes (illegitimately) that one of his jointly exhaustive alternatives must be true (ergo — Catholicism is a cult). Hunt's disjunctive (either-or) premise is false, and his argument is unsound.

While some individuals unfortunately exaggerate the theological faults of Catholicism, there remain in reality some central doctrinal differences between Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants. It is to these areas of difference that we now turn.

## WHAT SEPARATES ROMAN CATHOLICS FROM EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS?

There are many areas of difference between Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism.<sup>25</sup> These areas extend to both doctrines and practices, and range from very minor differences to those that can only be considered major points of contention. The following is just a brief list of the most consequential doctrinal differences between the two groups.<sup>26</sup> These are areas in which Catholicism generally differs with virtually all of the specific denominations within evangelical Protestantism. These areas obviously overlap and have significant implications for further areas of theology and religious practice. We will briefly note the general concerns expressed by Protestants.

### Authority

The question of authority is an area of central dispute between Catholics and Protestants. The Reformers referred to it as the *formal cause* of the Reformation. Catholics affirm a triad of authority: Scripture, apostolic tradition, and the teaching office of the church (magisterium). Implications of this authority system include: the Petrine doctrine (primacy of Peter), apostolic succession, papal supremacy and infallibility, and, as it relates to Scripture, the acceptance of the Apocrypha.

Protestants, by contrast, reject the Catholic system in favor of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone as the primary and absolute norm of doctrine). *Sola Scriptura* implies the authority, clarity, and sufficiency of Scripture, and uniquely gives Scripture alone the role of final arbiter in all matters of faith and morals.<sup>27</sup>

Evangelicals charge the Catholic church with affirming an illegitimate authority system and express great concern about Catholicism's decision to: (1) place human traditions on par with God's written Word, (2) grant infallibility to the church (magisterium), (3) subordinate the individual believer's interpretation of Scripture to the magisterium, (4) affirm the primacy and infallibility of the pope, and (5) introduce noncanonical books into the canon (the Apocrypha). Evangelicals believe that Catholicism's misguided authority structure has allowed numerous unbiblical teachings to arise in the church.

We will return for a more thorough discussion of this crucial issue of authority in Part Three of this series.

### Justification

Also of central dispute between evangelicals and Catholics is the crucial soteriological doctrine of justification. The Reformers referred to this doctrine as the *material cause* of the Reformation. Although we can only summarize the views here, we will also return to this issue in Parts Three and Four.

Theologian and Reformation scholar Peter Toon summarizes the main features of the official Roman doctrine of justification:

1. Justification is both an event and a process. An unrighteous man becomes a righteous man. Becoming a child of God in baptism and having the remission of sins, the Christian is made righteous. (If during this process he should lose faith or fall away, he may be restored through the sacrament of penance.)

2. Justification occurs because of the "infusion" of the grace of God into the soul, whereby inherent righteousness becomes one of the soul's characteristics.

3. This imparted, "infused" righteousness is described as the "formal cause" of justification. The "meritorious cause" is Christ's passion and death.

4. The believer will only know for certain that he is justified at the end of the process. In the meantime, his constant duty is to co-operate with the grace of God given to him.<sup>28</sup>

Oxford theologian and internationally recognized authority on the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, Alister McGrath, summarizes the Reformation Protestant position on justification:

1. Justification is the forensic [i.e., legal] declaration that the Christian is righteous, rather than the process by which he or she is made righteous. It involves a change in status rather than in nature.

2. A deliberate and systematic distinction is made between justification (the external act by which God declares the believer to be righteous) and sanctification or regeneration (the internal process of renewal by the Holy Spirit).

3. Justifying righteousness is the alien righteousness of Christ, imputed to the believer and external to him, not a righteousness that is inherent within him, located within him, or in any way belonging to him.

4. Justification takes place per fidem propter Christum [by faith on account of Christ], with faith being understood as the God-given means of justification and the merits of Christ the God-given foundation of justification.<sup>29</sup>

While the Protestant Reformers were essentially unified in their understanding of justification, modern-day evangelicalism is much less so.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, today's Reformation Protestants have consistently criticized the Catholic position for: (1) failing to recognize that justification is solely a judicial act of God that changes our status but not our state; (2) not making the necessary distinction between justification (being *declared* righteous) and sanctification (being *made* righteous); (3) interpreting justifying righteousness as infused and intrinsic, rather than imputed and extrinsic; (4) failing to see that assurance is a necessary byproduct of being justified; and (5) making justification a synergistic (man cooperating with God) process rather than a monergistic (God working alone) act.

Because Reformation Protestants see the doctrine of justification by faith as the very heart of the gospel, this dispute takes on extreme significance. While it is important to understand the nuanced doctrinal points described above, the issue of how one is justified before God is more

than just an academic theological debate. Reformation Protestants believe that to confuse or compromise the doctrine of justification is to run the dangerous risk of obscuring the very gospel of Christ. Following the Reformers, today's Reformation Protestants believe that the Catholic church's soteriological system has actually placed obstacles in the way of Catholics entering in to an authentically saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

## **Mariology**

It might rightly be said that evangelicals have a tendency to ignore Jesus' mother Mary. Catholics, on the other hand, greatly exalt her. Such dogmas as the Immaculate Conception and bodily Assumption, coupled with such titles as "Queen of Heaven," "Queen of all Saints," and the "Immaculate Spouse of the Holy Spirit," make Mary in the minds of Catholics the most exalted of all God's creatures.

While Catholics propose Mary as a point of unity with other Christians, most evangelicals see Mariology as a formidable barrier between themselves and Catholics. Even evangelicals who are for the most part sympathetic to Catholicism generally view this element of Catholic belief as grossly unbiblical. One evangelical commission on evaluating Catholic Mariology stated: "We as evangelical Christians are deeply offended by Rome's Marian dogmas because they cast a shadow upon the sufficiency of the intercession of Jesus Christ, lack all support from Scripture and detract from the worship which Christ alone deserves."<sup>31</sup> Although the documents of Vatican II inform us that Mary's exalted role "neither take away from nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator,"<sup>32</sup> most evangelicals believe Catholic Mariology actually undermines the foundation of orthodox Catholic Christology.

## **Sacramentalism and the Mass**

Sacramentalism is a central and vital component within Catholic theology. For Catholics, sacraments are "effective signs" of grace instituted by Christ. Catholicism's seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction[last rites], holy orders[ordination into the priesthood], and matrimony) both signify grace and cause it to happen *ex opere operato* ("they work by their own working").

While various evangelical denominations differ in their acceptance and approach to sacraments (or ordinances), generally speaking evangelicals differ with the Catholic view in number, nature, and operation of the sacraments. The Eucharist and the sacrificial nature of the mass in particular engender great dispute between Catholics and evangelicals. Both of these areas of concern have direct Christological implications.

## **Religious Pluralism**

From the time of Cyprian until modern times, the Catholic church has affirmed the slogan *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the [visible body of the one institutional] church). Vatican II affirms, however, that salvation is "not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way."<sup>33</sup> These statements of Vatican II clearly

opened the door for German theologian Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christianity" — the belief in the possibility of salvation without explicit Christian faith, even through non-Christian religions. While Catholic theology assures us that all the redeemed are ultimately saved through Christ alone, evangelicals are greatly concerned that these pluralistic trends greatly detract from the uniqueness of Christianity and open the Pandora's box of universalism. In light of this pluralism, is there any necessary reason to consider becoming Catholic, or even Christian?

In Part Three of this series we will examine the issues of authority and justification in more detail.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have personally interviewed many of Protestant evangelicalism's finest theologians (Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Evangelical Free, Dispensational, etc.), virtually all of whom thought the classification of Catholicism as a non-Christian religion or cult was misguided and inaccurate. Most were extremely critical of Catholicism at numerous points, but still rejected the above classification.

<sup>2</sup> Orthodoxy refers to the body of essential biblical teachings, especially (but not completely) reflected in the ancient ecumenical creeds. The doctrines summarized in the creeds are the foundation of Christian orthodoxy.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Davis expressed this to me during a private interview regarding Catholicism.

<sup>4</sup> When I speak of the Reformers, in this context I am speaking of the magisterial or classical Reformers, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox. I am specifically excluding those who would be part of the radical reformation.

<sup>5</sup> See John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 37. If the Catholic church were a completely false church, then its sacraments would be completely invalid.

<sup>6</sup> Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1984), 310.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Nicole expressed this to me during a private interview regarding Catholicism.

<sup>8</sup> Some people have charged that this view of Catholicism does not reflect the view held by CRI's founder Walter R. Martin. This is a false charge. This writer has been CRI's specialist on Roman Catholicism for the past seven years, and I came to embrace this view, at least in part, from interacting with Martin himself.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Kreeft offers five good reasons why Catholicism is not a cult. All five, to some extent, are included in my list. ("The Catholic Market," *Bookstore Journal*, February 1992, 28.)

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bowman, Jr., *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 115.

<sup>11</sup> The primary doctrinal controversies of early church history centered on these three issues, as is reflected in the creeds. Pelagianism was a heresy that originated in the late fourth century stressing man's ability to take the initial steps toward salvation, apart from the special intervening grace of God. See Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), s.v. "Pelagius, Pelagianism," 833-34.

<sup>12</sup> Council of Trent (Canons on Justification no. 1): "If anyone saith that man may be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ let him be anathema." *Dogmatic Canons and Decrees* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1977), 49. Some Reformation Protestants have nonetheless accused Catholicism of affirming semi-Pelagianism; see Robert C. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing

House, 1986), s.v. "The Pelagian Controversy," 17.

<sup>13</sup> Statements from the Second Vatican Council concerning ecumenism reflect a new approach taken by Catholicism toward other churches (Decree on Ecumenism, no. 3). See Walter M. Abbott, gen. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: The American Press, 1966), 345-46.

<sup>14</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vols. 1 and 3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> See Walton, s.v. "Medieval Dissenters and Heretical Groups," 28.

<sup>16</sup> The "invisible church" consists of all truly regenerate believers (i.e., the elect) throughout history. The "visible church" consists of all persons (true believers and merely professing believers alike) in the current church on earth.

<sup>17</sup> Frame, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Dave Hunt, "A Cult Is a Cult," *CIB Bulletin*, June 1991, 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Hunt indicts numerous ministries for their compromising cooperation with Rome, including: Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity, Youth with a Mission, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship. In the wake of this seduction, however, Hunt asserts that "most cult experts refuse to identify this horrendous cult as such! Instead they accept it as 'Christian.'" These cult experts and apologists include the late Walter Martin, Hank Hanegraaff, Norman Geisler, Josh McDowell, Don Stewart, Bob and Gretchen Passantino, and James Sire.

<sup>20</sup> The Christian Research Institute has published numerous works which have been very critical of certain areas of Catholic theology. See, for example, Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). Simply because we do not classify Catholicism as a cult does not mean that we give Catholicism a clean bill of theological health, or that we are not uncompromisingly critical of Catholicism at numerous points. In fact, one Catholic apologetics organization accuses CRI of being anti-Catholic. While the accusation is false (CRI is not anti-Catholic in emphasis, but pro-Protestant), it serves to illustrate that CRI is consistently critical of the excesses of Catholic theology.

<sup>21</sup> Dave Hunt, *Global Peace* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990), 141.

<sup>22</sup> When discussing why evangelical apologists do not list Catholicism as a cult, Hunt stated: "The current deafening silence concerning the Catholic Church may have less to do with one's courage than with the practical concern that to oppose Rome severely limits one's audience" (*Ibid.*). Likewise, the Research and Education Foundation affirms that "it is to be feared that the desire to get money out of millions of Catholics is stronger than the desire to defend the truth by exposing error wherever it is found." (Larry Wessels, "Lack of Discernment among Apologetic Ministries?" *The Researcher*, Jan.-Feb. 1993,3.) This is an unconscionable ad hominem — and patently false. The anti-Catholic approach seems to sell quite well within fundamentalism — just ask Jack Chick.

<sup>23</sup> Hunt, "A Cult Is a Cult," 1.

<sup>24</sup> See T. Edward Damer, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), 56.

<sup>25</sup> Certain differences can be attributed to the vast diversity found within evangelical Protestantism. Some Protestant denominations will have many more areas of agreement with Catholicism than others (e.g., liturgical and sacramental Protestant churches).

