

Is the Reformation Over?
Rethinking the Push for Détente with Rome
Phil Johnson
Executive Director, Grace to You

Introduction

It has now been more than a decade since the Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus teamed up to give us the document known as “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT). That document, which has the endorsement of hundreds of key evangelical and Roman Catholic leaders, marked the start of a major campaign to warm relations between the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestants.

At first it seemed ECT might actually cause a backlash effect that would coalesce a vigorous defense of the gospel from evangelical Protestants. There were lots of excellent critiques of Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the early days.

There was also a famous summit meeting in Orlando in January of 1995. R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, D. James Kennedy, and John Ankerberg met with Chuck Colson, Bill Bright, and J. I. Packer and challenged them on biblical grounds regarding their deliberate compromise on the doctrine of justification by faith. Colson, Bright, and Packer later issued a clarification and multiple press releases claiming they had fully resolved the concerns of their critics, but they never withdrew their support from ECT, and the ecumenical juggernaut rolled on.

John Armstrong, president of Reformation & Revival, was an early critic of ECT. He gradually abandoned his opposition to Catholic-evangelical détente, and now he is one of the most outspoken activists in favor of ecumenical harmony with Roman Catholicism. Timothy George (founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University), likewise, at first withheld his signature from the original ECT document, but in the ensuing years he has become an activist in the ecumenical effort.

So despite a lot of early controversy, the push for ecumenical relationships between evangelicals and Roman Catholicism has gained significant ground, and the relatively few critics who are still vocally opposed to the movement are being cast in the role of obstructionists, reactionaries, and people who are generally uncharitable.

Now Mark Noll has come out with his latest book, coauthored with a freelance writer, Carolyn Nystrom, titled *Is the Reformation Over?* Noll never really gives an explicit answer to that question, but the thrust of the book makes it clear that he leans toward a yes.

In fact, Mark Noll is putting his money where his mouth is. Last month, he announced that he’ll be leaving Wheaton College and taking a post at Notre Dame University. One of the reasons given for his move is his commitment to Protestant/Catholic dialogue. He reckons Notre Dame is an ideal place for that dialogue to happen.

In *Is the Reformation Over?* Mark Noll more or less suggests that if the Reformation has run its course, it’s because the Protestants have gained their point. The Roman Catholic Church has changed, and evangelicals need to recognize the change and embrace it.

Timothy George (who, by the way, is a superb historian whose main expertise lies in the theology of the Reformation) wrote an endorsement to Mark Noll's book in which he said, "The Reformation is over only in the sense that to some extent it has succeeded."

That's the gist of the whole argument: The Roman Catholic Church has changed in a number of significant ways (especially since Vatican II)—and it is therefore time for Protestants and Roman Catholics to cease all hostilities.

I'm inclined to agree that it's looking more and more like the Reformation is over, but I would argue that despite whatever cosmetic changes you may see in the public face of the Roman Catholic Church, what has really changed is *Protestantism*. And if this is the end of the Reformation, what it really signifies the failure of Protestantism as a movement