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent overall evaluation of Catholicism from an evangelical perspective, see "An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism I and II," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10



(1986): 342-64, and 11 (1987): 78-94; and Tony Lane, "Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism," *Evangelical Quarterly* 61, 4 (1989): 351-64.

<sup>27</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), s.v. "Sola Scriptura," 284.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Toon, *Protestants and Catholics* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1983), 87-88.

<sup>29</sup> Alister McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 61.

<sup>30</sup> The Reformed and Arminian theological traditions have important differences in their formulation of this doctrine. In a similar way, current Dispensational theologians are sharply divided concerning the so-called "lordship salvation" controversy.

<sup>31</sup> "An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism I," 356-57.

<sup>32</sup> "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," chapter 8, *see* Abbott, 92.

<sup>33</sup> As cited in Lane, 353.

A DOCTRINAL COMPARISON OF CATHOLICISM AND THE CULTS

DOCTRINES	RC	JW	LDS	CS	TWI	UPC
All theistic attributes of God	affirm	deny	deny	deny	deny	distort
Triune Nature of God	affirm	deny	deny	deny	deny	deny
Personality of the Holy Spirit	affirm	deny	distort	deny	deny	distort
Two natures of Christ (God-Human)	affirm	deny	distort	deny	deny	distort
Virgin birth	affirm	affirm	deny	deny	distort	affirm
Justification by faith	compro.	deny	deny	deny	distort	compro.
Sufficiency of Christ's atonement	compro.	deny	deny	deny	distort	distort
Christ's bodily resurrection	affirm	deny	affirm	deny	compro.	affirm
Eternal conscious punishment	affirm	deny	distort	deny	deny	affirm
Literal return of Christ	affirm	distort	distort	deny	affirm	affirm
Immortal soul	affirm	deny	distort	distort	deny	affirm
Infallible/Inerrant Bible	affirm	distort	deny	deny	distort	distort
Authority of the Bible	compro.	compro.	compro.	distort	compro.	compro.
Continuity of the church	affirm	deny	deny	deny	deny	deny
Predestination	affirm	deny	deny	deny	deny	deny
Salvation outside their ranks	compro.	deny	compro.	compro.	compro.	compro.
Total depravity	compro.	deny	deny	deny	deny	deny
Eternal life in heaven	affirm	distort	distort	deny	deny	affirm
Consciousness in the intermediate state	affirm	deny	affirm	deny	deny	affirm
Final judgment	affirm	distort	distort	deny	distort	affirm

These positions more rightly reflect Armstrongism. The current Worldwide Church of God seems to have moved somewhat toward orthodoxy, but has yet to accept the Trinity and remains in a state of flux.

## DEFINITIONS

**CRI distinguishes between teaching that is aberrational (a serious confusion or compromise of essential biblical truth) and teaching that is heretical (a continued outright denial or rejection of essential biblical truth).**

Affirm	declare to be true
deny	declare to be untrue
distort	a serious change or negative alteration
compromise	(compro.) an unacceptable blending, settlement, or concession
<b>IDENTIFICATIONS</b>	
RC	Roman Catholicism
JW	Jehovah's Witnesses
LDS	Latter-day Saints
CS	Christian Science
TWI	<b>The Way International</b>
UPC	<b>United Pentecostal Church</b>

WHAT THINK YE OF ROME? (Part Three):  
**The Catholic-Protestant Debate on Biblical Authority**  
by Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie

## Summary

Traditional Roman Catholicism has always, in its official pronouncements, held sacred Scripture in high esteem. Indeed, doctors of the church such as Jerome, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas — when dealing with Holy Writ — at times sound positively Protestant. Unfortunately, Roman Catholicism has not followed their lead and has elevated extrabiblical tradition to the same level as the Bible. The authors maintain this is a serious error, having dire consequences on the practical formation of the layperson's Christian faith. Scripture itself should be the final authoritative guide for the Christian. As the apostle Paul reminds Timothy, "From infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15 [The New American Bible]).

How should evangelical Protestants view contemporary Roman Catholicism? In the first two installments of this series<sup>1</sup> Kenneth R. Samples showed that classic Catholicism and Protestantism are in agreement on the most crucial doctrines of the Christian faith, as stated in the ancient ecumenical creeds. Nonetheless, he also outlined five doctrinal areas that separate Roman Catholics from evangelical Protestants: authority, justification, Mariology, sacramentalism and the mass, and religious pluralism.

Samples observed that Roman Catholicism is foundationally orthodox, but it has built much on this foundation that tends to compromise and undermine it. He concluded that Catholicism should therefore be viewed as "neither a cult (non-Christian religious system) nor a biblically sound church, but a historically Christian church which is in desperate need of biblical reform."

With the first two installments of this series being largely devoted to establishing that Catholicism is a historic Christian church, it is appropriate that in the remaining installments we turn our attention to the most critical doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants. This is especially important at a time when many ecumenically minded Protestants are ready to portray the differences between Catholics and Protestants as little more important than the differences that separate the many Protestant denominations. For although the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants do not justify one side labeling the other a cult, they *do* justify the formal separation between the two camps that began with the 16th-century Protestant Reformation and that continues today.

Among the many doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants, none are more fundamental than those of *authority* and *justification*. In relation to these the Protestant Reformation stressed two principles: a formal principle (*sola Scriptura*) and a material principle (*sola fide*)<sup>2</sup>: The Bible alone and faith alone. In this installment and in Part Four we will focus on the formal cause of the Reformation, authority. In the concluding installment, Part Five, we will examine its material cause, justification.

## PROTESTANT UNDERSTANDING OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

By *sola Scriptura* Protestants mean that Scripture alone is the primary and absolute source for all doctrine and practice (faith and morals). *Sola Scriptura* implies several things. First, the Bible is a direct *revelation* from God. As such, it has divine authority. For what the Bible says, God says.

Second, the Bible is *sufficient*: it is all that is necessary for faith and practice. For Protestants "the Bible alone" means "the Bible only" is the final authority for our faith.

Third, the Scriptures not only have sufficiency but they also possess *final authority*. They are the final court of appeal on all doctrinal and moral matters. However good they may be in giving guidance, all the fathers, Popes, and Councils are fallible. Only the Bible is infallible.

Fourth, the Bible is *perspicuous* (clear). The perspicuity of Scripture does not mean that everything in the Bible is perfectly clear, but rather the essential teachings are. Popularly put, in the Bible the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things. This does not mean — as Catholics often assume — that Protestants obtain no help from the fathers and early Councils. Indeed, Protestants accept the great theological and Christological pronouncements of the first four ecumenical Councils. What is more, most Protestants have high regard for the teachings of the early fathers, though obviously they do not believe they are infallible. So this is not to say there is no usefulness to Christian tradition, but only that it is of secondary importance.

Fifth, *Scripture interprets Scripture*. This is known as the analogy of faith principle. When we have difficulty in understanding an unclear text of Scripture, we turn to other biblical texts. For the Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible. In the Scriptures, clear texts should be used to interpret the unclear ones.

## CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR THE BIBLE PLUS TRADITION

One of the basic differences between Catholics and Protestants is over whether the Bible alone is the sufficient and final authority for faith and practice, or the Bible plus extrabiblical apostolic tradition. Catholics further insist that there is a need for a teaching magisterium (i.e., the Pope and their bishops) to rule on just what is and is not authentic apostolic tradition.

Catholics are not all agreed on their understanding of the relation of tradition to Scripture. Some understand it as two sources of revelation. Others understand apostolic tradition as a lesser form of revelation. Still others view this tradition in an almost Protestant way, namely, as merely an *interpretation* of revelation (albeit, an infallible one) which is found only in the Bible.

Traditional Catholics, such as Ludwig Ott and Henry Denzinger, tend to be in the first category and more modern Catholics, such as John Henry Newman and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in the latter. The language of the Council of Trent seems to favor the traditional understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not extrabiblical apostolic tradition is considered a second source of revelation, there is no question that the Roman Catholic church holds that apostolic tradition is both authoritative and infallible. It is to this point that we speak now.

## **The Catholic Argument for Holding the Infallibility of Apostolic Tradition**

The Council of Trent emphatically proclaimed that the Bible alone is not sufficient for faith and morals. God has ordained tradition in addition to the Bible to faithfully guide the church.

Infallible guidance in interpreting the Bible comes from the church. One of the criteria used to determine this is the "unanimous consent of the Fathers."<sup>4</sup> In accordance with "The Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent" (Nov. 13, 1565), all faithful Catholics must agree: "I shall never accept nor interpret it [Holy Scripture] otherwise than in accordance with the *unanimous consent of the Fathers*."<sup>5</sup>

Catholic scholars advance several arguments in favor of the Bible and tradition, as opposed to the Bible only, as the final authority. One of their favorite arguments is that the Bible itself does not teach that the Bible only is our final authority for faith and morals. Thus they conclude that even on Protestant grounds there is no reason to accept *sola Scriptura*. Indeed, they believe it is inconsistent or self-refuting, since the Bible alone does not teach that the Bible alone is the basis of faith and morals.

In point of fact, argue Catholic theologians, the Bible teaches that apostolic "traditions" as well as the written words of the apostles should be followed. St. Paul exhorted the Thessalonian Christians to "stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or epistle" (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 3:6).

One Catholic apologist even went so far as to argue that the apostle John stated his *preference* for oral tradition. John wrote: "I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. Instead, I hope to see you soon when we can talk face to face" (3 John 13). This Catholic writer adds, "Why would the apostle emphasize his preference for oral Tradition over written Tradition...if, as proponents of *sola Scriptura* assert, Scripture is superior to oral Tradition?"<sup>6</sup>

Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft lists several arguments against *sola Scriptura* which in turn are arguments for tradition: "First, it separates Church and Scripture. But they are one. They are not two rival horses in the authority race, but one rider (the Church) on one horse (Scripture)." He adds, "We are not taught by a teacher without a book or by a book without a teacher, but by one teacher, the Church, with one book, Scripture."<sup>7</sup>

Kreeft further argues that "*sola Scriptura* violates the principle of causality; that an effect cannot be greater than its cause." For "the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church, decided on the canon, the list of books to be declared scriptural and infallible." And "if the Scripture is infallible, then its cause, the Church, must also be infallible."<sup>8</sup>

According to Kreeft, "denominationalism is an intolerable scandal by scriptural standards — see John 17:20-23 and I Corinthians 1:10-17." But "let five hundred people interpret the Bible without Church authority and there will soon be five hundred denominations."<sup>9</sup> So rejection of authoritative apostolic tradition leads to the unbiblical scandal of denominationalism.

Finally, Kreeft argues that "the first generation of Christians did not have the New Testament, only the Church to teach them."<sup>10</sup> This being the case, using the Bible alone without apostolic tradition was not possible.

## **A PROTESTANT DEFENSE OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA***

As convincing as these arguments may seem to a devout Catholic, they are devoid of substance. As we will see, each of the Roman Catholic arguments against the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* fails, and they are unable to provide any substantial basis for the Catholic dogma of an infallible oral tradition.

### **Does the Bible Teach *Sola Scriptura*?**

Two points must be made concerning whether the Bible teaches *sola Scriptura*. First, as Catholic scholars themselves recognize, it is not necessary that the Bible explicitly and formally teach *sola Scriptura* in order for this doctrine to be true. Many Christian teachings are a necessary logical deduction of what is clearly taught in the Bible (e.g., the Trinity). Likewise, it is possible that *sola Scriptura* could be a necessary logical deduction from what is taught in Scripture.

Second, the Bible *does* teach implicitly and logically, if not formally and explicitly, that the Bible alone is the only infallible basis for faith and practice. This it does in a number of ways. One, the fact that Scripture, without tradition, is said to be "God-breathed" (*theopneustos*) and thus by it believers are "*competent, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, emphasis added) supports the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. This flies in the face of the Catholic claim that the Bible is formally insufficient without the aid of tradition. St. Paul declares that the God-breathed writings *are* sufficient. And contrary to some Catholic apologists, limiting this to only the Old Testament will not help the Catholic cause for two reasons: first, the New Testament is also called "Scripture" (2 Pet. 3:15-16; 1 Tim. 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7); second, it is inconsistent to argue that God-breathed writings in the Old Testament are sufficient, but the inspired writings of the New Testament are not.

Further, Jesus and the apostles constantly appealed to the Bible as the final court of appeal. This they often did by the introductory phrase, "It is written," which is repeated some 90 times in the New Testament. Jesus used this phrase three times when appealing to Scripture as the final authority in His dispute with Satan (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10).

Of course, Jesus (Matt. 5:22, 28, 31; 28:18) and the apostles (1 Cor. 5:3; 7:12) sometimes referred to their own God-given authority. It begs the question, however, for Roman Catholics to claim that this supports their belief that the church of Rome still has infallible authority outside the Bible today. For even they admit that no new revelation is being given today, as it was in apostolic times. In other words, the only reason Jesus and the apostles could appeal to an authority outside the Bible was that God was still giving normative (i.e., standard-setting) revelation for the faith and morals of believers. This revelation was often first communicated orally before it was finally committed to writing (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:5). Therefore, it is not legitimate to appeal to any oral revelation in New Testament times as proof that nonbiblical infallible authority is in existence today.

What is more, Jesus made it clear that the Bible was in a class of its own, exalted above all tradition. He rebuked the Pharisees for not accepting *sola Scriptura* and negating the final authority of the Word of God by their religious traditions, saying, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?...You have nullified the word of God, for the sake of your tradition" (Matt. 15:3, 6).

It is important to note that Jesus did not limit His statement to mere *human* traditions but applied it specifically to the traditions of the religious authorities who used their tradition to misinterpret the Scriptures. There is a direct parallel with the religious traditions of Judaism that grew up around (and obscured, even negated) the Scriptures and the Christian traditions that have grown up around (and obscured, even negated) the Scriptures since the first century. Indeed, since Catholic scholars make a comparison between the Old Testament high priesthood and the Roman Catholic papacy, this would seem to be a very good analogy.

Finally, to borrow a phrase from St. Paul, the Bible constantly warns us "not to go beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6).<sup>11</sup> This kind of exhortation is found throughout Scripture. Moses was told, "You shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it" (Deut. 4:2). Solomon reaffirmed this in Proverbs, saying, "Every word of God is tested....Add nothing to his words, lest he reprove you, and you be exposed as a deceiver" (Prov. 30:5-6). Indeed, John closed the last words of the Bible with the same exhortation, declaring: "I warn everyone who hears the prophetic words in this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life..." (Rev. 22:18-19). *Sola Scriptura* could hardly be stated more emphatically.

Of course, none of these are a prohibition on future revelations. But they do apply to the point of difference between Protestants and Catholics, namely, whether there are any authoritative normative revelations outside those revealed to apostles and prophets and inscripturated in the Bible. And this is precisely what these texts say. Indeed, even the prophet himself was not to add to the revelation God gave him. For prophets were not infallible in everything they said, but only when giving God's revelation to which they were not to add or from which they were not to subtract a word.

Since both Catholics and Protestants agree that there is no new revelation beyond the first century, it would follow that these texts do support the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. For if there is no normative revelation after the time of the apostles and even the prophets themselves were not to add to the revelations God gave them in the Scriptures, then the Scriptures alone are the only infallible source of divine revelation.

Roman Catholics admit that the New Testament is the only infallible record of apostolic teaching we have from the first century. However, they do not seem to appreciate the significance of this fact as it bears on the Protestant argument for *sola Scriptura*. For even many early fathers testified to the fact that all apostolic teaching was put in the New Testament. While acknowledging the existence of apostolic tradition, J. D. N. Kelly concluded that "admittedly there is no evidence for beliefs or practices current in the period which were not vouched for in



the books later known as the New Testament." Indeed, many early fathers, including Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, and Augustine, believed that the Bible was the only infallible basis for all Christian doctrine.<sup>12</sup>

Further, if the New Testament is the only infallible record of apostolic teaching, then every other record from the first century *is fallible*. It matters not that Catholics believe that the teaching Magisterium later claims to pronounce some extrabiblical tradition as infallibly true. The fact is that they do not have an infallible record from the first century on which to base such a decision.

### **All Apostolic "Traditions" Are in the Bible**

It is true that the New Testament speaks of following the "traditions" (=teachings) of the apostles, whether oral or written. This is because they were living authorities set up by Christ (Matt. 18:18; Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20). When they died, however, there was no longer a living apostolic authority since only those who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ could have apostolic authority (Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 9:1). Because the New Testament is the only inspired (infallible) record of what the apostles taught, it follows that since the death of the apostles the only apostolic authority we have is the inspired record of their teaching in the New Testament. That is, all apostolic tradition (teaching) on faith and practice is in the New Testament.

This does not necessarily mean that everything the apostles ever taught is in the New Testament, any more than everything Jesus said is there (cf. John 20:30; 21:25). What it does mean is that all apostolic teaching that God deemed necessary for the faith and practice (morals) of the church was preserved (2 Tim. 3:15-17). It is only reasonable to infer that God would preserve what He inspired.

The fact that apostles sometimes referred to "traditions" they gave orally as authoritative in no way diminishes the Protestant argument for *sola Scriptura*. First, it is not necessary to claim that these oral teachings were *inspired* or *infallible*, only that they were *authoritative*. The believers were asked to "maintain" them (1 Cor. 11:2) and "stand fast in them" (2 Thess. 2:15). But oral teachings of the apostles were not called "inspired" or "unbreakable" or the equivalent, unless they were recorded as Scripture.

The apostles were living authorities, but not everything they said was infallible. Catholics understand the difference between *authoritative* and *infallible*, since they make the same distinction with regard to noninfallible statements made by the Pope and infallible *ex cathedra* ("from the seat" of Peter) ones.

Second, the traditions (teachings) of the apostles that were revelations were written down and are inspired and infallible. They comprise the New Testament. What the Catholic must prove, and cannot, is that the God who deemed it so important for the faith and morals of the faithful to inspire the inscripturation of 27 books of apostolic teaching would have left out some important revelation in these books. Indeed, it is not plausible that He would have allowed succeeding generations to struggle and even fight over precisely where this alleged extrabiblical revelation is to be found. So, however authoritative the apostles were by their office, only their inscripturated words are inspired and infallible (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. John 10:35).

There is not a shred of evidence that any of the revelation God gave them to express was not inscripturated by them in the only books — the inspired books of the New Testament — that they left for the church. This leads to another important point.

The Bible makes it clear that God, from the very beginning, desired that His normative revelations be written down and preserved for succeeding generations. "Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord" (Exod. 24:4), and his book was preserved in the Ark (Deut. 31:26). Furthermore, "Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them... which he recorded in the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:25-26) along with Moses' (cf. Josh. 1:7). Likewise, "Samuel next explained to the people the law of royalty and wrote it in a book, which he placed in the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam. 10:25). Isaiah was commanded by the Lord to "take a large cylinder-seal, and inscribe on it in ordinary letters" (Isa. 8:1) and to "inscribe it in a record; that it may be in future days an eternal witness" (30:8). Daniel had a collection of "the books" of Moses and the prophets right down to his contemporary Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2).

Jesus and New Testament writers used the phrase "It is written" (cf. Matt. 4:4, 7, 10) over 90 times, stressing the importance of the written word of God. When Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders it was not because they did not follow the traditions but because they did not "understand the Scriptures" (Matt. 22:29). All of this makes it clear that God intended from the very beginning that His revelation be preserved in Scripture, not in extrabiblical tradition. To claim that the apostles did not write down all God's revelation to them is to claim that they were not obedient to their prophetic commission not to subtract a word from what God revealed to them.

### **The Bible Does Not State a Preference for Oral Tradition**

The Catholic use of 3 John to prove the superiority of oral tradition is a classic example of taking a text out of context. John is not comparing oral and written tradition about the past but a written, as opposed to a personal, communication in the *present*. Notice carefully what he said: "I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. Instead, I hope to see you soon when we can talk face to face" (3 John 13). Who would not prefer a face-to-face talk with a living apostle over a letter from him? But that is not what oral tradition gives. Rather, it provides an unreliable oral tradition as opposed to an infallible written one. *Sola Scriptura* contends the latter is preferable.

### **The Bible Is Clear Apart from Tradition**

The Bible has perspicuity apart from any traditions to help us understand it. As stated above, and contrary to a rather wide misunderstanding by Catholics, perspicuity does not mean that everything in the Bible is absolutely clear but that the *main message* is clear. That is, all doctrines essential for salvation and living according to the will of God are sufficiently clear.

Indeed, to assume that oral traditions of the apostles, not written in the Bible, are necessary to interpret what is written in the Bible under inspiration is to argue that *the uninspired is more clear than the inspired*. But it is utterly presumptuous to assert that what fallible human beings

pronounce is clearer than what the infallible Word of God declares. Further, it is unreasonable to insist that words of the apostles that were not written down are more clear than the ones they did write. We all know from experience that this is not so.

### **Tradition and Scripture Are Not Inseparable**

Kreeft's claim that Scripture and apostolic tradition are inseparable is unconvincing. Even his illustration of the horse (Scripture) and the rider (tradition) would suggest that Scripture and apostolic tradition *are* separable. Further, even if it is granted that tradition is necessary, the Catholic inference that it has to be infallible tradition — indeed, the infallible tradition of the church of Rome — is unfounded. Protestants, who believe in *sola Scriptura*, accept genuine tradition; they simply do not believe it is infallible. Finally, Kreeft's argument wrongly assumes that the Bible was produced by the Roman Catholic church. As we will see in the next point, this is not the case.

### **The Principle of Causality Is Not Violated**

Kreeft's argument that *sola Scriptura* violates the principle of causality is invalid for one fundamental reason: it is based on a false assumption. He wrongly assumes, unwittingly in contrast to what Vatican II and even Vatican I say about the canon,<sup>13</sup> that the church determined the canon. In fact, God *determined* the canon by inspiring these books and no others. The church merely *discovered* which books God had determined (inspired) to be in the canon. This being the case, Kreeft's argument that the cause must be equal to its effect (or greater) fails.

### **Rejection of Tradition Does Not Necessitate Scandal**

Kreeft's claim that the rejection of the Roman Catholic view on infallible tradition leads to the scandal of denominationalism does not follow for many reasons. First, this wrongly implies that all denominationalism is scandalous. Not necessarily so, as long as the denominations do not deny the essential doctrines of the Christian church and true spiritual unity with other believers in contrast to mere external organizational uniformity. Nor can one argue successfully that unbelievers are unable to see spiritual unity. For Jesus declared: "This is how all [men] will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Second, as orthodox Catholics know well, the scandal of liberalism is as great inside the Catholic church as it is outside of it. When Catholic apologists claim there is significantly more doctrinal agreement among Catholics than Protestants, they must mean between *orthodox Catholics* and *all* Protestants (orthodox and unorthodox) — which, of course, is not a fair comparison.

Only when one chooses to compare things like the mode and candidate for baptism, church government, views on the Eucharist, and other less essential doctrines are there greater differences among orthodox Protestants. When, however, we compare the differences with orthodox Catholics and orthodox Protestants or with all Catholics and all Protestants on the more essential doctrines, there is no significant edge for Catholicism. This fact negates the value of the alleged infallible teaching Magisterium of the Roman Catholic church. In point of fact, Protestants seem to do about as well as Catholics on unanimity of essential doctrines with only

an infallible Bible and no infallible interpreters of it!

Third, orthodox Protestant "denominations," though there be many, have not historically differed much more significantly than have the various "orders" of the Roman Catholic church. Orthodox Protestants' differences are largely over secondary issues, not primary (fundamental) doctrines. So this Catholic argument against Protestantism is self-condemning.

Fourth, as J. I. Packer noted, "the real deep divisions have been caused not by those who maintained *sola Scriptura*, but by those, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, who reject it." Further, "when adherents of *sola Scriptura* have split from each other the cause has been sin rather than Protestant biblicism...."<sup>14</sup> Certainly this is often the case. A bad hermeneutic (method of interpreting Scripture) is more crucial to deviation from orthodoxy than is the rejection of an infallible tradition in the Roman Catholic church.

### **First Century Christians Had Scripture and Living Apostles**

Kreeft's argument that the first generation of Christians did not have the New Testament, only the church to teach them, overlooks several basic facts. First, the essential Bible of the early first century Christians was the Old Testament, as the New Testament itself declares (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6). Second, early New Testament believers did not need further revelation through the apostles in written form for one very simple reason: *they still had the living apostles to teach them*. As soon as the apostles died, however, it became imperative for the written record of their infallible teaching to be available. And it was — in the apostolic writings known as the New Testament. Third, Kreeft's argument wrongly assumes that there was apostolic succession (*see* Part Four, next issue). The only infallible authority that succeeded the apostles was their infallible apostolic writings, that is, the New Testament.

### **PROTESTANT ARGUMENTS AGAINST INFALLIBLE TRADITION**

There are many reasons Protestants reject the Roman Catholic claim that there is an extrabiblical apostolic tradition of equal reliability and authenticity to Scripture. The following are some of the more significant ones.

#### **Oral Traditions Are Unreliable**

In point of fact, oral traditions are notoriously unreliable. They are the stuff of which legends and myths are made. What is written is more easily preserved in its original form. Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper notes four advantages of a written revelation: (1) It has durability whereby errors of memory or accidental corruptions, deliberate or not, are minimized; (2) It can be universally disseminated through translation and reproduction; (3) It has the attribute of fixedness and purity; (4) It is given a finality and normativeness which other forms of communication cannot attain.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, what is not written is more easily polluted. We find an example of this in the New Testament. There was an unwritten "apostolic tradition" (i.e., one coming from the apostles) based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus said. They wrongly assumed that Jesus affirmed that

the apostle John would not die. John, however, debunked this false tradition in his authoritative written record (John 21:22-23).

Common sense and historical experience inform us that the generation alive when an alleged revelation was given is in a much better position to know if it is a true revelation than are succeeding generations, especially those hundreds of years later. Many traditions proclaimed to be divine revelation by the Roman Catholic Magisterium were done so centuries, even a millennia or so, after they were allegedly given by God. And in the case of some of these, there is no solid evidence that the tradition was believed by any significant number of orthodox Christians until centuries after they occurred. But those living at such a late date are in a much inferior position than contemporaries, such as those who wrote the New Testament, to know what was truly a revelation from God.

### **There Are Contradictory Traditions**

It is acknowledged by all, even by Catholic scholars, that there are contradictory Christian traditions. In fact, the great medieval theologian Peter Abelard noted hundreds of differences. For example, some fathers (e.g., Augustine) supported the Old Testament Apocrypha while others (e.g., Jerome) opposed it. Some great teachers (e.g., Aquinas) opposed the Immaculate Conception of Mary while others (e.g., Scotus) favored it. Indeed, some fathers opposed *sola Scriptura*, but others favored it.

Now this very fact makes it impossible to trust tradition in any authoritative sense. For the question always arises: *which of the contradictory traditions (teachings) should be accepted?* To say, "The one pronounced authoritative by the church" begs the question, since the infallibility of tradition is a necessary link in the argument for the very doctrine of the infallible authority of the church. Thus this infallibility should be provable without appealing to the Magisterium. The fact is that there are so many contradictory traditions that tradition, as such, is rendered unreliable as an authoritative source of dogma.

Nor does it suffice to argue that while particular fathers cannot be trusted, nonetheless, the "unanimous consent" of the fathers can be. For there is *no* unanimous consent of the fathers on many doctrines "infallibly" proclaimed by the Catholic church (*see* below). In some cases there is not even a majority consent. Thus to appeal to the teaching Magisterium of the Catholic church to settle the issue begs the question.

The Catholic response to this is that just as the bride recognizes the voice of her husband in a crowd, even so the church recognizes the voice of her Husband in deciding which tradition is authentic. The analogy, however, is faulty. First, it assumes (without proof) that there is some divinely appointed postapostolic way to decide — extrabiblically — which traditions were from God.

Second, historical evidence such as that which supports the reliability of the New Testament is not to be found for the religious tradition used by Roman Catholics. There is, for example, no good evidence to support the existence of first century eyewitnesses (confirmed by miracles) who affirm the traditions pronounced infallible by the Roman Catholic church. Indeed, many

Catholic doctrines are based on traditions that only emerge several centuries later and are disputed by both other traditions and the Bible (e.g., the Bodily Assumption of Mary).

Finally, the whole argument reduces to a subjective mystical experience that is given plausibility only because the analogy is false. Neither the Catholic church as such, nor any of its leaders, has experienced down through the centuries anything like a continual hearing of God's actual voice, so that it can recognize it again whenever He speaks. The truth is that the alleged recognition of her Husband's voice is nothing more than subjective faith in the teaching Magisterium of the Roman Catholic church.

### **Catholic Use of Tradition Is Not Consistent**

Not only are there contradictory traditions, but the Roman Catholic church is arbitrary and inconsistent in its choice of which tradition to pronounce infallible. This is evident in a number of areas. First, the Council of Trent chose to follow the weaker tradition in pronouncing the apocryphal books inspired. The earliest and best authorities, including the translator of the Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate Bible, St. Jerome, opposed the Apocrypha.

Second, support from tradition for the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary is late and weak. Yet despite the lack of any real evidence from Scripture or any substantial evidence from the teachings of early church fathers, Rome chose to pronounce this an infallible truth of the Catholic faith. In short, Roman Catholic dogmas at times do not grow out of *rationally weighing* the evidence of tradition but rather out of *arbitrarily choosing* which of the many conflicting traditions they wish to pronounce infallible. Thus, the "unanimous consent of the fathers" to which Trent commanded allegiance is a fiction.

Third, apostolic tradition is nebulous. As has often been pointed out, "Never has the Roman Catholic Church given a complete and exhaustive list of the contents of extrabiblical apostolic tradition. It has not dared to do so because this oral tradition is such a nebulous entity."<sup>16</sup> That is to say, even if all extrabiblical revelation definitely exists somewhere in some tradition (as Catholics claim), which ones these are has nowhere been declared.

Finally, if the method by which they choose which traditions to canonize were followed in the practice of textual criticism of the Bible, one could never arrive at a sound reconstruction of the original manuscripts. For textual criticism involves weighing the evidence as to what the original actually said, not reading back into it what subsequent generations would like it to have said. Indeed, even most contemporary Catholic biblical scholars do not follow such an arbitrary procedure when determining the translation of the original text of Scripture (as in *The New American Bible*).

In conclusion, the question of authority is crucial to the differences between Catholics and Protestants. One of these is whether the Bible alone has infallible authority. We have examined carefully the best Catholic arguments in favor of an additional authority to Scripture, infallible tradition, and found them all wanting. Further, we have advanced many reasons for accepting the Bible alone as the sufficient authority for all matters of faith and morals. This is supported by Scripture and sound reason. In Part Four we will go further in our examination of Catholic

authority by evaluating the Catholic dogma of the infallibility of the Pope.

**Dr. Norman L. Geisler** is Dean of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, NC. He is author or co-author of over 40 books and has his Ph.D. in philosophy from Loyola University, a Roman Catholic school in Chicago.

**Ralph E. MacKenzie** has dialogued with Roman Catholics for 40 years. He graduated from Bethel Theological Seminary West, earning a Master of Arts in Theological Studies (M.A.T.S.), with a concentration in church history.

[The material for this article is excerpted from a forthcoming book by the authors titled, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Baker Book House).]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Kenneth R. Samples, "What Think Ye of Rome?" (Parts One and Two), *Christian Research Journal*, Winter (pp. 32-42) and Spring (pp. 32-42) 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Some Reformed theologians wish to point out that the material principle is really "in Christ alone" and faith alone is the means of access.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1957) [section] 783, 244. From the Council of Trent, Session 4 (April 8, 1546).

<sup>4</sup> Denzinger, "Systematic Index," 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* [sections] 995, 303.

<sup>6</sup> See Patrick Madrid, "Going Beyond," *This Rock*, August 1992, 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 274-75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> There is some debate even among Protestant scholars as to whether Paul is referring here to his own previous statements or to Scripture as a whole. Since the phrase used here is reserved only for Sacred Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15-16) the latter seems to be the case.

<sup>12</sup> J. D. N. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> See Austin Flannery, gen. ed., *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1992), *Dei Verbum*, 750-65 and Denzinger, [section] 1787, 444.

<sup>14</sup> J. I. Packer, "Sola Scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism," in *The Foundations of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 103.

<sup>15</sup> See Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 68.

WHAT THINK YE OF ROME? (Part Four):  
**The Catholic-Protestant Debate on Papal Infallibility**  
by Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie

## Summary

Papal infallibility was formalized at the First Vatican Council, A.D. 1870. It is required belief for Roman Catholics but is rejected by evangelicals. On examination, the major biblical texts used to defend this dogma do not support the Catholic position. Further, there are serious theological and historical problems with the doctrine of papal infallibility. Infallibility stands as an irrevocable roadblock to any ecclesiastical union between Catholics and Protestants.

According to Roman Catholic dogma, the teaching magisterium of the church of Rome is infallible when officially defining faith and morals for believers. One manifestation of this doctrine is popularly known as "papal infallibility." It was pronounced a dogma in A.D. 1870 at the First Vatican Council. Since this is a major bone of contention between Catholics and Protestants, it calls for attention here.

## THE DOCTRINE EXPLAINED

Roman Catholic authorities define infallibility as "immunity from error, i.e., protection against either passive or active deception. Persons or agencies are infallible to the extent that they can neither deceive nor be deceived."<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the authority of the pope, Vatican I pronounced that

all the faithful of Christ must believe "that the Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff hold primacy over the whole world, and that the Pontiff of Rome himself is the successor of the blessed Peter, the chief of the apostles, and is the true [vicar] of Christ and head of the whole Church and faith, and teacher of all Christians; and that to him was handed down in blessed Peter, by our Lord Jesus Christ, full power to feed, rule, and guide the universal Church, just as is also contained in the records of the ecumenical Councils and in the sacred canons."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the Council went on to speak of "The Infallible 'Magisterium' [teaching authority] of the Roman Pontiff," declaring that

when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when carrying out the duty of the pastor and teacher of all Christians in accord with his *supreme apostolic authority* he explains a doctrine of faith or morals to be held by the Universal Church, through the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, *operates with that infallibility* with which the divine Redeemer wished that His church be instructed in defining doctrine on faith and morals; and so such definitions of the Roman Pontiff from himself, but not from the consensus of the Church, *are unalterable*. [emphases added]<sup>3</sup>

Then follows the traditional condemnation on any who reject papal infallibility: "But if anyone presumes to contradict this definition of Ours, which may God forbid: let him be anathema" [i.e., excommunicated].<sup>4</sup>



## Qualifications

Roman Catholic scholars have expounded significant qualifications on the doctrine. First, they acknowledge that the pope is not infallible in everything he teaches but only when he speaks *ex cathedra*, as the official interpreter of faith and morals. Avery Dulles, an authority on Catholic dogma, states for a pronouncement to be *ex cathedra* it must be:

- (1) in fulfillment of his office as supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians;
- (2) in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, i.e., as successor of Peter;
- (3) determining a doctrine of faith and morals, i.e., a doctrine expressing divine revelation;
- (4) imposing a doctrine to be held definitively by all.<sup>5</sup>

Dulles notes that "Vatican I firmly rejected one condition...as necessary for infallibility, namely, the consent of the whole church."<sup>6</sup>

Second, the pope is not infallible when pronouncing on matters that do not pertain to "faith and morals." On these matters he may be as fallible as anyone else.

Third, although the pope is infallible, he is not *absolutely* so. As Dulles observes, "absolute infallibility (in all respects, without dependence on another) is proper to God....All other infallibility is derivative and limited in scope."<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, infallibility entails irrevocability. A pope cannot, for example, declare previous infallible pronouncements of the church void.

Finally, in contrast to Vatican I, many (usually liberal or progressive) Catholic theologians believe that the pope is not infallible *independent* of the bishops but only as he speaks in one voice with and for them in collegiality. As Dulles noted, infallibility "is often attributed to the bishops as a group, to ecumenical councils, and to popes."<sup>8</sup> Conservatives argue that Vatican I condemned this view.<sup>9</sup>

## A PROTESTANT RESPONSE

Not only Protestants but the rest of Christendom — Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox included — reject the doctrine of papal infallibility.<sup>10</sup> Protestants accept the infallibility of Scripture but deny that any human being or institution is the infallible interpreter of Scripture. Harold O. J. Brown writes: "In every age there have been those who considered the claims of a single bishop to supreme authority to be a sure identification of the corruption of the church, and perhaps even the work of the Antichrist. Pope Gregory I (A.D. 590-604) indignantly reproached Patriarch John the Faster of Constantinople for calling himself the universal bishop; Gregory did so to defend the rights of all the bishops, himself included, and not because he wanted the title for himself."<sup>11</sup>

## Biblical Problems

There are several texts Catholics use to defend the infallibility of the bishop of Rome. We will focus here on the three most important of these.

**Matthew 16:18ff.** Roman Catholics use the statement of Jesus to Peter in Matthew 16:18ff. that "upon this rock I will build my church..." to support papal infallibility. They argue that the truth of the church could only be secure if the one on whom it rested (Peter) were infallible. Properly understood, however, there are several reasons this passage falls far short of support for the dogma of papal infallibility.

First, many Protestants insist that Christ was not referring to Peter when he spoke of "this rock" being the foundation of the church.<sup>12</sup> They note that: (1) Whenever Peter is referred to in this passage it is in the second person ("you"), but "this rock" is in the third person. (2) "Peter" (*petros*) is a masculine singular term and "rock" (*petra*) is feminine singular. Hence, they do not have the same referent. And even if Jesus did speak these words in Aramaic (which does not distinguish genders), the inspired Greek original *does* make such distinctions. (3) What is more, the same authority Jesus gave to Peter (Matt. 16:18) is given later to all the apostles (Matt. 18:18). (4) Great authorities, some Catholic, can be cited in agreement with this interpretation, including John Chrysostom and St. Augustine. The latter wrote: "On this rock, therefore, He said, which thou hast confessed. I will build my Church. For the Rock (*petra*) is Christ; and on this foundation was Peter himself built."<sup>13</sup>

Second, even if Peter is the rock referred to by Christ, as even some non-Catholic scholars believe, he was not the *only* rock in the foundation of the church. Jesus gave all the apostles the same power ("keys") to "bind" and "loose" that he gave to Peter (cf. Matt. 18:18). These were common rabbinic phrases used of "forbidding" and "allowing." These "keys" were not some mysterious power given to Peter alone but the power granted by Christ to His church by which, when they proclaim the Gospel, they can proclaim God's forgiveness of sin to all who believe. As John Calvin noted, "Since heaven is opened to us by the doctrine of the gospel, the word 'keys' affords an appropriate metaphor. Now men are bound and loosed in no other way than when faith reconciles some to God, while their own unbelief constrains others the more."<sup>14</sup>

Further, Scripture affirms that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone" (Eph. 2:20). Two things are clear from this: first, all the apostles, not just Peter, are the foundation of the church; second, the only one who was given a place of uniqueness or prominence was Christ, the capstone. Indeed, Peter himself referred to Christ as "the cornerstone" of the church (1 Pet. 2:7) and the rest of believers as "living stones" (v. 4) in the superstructure of the church. There is no indication that Peter was given a special place of prominence in the foundation of the church above the rest of the apostles and below Christ. He is one "stone" along with the other eleven apostles (Eph. 2:20).

Third, Peter's role in the New Testament falls far short of the Catholic claim that he was given unique authority among the apostles for numerous reasons.<sup>15</sup>

(1) While Peter did preach the initial sermon on the day of Pentecost, his role in the rest of Acts is scarcely that of the chief apostle but at best *one of* the "most eminent apostles" (plural, 2 Cor. 21:11, NKJV).

(2) No one reading Galatians carefully can come away with the impression that any apostle, including Peter, is superior to the apostle Paul. For he claimed to get his revelation independent

of the other apostles (Gal. 1:12; 2:2) and to be on the same level as Peter (2:8), and he even used his revelation to rebuke Peter (2:11-14).

(3) Indeed, if Peter was the God-ordained superior apostle, it is strange that more attention is given to the ministry of the apostle Paul than to that of Peter in the Book of Acts. Peter is the central figure among many in chapters 1-12, but Paul is *the* dominant focus of chapters 13-28.<sup>16</sup>

(4) Furthermore, though Peter addressed the first council (in Acts 15), he exercised no primacy over the other apostles. Significantly, the decision came from "the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church" (15:22; cf. v. 23). Many scholars believe that James, not Peter, exercised leadership over the council, since he brought the final words and spoke decisively concerning what action should be taken (vv. 13-21).<sup>17</sup>

(5) In any event, by Peter's own admission he was not *the* pastor of the church but only a "*fellow* presbyter [elder]" (1 Pet. 5:1-2, emphasis added). And while he did claim to be "*an* apostle" (1 Pet. 1:1) he nowhere claimed to be "*the* apostle" or the chief of apostles. He certainly was a leading apostle, but even then he was only one of the "pillars" (plural) of the church along with James and John, not *the* pillar (*see* Gal. 2:9).

This is not to deny that Peter had a significant role in the early church; he did. He even seems to have been the initial leader of the apostolic band. As already noted, along with James and John he was one of the "pillars" of the early church (Gal. 2:9). For it was he that preached the great sermon at Pentecost when the gift of the Holy Spirit was given, welcoming many Jews into the Christian fold. It was Peter also who spoke when the Spirit of God fell on the Gentiles in Acts 10. From this point on, however, Peter fades into the background and Paul is the dominant apostle, carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28), writing some one-half of the New Testament (as compared to Peter's two epistles), and even rebuking Peter for his hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-14). In short, there is no evidence in Matthew 16 or any other text for the Roman Catholic dogma of the superiority, to say nothing of the infallibility, of Peter. He did, of course, write two infallible books (1 and 2 Peter), as did other apostles.

**John 21:15ff.** In John 21:15ff. Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my lambs" and "Tend my sheep" and "Feed my sheep" (vv. 15, 16, 17). Roman Catholic scholars believe this shows that Christ made Peter the supreme pastor of the church. This means he must protect the church from error, they say, and to do so he must necessarily be infallible. But this is a serious overclaim for the passage.

First, whether this text is taken of Peter alone or of all the disciples, there is absolutely no reference to any infallible authority. Jesus' concern here is simply a matter of pastoral care. Feeding is a God-given pastoral function that even nonapostles have in the New Testament (cf. Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). One does not have to be an infallible shepherd in order to feed one's flock properly.

Second, if Peter had infallibility (the ability not to mislead), then why did he mislead believers and have to be rebuked by the apostle Paul for so doing? The infallible Scriptures, accepted by Roman Catholics, declared of Peter on one occasion, "He clearly was wrong" and "stood condemned."<sup>18</sup> Peter and others "acted hypocritically...with the result that even Barnabas was

carried away by their hypocrisy." And hypocrisy here is defined by the Catholic Bible (NAB) as "pretense, play-acting; moral insincerity." It seems difficult to exonerate Peter from the charge that he led believers astray. And this failing is hard to reconcile with the Roman Catholic claim that, as the infallible pastor of the church, he could never do so! The Catholic response — that Peter was not infallible in his actions, only his *ex cathedra* words — rings hollow when we remember that "actions speak louder than words." By his actions he was teaching other believers a false doctrine concerning the need for Jewish believers to separate themselves from Gentile believers. The fact is that Peter cannot be both an infallible guide for faith and morals and also at the same time mislead other believers on the important matter of faith and morals of which Galatians speaks.

Third, in view of the New Testament terminology used of Peter it is clear that he would never have accepted the titles used of the Roman Catholic pope today: "Holy Father" (cf. Matt. 23:9), "Supreme Pontiff," or "Vicar of Christ." The only vicar (representative) of Christ on earth today is the blessed Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26). As noted earlier, Peter referred to himself in much more humble terms as "*an* apostle," not *the* apostle (1 Pet. 1:1, emphasis added) and "*fellow*-presbyter [elder]" (1 Pet. 5:1, emphasis added), not the supreme bishop, the pope, or the Holy Father.

**John 11:49-52.** In John 11:49-52 Caiaphas, the High Priest, in his official capacity as High Priest, made an unwitting prophecy about Christ dying for the nation of Israel so that they would not perish. Some Catholics maintain that in the Old Testament the High Priest had an official revelatory function connected with his office, and therefore we should expect an equivalent (namely, the pope) in the New Testament. However, this argument is seriously flawed. First, this is merely an argument from analogy and is not based on any New Testament declaration that it is so. Second, the New Testament affirmations made about the Old Testament priesthood reject that analogy, for they say explicitly that the Old Testament priesthood has been abolished. The writer to the Hebrews declared that "there is a change of priesthood" from that of Aaron (Heb. 7:12). The Aaronic priesthood has been fulfilled in *Christ* who is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:15-17). Third, even Catholics acknowledge that there is no new revelation after the time of the New Testament function. So no one (popes included) after the first century can have a revelatory function in the proper sense of giving new revelations. Finally, there is a New Testament revelatory function like that of the Old, but it is in the New Testament "apostles and prophets" (cf. Eph. 2:20; 3:5), which revelation ceased when they died. To assume a revelatory (or even infallible defining) function was passed on after them and is resident in the bishop of Rome is to beg the question.

In addition to a total lack of support from the Scriptures, there are many other arguments against papal infallibility. We will divide them into theological and historical arguments.

### **Theological Problems**

There are serious theological problems with papal infallibility. One is the question of heresy being taught by an infallible pope.

**The Problem of Heretical Popes.** Pope Honorius I (A.D. 625-638) was condemned by the Sixth General Council for teaching the monothelite heresy (that there was only one will in Christ<sup>19</sup>). Even Roman Catholic expert, Ludwig Ott, admits that "Pope Leo II (682-683) confirmed his

anathematization..."<sup>20</sup> This being the case, we are left with the incredible situation of an infallible pope teaching a fallible, indeed *heretical*, doctrine. If the papal teaching office is infallible — if it cannot mislead on doctrine and ethics — then how could a papal teaching be heretical? This is misleading in doctrine in the most serious manner.

To claim that the pope was not infallible on this occasion is only to further undermine the doctrine of infallibility. How can one know just when his doctrinal pronouncements are infallible and when they are not? There is no infallible list of which are the infallible pronouncements and which are not.<sup>21</sup> But without such a list, how can the Roman Catholic church provide infallible guidance on doctrine and morals? If the pope can be fallible on one doctrine, why cannot he be fallible on another?

Further, Ott's comment that Pope Leo did not condemn Pope Honorius with heresy but with "negligence in the suppression of error" is ineffective as a defense.<sup>22</sup> First, it still raises serious questions as to how Pope Honorius could be an infallible guide in faith and morals, since he taught heresy. And the Catholic response that he was not speaking *ex cathedra* when he taught this heresy is convenient but inadequate. Indeed, invoking such a distinction only tends to undermine faith in the far more numerous occasions when the pope is speaking with authority but not with infallibility.

Second, it does not explain the fact that the Sixth General Council did condemn Honorius as a heretic, as even Ott admits.<sup>23</sup> Was this infallible Council in error?

Finally, by disclaiming the infallibility of the pope in this and like situations, the number of occasions on which infallible pronouncements were made is relatively rare. For example, the pope has officially spoken *ex cathedra* only one time this whole century (on the Bodily Assumption of Mary)! If infallibility is exercised only this rarely then its value for all practical purposes on almost all occasions is nill. This being the case, since the pope is only speaking with fallible authority on the vast majority of occasions, the Catholic is bound to accept his authority on faith and morals when he may (and sometimes has been) wrong. In short, the alleged infallible guidance the papacy is supposed to provide is negligible at best. Indeed, on the overwhelming number of occasions there is no infallible guidance at all.

***The Problem of Revelational Insufficiency.*** One of the chief reasons given by Catholic authorities as to the need for an infallible teaching magisterium is that we need infallible guidance to understand God's infallible revelation. Otherwise it will be misinterpreted as with the many Protestant sects. To this the Protestant must respond, How is an infallible interpretation any better than the infallible revelation? Divine revelation is a disclosure or unveiling by God. But to claim, as Catholics do, that God's infallible unveiling in the Bible needs further infallible unveiling by God is to say that it was not unveiled properly to begin with.

To be sure, there is a difference between objective disclosure (revelation) and subjective discovery (understanding). But the central problem in this regard is not in the *perception* of God's truth. Even His special revelation is "evident" and "able to be understood" (Rom. 1:19-20). Our most significant problem with regard to the truth of God's revelation is *reception*. Paul declared that "the natural person does not *accept* [Gk: *dekomai*, welcome, receive] what pertains

to the Spirit of God..." (1 Cor. 2:14). He cannot "know" (*ginosko*: know by experience) them because he does not receive them into his life, even though he understands them in his mind. So even though there is a difference between objective disclosure and subjective understanding, humans are "without excuse" for failing to understand the objective revelation of God, whether in nature or in Scripture (Rom. 1:20).

In this regard it is interesting that Catholic theology itself maintains that unbelievers should and can understand the truth of *natural* law apart from the teaching magisterium. Why then should they need an infallible teaching magisterium in order to properly understand the more explicit *divine* law?

It seems singularly inconsistent for Catholic scholars to claim they need another mind to interpret Scripture correctly for them when the mind God gave them is sufficient to interpret everything else, including some things much more difficult than Scripture. Many Catholic scholars, for example, are experts in interpreting classical literature, involving both the moral and religious meaning of those texts. Yet these same educated minds are said to be inadequate to obtain a reliable religious and moral interpretation of the texts of their own Scriptures.

Furthermore, it does not take an expert to interpret the crucial teachings of the Bible. The New Testament was written in the vernacular of the times, the trade-language of the first century, known as *koine* Greek. It was a book written in the common, everyday language for the common, everyday person. Likewise, the vast majority of English translations of the Bible are also written in plain English, including Catholic versions. The essential truths of the Bible can be understood by any literate person. In fact, it is an insult to the intelligence of the common people to suggest that they can read and understand the daily news for themselves but need an infallible teaching magisterium in order to understand God's Good News for them in the New Testament.

***The Problem of Indecisiveness of the Teaching Magisterium.*** There is another problem with the Catholic argument for an infallible teaching magisterium: if an infallible teaching magisterium is needed to overcome the conflicting interpretations of Scripture, why is it that even these "infallibly" decisive declarations are also subject to conflicting interpretations? There are many hotly disputed differences among Catholic scholars on just what *ex cathedra* statements mean, including those on Scripture, tradition, Mary, and justification. Even though there may be future clarifications on some of these, the problem remains for two reasons. First, it shows the indecisive nature of supposedly infallible pronouncements. Second, judging by past experience, even these future declarations will not settle all matters completely. Pronouncements on the inerrancy of Scripture are a case in point. Despite "infallible" statements, there is strong disagreement among Catholics on whether the Bible is really infallible in all matters or only on matters of salvation.

## **Historical Problems**

In addition to biblical and theological problems, there are serious historical problems with the Catholic claim for infallibility. Two are of special note here.

***The Problem of the Antipopes.*** Haunting the history of Roman Catholicism is the scandalous specter of having more than one infallible pope at the same time — a pope and an antipope. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says "there have been about thirty-five antipopes in the history of the Church."<sup>24</sup> How can there be two infallible and opposing popes at the same time? Which is the true pope? Since there is no infallible list of popes or even an infallible way to determine who is the infallible pope, the system has a serious logical problem. Further, this difficulty has had several actual historical manifestations which bring into focus the whole question of an infallible pope.<sup>25</sup>

Catholic apologists claim that there were not really two popes, since only one can be infallible. However, since the faithful have no way to know for sure which one is the pope, which one should they look to for guidance? Each pope can excommunicate the other (and sometimes have). This being the case, claiming that only one is the real pope is at best only a theoretical solution. It does not solve the practical problem of which pope should be followed.

***The Problem of Galileo.*** Perhaps one of the greatest embarrassments to the "infallible" church is its fallible judgment about Galileo Galilei (A.D. 1564-1642), generally known as Galileo. In opposition to Galileo and the Copernican solar-centric theory he adopted, the Catholic church sided with the scientifically outdated Ptolemaic geocentric universe.

In A.D. 1616, the Copernican theory was condemned at Rome.<sup>26</sup> Aristotelian scientists, the Jesuits, the Dominicans, and three popes (Paul V, Gregory XV, and Urban VIII), played key roles in the controversy. Galileo was summoned by the Inquisition in 1632, tried, and on June 21, 1633, pronounced "vehemently suspected of heresy." Eventually Pope Urban VIII allowed Galileo to return to his home in Florence, where he remained under house arrest until his death in 1642.

After the church had suffered many centuries of embarrassment for its condemnation of Galileo, on November 10, 1979, Pope John Paul II spoke to the Pontifical Academy of Science. In the address titled, "Faith, Science and the Galileo Case," the pope called for a reexamination of the whole episode.<sup>27</sup> On May 9, 1983, while addressing the subject of the church and science, John Paul II conceded that "Galileo had 'suffered from departments of the church.'"<sup>28</sup> This, of course, is not a clear retraction of the condemnation, nor does it solve the problem of how an infallible pronouncement of the Catholic church could be in error.

Roman Catholic responses to the Galileo episode leave something to be desired. One Catholic authority claims that while both Paul V and Urban VIII were committed anti-Copernicans, their pronouncements were not *ex cathedra*. The decree of A.D. 1616 "was issued by the Congregation of the Index, which can raise no difficulty in regard of infallibility, this tribunal being absolutely incompetent to make a dogmatic decree."<sup>29</sup> As to the second trial in 1633, which also resulted in a condemnation of Galileo, this sentence is said to be of lesser importance because it "did not receive the Pope's signature."<sup>30</sup> Another Catholic authority states that although the theologians' treatment of Galileo was inappropriate, "the condemnation was the act of a Roman Congregation and in no way involved infallible teaching authority."<sup>31</sup> Still another source observes, "The condemnation of Galileo by the Inquisition had nothing to do with the

question of papal infallibility, since no question of faith or morals was papally condemned *ex cathedra*."<sup>32</sup> And yet another Catholic apologist suggests that, although the decision was a "regrettable" case of "imprudence," there was no error made by the pope, since Galileo was not really condemned of heresy but only strongly suspected of it.

None of these ingenious solutions is very convincing, having all the earmarks of after-the-fact tinkering with the pronouncements that resulted from this episode. Galileo and his opponents would be nonplussed to discover that the serious charges leveled against him were not "*ex cathedra*" in force. And in view of the strong nature of both the condemnation and the punishment, he would certainly be surprised to hear Catholic apologists claim that he was not really being condemned for false teaching but only that "his 'proof' did not impress even astronomers of that day — nor would they impress astronomers today!"<sup>33</sup>

At any rate, the pope's condemnation of Galileo only leads to undermine the alleged infallibility of the Catholic church. Of course, Catholic apologists can always resort to their apologetic warehouse — the claim that the pope was not really speaking infallibly on that occasion. As we have already observed, however, constant appeal to this nonverifiable distinction only tends to undermine the very infallibility it purports to defend.

## **AN IMPASSABLE ROADBLOCK**

Despite the common creedal and doctrinal heritage of Catholics and Protestants, there are some serious differences.<sup>34</sup> None of these is more basic than the question of authority. Catholics affirm *de fide*, as an unchangeable part of their faith, the infallible teaching authority of the Roman church as manifested in the present bishop of Rome (the pope). But what Catholics affirm "infallibly" Protestants deny emphatically. This is an impassable roadblock to any ecclesiastical unity between Catholicism and orthodox Protestantism. No talk about "first among equals" or "collegiality" will solve the problem. For the very concept of an infallible teaching magisterium, however composed, is contrary to the basic Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone (*see* Part Three). Here we must agree to disagree. For while both sides believe the Bible is infallible, Protestants deny that the church or the pope has an infallible interpretation of it.

**Dr. Geisler** is Dean of Southern Evangelical Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina (704) 543-9475.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles, "Infallibility: The Terminology," in *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*, ed. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), no. 1826, 454.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1839, 457.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1840.

<sup>5</sup> Dulles, 79-80.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.



<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> They appeal to Denzinger 1839 to support their view.

<sup>10</sup> Eastern Orthodoxy is willing to accept the bishop of Rome as "first among equals," a place of honor coming short of the total superiority Roman Catholics ascribe to the pope.

<sup>11</sup> Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of a Troubled Protestant* (New York: Arlington House, 1969), 122.

<sup>12</sup> See James R. White, *Answers to Catholic Claims* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, 1990), 104-8.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, "On the Gospel of John," Tractate 12435, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series I* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 7:450, as cited in *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4:6,4, p. 1105.

<sup>15</sup> Many of these arguments are found in White, 101-2.

<sup>16</sup> One cannot, as some Catholic scholars do, dismiss this dominant focus on St. Paul rather than Peter on the circumstantial fact that Luke wrote more about Paul because he was his travel companion. After all, it was the Holy Spirit who inspired what Luke wrote.

<sup>17</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 86ff.

<sup>18</sup> This is the literal rendering given in the Roman Catholic *New American Bible* of Galatians 2:11.

<sup>19</sup> See John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994). Also see Ott, 238.

<sup>20</sup> Ott, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Catholic apologists claim there are objective tests, such as: Was the pope speaking (1) to all believers, (2) on faith and morals, and (3) in his official capacity as pope (*see* Ott, 207). But these are not definitive as to which pronouncements are infallible for several reasons. First, there is no infallible statement on just what these criteria are. Second, there is not even universal agreement on what these criteria are. Third, there is no universal agreement on how to apply these or any criteria to all cases.

<sup>22</sup> Ott, 150.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 66. See also, A. Mercati, "The New List of the Popes," in *Medieval Studies*, ix (1947), 71-80.

<sup>25</sup> See Jarislov Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 40.

<sup>26</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols., prepared by an editorial staff at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), vol. 6, 252.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, 177, n. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* See also "Discourse to Scientists on the 350th Anniversary of the Publication of Galileo's 'Dialoghi,'" in J. Neuner, S.J. and J. Dupuis, S.J., eds., *The Christian Faith: Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (New York: Alba House, 1990), 68.

<sup>29</sup> Charles G. Herbermann, et al., *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. and index (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1909), vol. 6, 345.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>31</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, 254.

<sup>32</sup> "Galileo Galilei," in John J. Delaney and James E. Tobin, *Dictionary of Catholic Biography* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961), 456.

<sup>33</sup> See William G. Most, *Catholic Apologetics Today: Answers to Modern Critics* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1986), 168-69.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the problem areas for evangelicals have also been addressed by some well-known Roman Catholic authorities, such as Athanasius, Jerome, and Aquinas. The evangelical case could be made for these writers on a number of issues. For example, Jerome did not accept the Catholic apocryphal (deuterocanonical) books and Aquinas rejected the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary.

**STATEMENT DC-170-5**  
**WHAT THINK YE OF ROME? (Part Five):**  
**The Catholic-Protestant Debate on Justification<sup>1</sup>**  
by Norman L. Geisler, and Ralph E. MacKenzie, with Elliot Miller

**Summary**

The Protestant Reformers recovered the biblical view of forensic justification, that a person is legally declared righteous by God on the basis of faith alone. In so doing, their principle of “salvation by faith alone” gave a more biblical specificity to the common Augustinian view of “salvation by grace alone” held by Catholics and Protestants alike. For although Rome has always held the essential belief in salvation by grace, its view of justification - made dogma by the Council of Trent - obscures the pure grace of God, if not at times negating it in practice. Roman Catholics and evangelicals share a common core of beliefs about salvation. Both camps are greatly indebted to the same church father (Augustine) for their views on this subject. Despite this common heritage, however, the question of how a person is justified before God has always been a fundamental dividing point between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Recently, the Catholic doctrine of justification has become a divisive issue even among evangelicals, as they seek to determine how far they should go in cooperative relations with Catholics.

In this conclusion to our series on Roman Catholicism, we will examine both the commonalities and differences between Catholic and Protestant soteriology (beliefs about salvation). We will give special attention to the Protestant Reformation doctrine of forensic (legal) justification, and we will provide a Protestant critique of the official Roman Catholic response to that doctrine, as embodied in the decrees of the sixteenth-century Council of Trent.

**JUSTIFICATION IN CHURCH HISTORY**

The earliest serious threat to Christian faith was Gnosticism. This was not a clearly defined movement but was made up of various subgroups drawn from Hellenistic as well as Oriental sources. One of the central beliefs of Gnosticism was that salvation is the escape from the physical body (which is evil) achieved by special knowledge (*gnosis*; hence, Gnosticism). The understanding of the body as evil led some gnostics to stress control of the body and its desires (asceticism). Others were libertines, leaving the body to its own devices and passions.

The early orthodox theologians and apologists devoted much of their effort to combating Gnosticism. In response to the libertines, the early father Tertullian (A.D. 160-225) focused on the importance of works and righteousness. In so doing he went so far as to say that “the man who performs good works can be said to make God his debtor.”<sup>2</sup> This unfortunate affirmation set the stage for centuries to come.

The “works-righteousness” concept, which seemed to be so ingenious in combating Gnosticism, was popular for the first 350 years of the church's history. However, a controversy that would produce a more precise definition of the theological elements involved was needed. This dispute came on the scene with the system of Pelagius, and the Christian thinker to confront it was Augustine of Hippo.<sup>3</sup>

## **Augustine**

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) was an intellectual giant. No one has exercised a greater influence over the development of Western Christian thought than the Bishop of Hippo. In dealing with Augustine's doctrine of justification, it is important to note that his thinking on this vital issue underwent significant development. Early on Augustine stressed the role of the human will in matters of salvation, a view he would later modify in his disputations with the British monk, Pelagius.

Pelagius's theological system taught the total freedom of the human will and denied the doctrine of original sin. After reflecting on Pauline insights, the later Augustine came to the following conclusions: First, the eternal decree of God's predestination determines man's election. Second, God's offer of grace (salvation) is itself a gift (John 6:44a). Third, the human will is completely unable to initiate or attain salvation. This concept squares quite well with the later Reformed doctrine of total depravity. Fourth, the justified sinner does not merely receive the *status* of sonship, but *becomes* one. Fifth, God may regenerate a person without causing that one to finally persevere.<sup>4</sup> This is basic Calvinism without the perseverance of *all* the saints.

It would be incorrect to say that Augustine held to the concept of forensic justification. Nonetheless, he did maintain that *salvation is by God's grace*. That is, no good works precede or merit initial justification (regeneration).

Augustine has been regarded as both the last of the church fathers and the first medieval theologian. He marks the end of one era and the beginning of another.

## **The Early Medieval Period**

The medieval period (the "Middle Ages") is commonly dated from Augustine (or slightly later) to the 1500s. This period saw the balance of power in the church shift from the East (where Christianity began) to the West or Latin wing of the church.

Pelagianism was officially condemned by the church at the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) and again at the Second Council of Orange (A.D. 529), which declared that "if anyone says that the grace of God can be bestowed by human invocation, but that the grace itself does not bring it to pass that it be invoked by us, he contradicts Isias the Prophet...[cf. Isa. 65:1]"<sup>5</sup> However, this heresy, along with its more moderate relative semi-Pelagianism (also condemned at the Council of Orange),<sup>6</sup> keeps recurring in church history. It seems that man's inclination is toward Pelagianism rather than Augustine's Pauline emphasis on the grace of God.

Leo "the Great," who was the bishop of Rome from A.D. 440-461, is designated by many non-Catholic historians as the first "pope" in the modern sense. During his era many Roman Catholic dogmas (which may have existed in germ form earlier) solidified: the supreme authority of the Roman bishop in the church, sacramentalism, sacerdotalism (belief in a priesthood), and the change of emphasis in the Eucharistic Feast from celebration to sacrifice, to name a few. These doctrines influenced medieval soteriology in several ways.

Justification and the Sacraments. During the medieval period baptism and penance were linked with justification. God's righteousness was *begun* (infused) in baptism and *continued* (perfected) through penance.

Although this understanding of the nature and purpose of baptism can be found from the earliest of times, the same is not true of the concept of penance. The idea of confession to a priest for the remission of sin existed in the second century but did not become a widespread practice until the early medieval period.

The view that developed was that baptism addresses the problem of *original* sin; confession cleanses the effect of *actual* sin. Some theologians of this era took pains to stress that the sacraments were the *means* God used to mediate grace to man. However, this theological nicety was often lost on the laity who became entangled in a works-righteousness system.

The Concept of Merit. Closely related to the sacraments in general is the concept of merit. The term was first used by Tertullian and then fully developed by the Schoolmen in the medieval period. As Alister McGrath points out, "It can be shown that a distinction came to be drawn between the concepts of *merit* and *congruity*; while man cannot be said to merit justification by any of his actions, his preparation for justification could be said to make his subsequent justification 'congruous' or 'appropriate.'"<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, as with the sacraments, this distinction did not always filter down to the common folk.

### **Anselm of Canterbury**

Anselm of Canterbury (A.D. 1033-1109) was arguably the most penetrating theological thinker between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. One of Anselm's great theological treatises was *Cur Deus Homo?* ("Why the God-man?").<sup>8</sup> In it he addressed the relationship between the Incarnation and the Atonement and redirected thinking on the nature and purpose of the Atonement that had been in place since the apostolic era.

A popular doctrine in the early church was the so-called *ransom theory*. This understood the Atonement as a deliverance of humanity from the clutches of Satan. Anselm's contribution to the doctrine of the Atonement is called the *satisfaction* theory. It understands the Atonement as compensation to the Father rather than Satan. While forensic justification is not *explicit* in Anselm's theology, the Reformers later built upon his insights and developed the judicial aspect of salvation that they called justification.

### **Thomas Aquinas**

One figure dominated the late medieval period: Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225?-1274). Aquinas considered himself Augustinian in his theology, although he preferred to express his philosophical views in Aristotelian terms rather than the Platonic language of Augustine.

Like Augustine, Aquinas believed that regeneration occurs at baptism, and that not all the regenerate will persevere (i.e., not all are of the elect). Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding among Protestants, Aquinas believed that because human beings are fallen, humankind is unable to initiate or attain salvation except by the grace of God.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, even faith

is a gift of God.<sup>10</sup>

Like Augustine and Anselm, Aquinas did not distinguish forensic (declarative) justification and progressive sanctification as did the Reformers. Many contemporary Roman Catholic scholars, however, believe that forensic justification is included in the thinking of these men, at least implicitly.

The Augustinianism of Anselm and Aquinas dominated medieval church soteriology (existing in tension with the works orientation of the sacramental system). In light of this it is clear that some basic theological tenets of the coming Reformation are not at irreconcilable odds with the historic church, but are a continuation of it.

### **Martin Luther**

Born in A.D. 1483 in Eisleben, Germany, of middle class parents, Martin Luther entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt in 1505. The themes of salvation and damnation - which were central to the culture of the day - concerned him greatly. Luther became aware of the presence of sin in his life and the ineffectiveness of penance and the other sacraments provided by the church to bring relief to this situation.

In 1511 Luther was transferred from Erfurt to Wittenberg. He lived in the Augustinian cloister and was fortunate to have as his spiritual confessor a godly man - who was also the vicar-general of the monastery - Johannes von Staupitz (1469-1524). Staupitz, aware of the intense spiritual struggles that enveloped his young charge, directed Luther to study Scripture. Luther was graduated Doctor of Theology on October 19, 1512 and commenced teaching theology and biblical studies at Wittenberg on August 16, 1513. It was in the context of his assignment at the university that Luther developed his initial ideas concerning justification by faith.

The decisive role in the formulation of Luther's theology was played by the apostle Paul and Augustinianism. It was shortly after his exegesis of Romans 1:16-17 that Luther concluded that justification is a gift of God, appropriated by faith: "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise."<sup>11</sup>

The beginning of Martin Luther's break with Rome has often been identified with his posting of the *Ninety-five Theses* on the church door at Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints, October 31, 1517. These theses dealt with the penitential system and papal authority, but primarily with the sale of indulgences. With the public display of the *Ninety-five Theses* the die was cast, the Reformation began, and Christendom changed forever.

Indicating how deeply his evangelical (Augustinian) principles influenced his theses, Luther was later to write: "And this is the confidence that Christians have and our real joy of conscience, that by faith our sins become no longer ours but Christ's upon whom God placed the sins of all of us. He took upon himself our sins....All the righteousness of Christ becomes ours....He spreads his cloak and covers us..."<sup>12</sup>

Before Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation, extrinsic justification, in which a sinner is *declared* righteous legally, was, at best, a subterranean stream in Christian soteriology. With Luther the situation changed dramatically. However, as Peter Toon notes, “Luther does not employ forensic terms to explain this imputation or alien righteousness. This development will come later, from others.”<sup>13</sup> Philipp Melancthon, Luther's great systematic theologian, did use legal terminology to describe justification.

### **John Calvin**

Without a doubt, the most important Reformed theology to come out of the Protestant Reformation was that of John Calvin. He was born in Noyon, France on July 10, 1509. Young Calvin studied in Paris, where he was familiar with the writings and theology of Luther. He drew his deepest inspiration, however, from Augustine. Calvin believed that he was doing nothing more than reproducing “that holy man's own plain and uncompromising teachings.”<sup>14</sup>

Calvin's theological system begins, as did Augustine's and Aquinas's before him, with man's present condition - one of complete moral corruption. For “even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in man, yet was it so corrupted that whatever remains is a horrible deformity.”<sup>15</sup>

Calvin held that “predestination we call the eternal decree of God, which he has determined in himself, what he would have to become of every individual of mankind.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, “while the elect receive the grace of adoption by faith, their election does not depend on faith, but is prior in time and order.”<sup>17</sup>

For Calvin, justification “consists in remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.”<sup>18</sup> Departing at this point from the medieval tradition, Calvin does not see justification as involving an *infusion* of grace: “Man is not made righteous in justification, but is accepted as righteous, not on account of his own righteousness, but on account of the righteousness of Christ located outside of man.”<sup>19</sup>

What place, then, does good works have in the life of the believer? “To the charge that justification thus understood obviates the need for good works, Calvin's firm reply is, like Luther's, that although in no respect can good works become the ground of our holiness, a living faith is never devoid of such works. Thus justification necessarily has its consequence in sanctification.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Common Soteriological Roots**

A soteriological survey of both the leading Roman Catholic theologians and Protestant Reformers reveals a number of commonalities. First, both believe salvation is effected through historic, divine intervention. Against Gnosticism, Catholics and Protestants jointly affirm that man is not saved by wisdom, but by God's action in history in the person of Jesus Christ.

Second, both evangelicals and Catholics believe salvation is moral and spiritual. Salvation is related to a deliverance from sin and its consequences.

Third, salvation is eschatological for both Catholics and evangelicals. The future perspective is crucial. All that is now known about salvation is preliminary and a foretaste of the fullness, which awaits the completing of the kingdom at the *Parousia* (physical “presence” or second coming) of the Lord.

Fourth, the grace of God is absolutely necessary for salvation. And, initial justification is based on grace alone, apart from all works. Thus, Colin Brown can speak of “the Augustinian orthodoxy of Geneva [Calvin's home base] and Rome.”<sup>21</sup> For both groups, salvation comes as a gift of God to undeserving humanity.

It is against the backdrop of this common heritage that the important soteriological differences between Catholics and evangelicals must be viewed. As Harold O. J. Brown put it, “We must not oversimplify and create an artificial and forced consensus between great Christians of the past and present. Yet if one thing stands out when one studies the writings and lives of such men, it is that they knew and served the same Lord, and that they shared one faith and one hope.”<sup>22</sup>

## **THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO THE REFORMATION**

The Council of Trent, which began its deliberations on June 22, 1546, was the Catholic response to the Reformers. A proper understanding of the Catholic view of justification is not possible apart from an understanding of the decrees of Trent.

The Council considered the following questions concerning justification: (1) Is justification only extrinsic (judicial) in nature or is there also an intrinsic (sanctifying) work involved? (2) What is the relationship between faith and good works? (3) Does the human will have an active roll in justification? (4) How are justification and sacraments such as the Eucharist, baptism, and penance related? (5) Can the believer know with certainty that he or she is justified? (6) Can humans incline themselves toward justification, and if so, is this inclination to be understood as meritorious?<sup>23</sup>

On January 9, 1547, the Council participants agreed on a final formula for justification: First, although several Council members recognized an extrinsic element in justification (thereby approaching the Reformers on this point), the consensus view was that “the opinion that a sinner may be justified *solely* as a matter of reputation or imputation...is rejected.” And so, “justification is thus defined in terms of a man becoming, and not *merely* being reputed as, righteous...” (emphases added).<sup>24</sup>

Second, in that Trent understands justification in two senses (the second corresponding to the Reformed doctrine of sanctification), good works are required in the second sense as a condition for ultimate justification. Therefore, it is possible and necessary (in this second sense) to keep the law of God.

Third, Trent, taking into account original sin, states that sin has affected the human race. Therefore man cannot effect his own salvation, Free will, while not destroyed, is weakened by the Fall. For “if anyone shall say that man's free will moved and aroused by God does not



cooperate by assenting to God who looses and calls...let him be anathema.”<sup>25</sup> (It is important to note that “anathema” is a decree of excommunication, not automatic damnation.) So, as one Catholic author put it, “The sinner indeed cooperates with this grace, at least in the sense of not sinfully rejecting it.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, most Protestants agree with this. Many Protestants, Calvinists in particular, add quickly (as would Catholic Thomists) that it is God by His grace who brings about this cooperation. But He does this without destroying man's free choice.

Fourth, the subject of the sacraments was addressed at Session VII (March 3, 1547). In order to understand these pronouncements, one must remember that Trent understood justification in two ways - the “first” and “second” phases which Catholic scholars refer to as *initial* and *progressive* justification respectively. Baptism is operative in the “first” or “initial” justification, since grace to overcome original sin is “mediated” to us through baptism. Both the Eucharist and penance pertain to the “second” or “progressive” sense of justification, and such justification (i.e., righteousness) is said to be “increased” by participation in these sacraments. There is finally a third or “ultimate” stage of justification by which, providing one had not committed a mortal sin, he or she is allowed into heaven.

Fifth, due to the Reformers' stress on the assurance of salvation, Trent was forced to deal with the subject. McGrath claims that they issued “an explicit condemnation of the Lutheran doctrine of assurance as an assertion contrary to proper Christian humility.”<sup>27</sup> However, this explicit condemnation deals with “infallible certainty,” which many Catholic scholars point out is not necessary, if indeed it is possible. In fact, “in many ways Roman [Catholic] dogmatics have pointed out that Rome's rejection of personal assurance of salvation does not mean the proclamation of a religion of uninterrupted anxiety.”<sup>28</sup> For the Roman Catholic “there is an intermediate position between the assurance of faith and doubt. This position is that of moral certainty which excludes any anxiety and despair.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Christians can be said to have relative, not absolute (i.e., infallible), certainty of salvation.

Sixth, Trent states that our initial justification must be seen as a “gift.” Thus, it comes as a surprise to many Protestants that Roman Catholics believe that “if anyone shall say that man can be justified before God by his own works which are done...without divine grace through Christ Jesus: let him be anathema.”<sup>30</sup> Further, “none of those things which precede justification, whether faith or works, merits the grace of justification. For if it is by grace, it is no more by works; otherwise, as the apostle says, grace is no more grace.”<sup>31</sup>

In this connection it is only fair to point out that when Catholic scholars cite James 2:24 - that “we are justified by works” - they do not mean this initial justification at baptism which comes only by grace. Rather, they are referring to progressive justification (growth in righteousness) which Protestants call sanctification. On the other hand, Trent does assert that works are necessary for salvation in the progressive and eventual senses. For Trent made it dogma that “by his good works the justified man really acquires a claim to supernatural reward from God.”<sup>32</sup> And it is precisely here that Catholics and evangelicals disagree.

## A PROTESTANT CRITIQUE OF TRENT

With all due recognition of the common Augustinian core of salvation by grace, there are some important differences between the Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant views of justification. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned but unsuccessful recent statement, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” lacked precision in these very areas, speaking of a common belief that “we are justified by grace through faith.”<sup>33</sup> What it failed to note, however, is what the Reformation was fought over, namely, that Scripture teaches, and Protestants affirm, that we are saved by grace through faith *alone* (*sola fide*). Since this was the heart cry of the Reformation, many evangelicals refuse to sign the statement, believing it would betray the Reformation.

### The Biblical Basis for Forensic Justification

In order to appreciate the significant contribution of the Reformers it is necessary to examine the biblical background of the term justification. As we will see, there are solid biblical grounds for the Protestant doctrine of forensic justification.

The background for the doctrine of forensic justification (as with other New Testament doctrines as well) is found in the Old Testament. Concerning the Hebrew word *hitsdiq*, usually rendered “justify,” more often than not it is “used in a forensic or legal sense, as meaning, not 'to make just or righteous,' but 'to declare judicially that one is in harmony with the law.’”<sup>34</sup> George Eldon Ladd notes that “he is righteous who is judged to be in the right (Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1); i.e., who in judgment through acquittal thus stands in a right relationship with God.”<sup>35</sup>

Turning to the New Testament, the Greek verb translated “to justify” is *dikaioó*. This word is used by Paul in a forensic or legal sense; the sinner is declared to be righteous (cf. Rom. 3-4). As Anthony Hoekema observes, “The opposite of condemnation, however, is not 'making righteous' but 'declaring righteous.’” Therefore, by *dikaioó*, Paul means the “legal imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner.”<sup>36</sup>

When a person is justified, God pronounces that one acquitted - in advance of the final judgment. Therefore, “the resulting righteousness is not ethical perfection; it is 'sinlessness' in the sense that God no longer counts a man's sin against him (II Cor. 5:19).”<sup>37</sup> Thus we find in the New Testament that “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 of the requirements of the law which pertain to them” (emphasis in original).<sup>38</sup>

### The Incompatibility of Grace and Merit

Much criticism of the Catholic view of justification revolves around the concept of merit that was elevated by Trent to the status of infallible dogma. While Catholics wish to remind us that the whole doctrine of merit should be viewed in the context of grace,<sup>39</sup> they overlook the fact that Scripture teaches that grace and meritorious works are mutually exclusive (e.g., Rom. 11:6).

The New Testament clearly speaks against obtaining salvation (whether justification *or*

sanctification) as a “reward” (i.e., wage) for work done. For the Scriptures insist that gifts cannot be worked for; only wages can (Rom. 4:4-5). Grace means unmerited favor, and reward based on works is merited. Hence, grace and works are no more coherent than is an unmerited merit!

### **Eternal Life Is a Gift That Cannot Be Merited**

The Council of Trent declared clearly that to “those who work well 'unto the end' [Matt. 10:22], and who trust in God, life eternal is to be proposed, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, 'and as a recompense' which is...to be faithfully given to their good works and merit.”<sup>40</sup> By contrast, the Bible declares clearly and emphatically that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

Further, in direct opposition to the Catholic position, the Bible guarantees eternal life is a present possession of those who believe. Jesus said: “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my words and believes in the one who sent me *has* [present tense] eternal life and *will not come into condemnation*, but *is* [right now] passed from death to life.” This same truth is repeated over and over in Scripture (e.g., John 3:36; 1 John 5:13). But according to the Roman Catholic view, one must await a final justification at death to know whether he or she has eternal life and will not see God's condemnation.

In the entire Gospel of John only one condition is laid down for obtaining eternal life - *belief* (John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 20:31, etc.). If salvation were not by faith alone, then the whole message of John would be deceptive, stating that there is only one condition for salvation when there are two: faith plus works. Indeed, John states explicitly that the only “work” necessary for salvation is to believe (John 6:29). There is simply nothing else to do for our salvation. Jesus did it all (John 19:31).

It is true that all who are saved by God's grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) will be rewarded for their works for Christ (1 Cor. 3:11ff.; 2 Cor. 5:10). These rewards for service, however, have nothing to do with *whether* we will be in heaven, but only have to do with *what status* we will have there. As Jesus said, some of the saved will reign over ten cities and others over five (Luke 19:17, 19). But all believers will be in His kingdom.

### **Christians Work from Salvation, Not for It**

Put in traditional terms, Catholicism fails to recognize the important difference between working *for* salvation and working *from* salvation. We do not work in order to receive salvation; rather, we work because we have already received it. God works salvation *in* us by justification and we work it *out* in sanctification (Phil. 2:12-13). But neither justification nor sanctification can be merited by works; they are given by grace.

Despite the fact that the Catholic understanding of salvation does not logically *eliminate* forensic justification, nevertheless, it does *obscure* it. For when one fails to make a clear distinction between forensic justification and practical sanctification, then the good works Catholics believe are needed for sanctification tend to obscure the fact that works are not needed for justification.

Of course, good works are necessary in the Christian life. But Protestants have solved the problem in a much more biblical and balanced way. They insist that while we are *saved by faith alone*, nevertheless, *the faith that saves us is not alone*. It inevitably produces good works. That is, we are saved *by faith* but *for works*. Works are not a *condition* of justification but they are a *consequence* of it. Thus, someone who is truly saved will manifest good works. If there are no good works present, then there is no reason to believe that true saving faith is present either.

As James said, “Faith without works is dead.” Such faith cannot save. “Can [mere intellectual] faith save him?” Only the kind of faith that produces good works can save. So, we are not saved (i.e., do not receive eternal life) by works, but we are saved by the kind of faith that produces good works.

### **Preserving the Pure Doctrine of Grace**

We conclude by noting that Protestants, following the clear biblical distinction between forensic justification and practical sanctification, make the way of salvation much clearer and preserve the doctrine of grace (which Catholics also claim) in a much purer form. For once believers know they have right standing before God (=are justified) by faith alone apart from works, then their minds are not cluttered with works they must perform in order to know all their sins are forgiven (past, present, and future) and they are on their way to heaven.

While Catholicism acknowledges that there is an initial act of justification (which some even admit includes a forensic act), nevertheless, it also maintains that one must work to faithfully avoid mortal sin in order to achieve final justification before God. Thus, works are ultimately necessary for salvation. But this is contrary to the biblical teaching that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, based on Christ alone. And, despite Catholic protest to the contrary, this is not conducive to the assurance of salvation by which we “know...[we] have eternal life” (1 John 5:13), and by which we are connected to God by His inseparable love (Rom. 8:1, 36-39).

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>This material is taken from a forthcoming book by Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Baker, 1995), as extensively edited by Elliot Miller.

<sup>2</sup>Tertullian, *De paenitentia* 2; 1.323.44-6.

<sup>3</sup>An excellent historical analysis of this period can be found in Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1986), 1-23.

<sup>4</sup>Augustine, *City of God* 10.8.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari from the 30th edition of Henry Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), “Grace” Can. 3.176., p. 76.

<sup>6</sup>Semi-Pelagianism held that man cooperated with God by ordinarily taking the first steps toward salvation.

<sup>7</sup>McGrath, 110.

<sup>8</sup>Or “Why God Became Man?” *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. X, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951).

- <sup>9</sup>See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 2, 4, in *The Basic Writings of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1944), 1079.
- <sup>10</sup>Aquinas, 2a2ae. 2, 6, ad 1.
- <sup>11</sup>Cited by R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abington, 1978), 65.
- <sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, published August 1518.
- <sup>13</sup>Peter Toon, *Justification and Sanctification* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983), 58.
- <sup>14</sup>Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London: Longman, 1981), 190.
- <sup>15</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, I xv, 4.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, i.
- <sup>17</sup>J. K. S. Reid, trans., *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, vol. 22, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), article 5.
- <sup>18</sup>Calvin, 2I, xi, 2.
- <sup>19</sup>Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1986), 36.
- <sup>20</sup>Reardon, 196.
- <sup>21</sup>Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 165.
- <sup>22</sup>Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of a Troubled Protestant* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969), 107.
- <sup>23</sup>McGrath, 69.
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 72. The words “solely” and “merely” in these quotes indicate that Trent did not reject forensic justification as such.
- <sup>25</sup>Denzinger, 814, 258.
- <sup>26</sup>H. George Anderson, *Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1985), 34.
- <sup>27</sup>McGrath, vol. 2, 78.
- <sup>28</sup>Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Conflict with Rome* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1958), 114.
- <sup>29</sup>Bernhard Bartmann, *Lehrbuch der Dogmatik*, II, 109. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>30</sup>“Trent,” see Denzinger, 811, p. 258.
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, ch. 8, 801, 252.
- <sup>32</sup>Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1960), 264.
- <sup>33</sup>“Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” final draft (29 March 1994).
- <sup>34</sup>Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 154.
- <sup>35</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 440.
- <sup>36</sup>Hoekema, 154.
- <sup>37</sup>Ladd, 446.
- <sup>38</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 956.
- <sup>39</sup>See Avery Dulles, S. J., in Anderson, 274.
- <sup>40</sup>Denzinger, 809, p. 257.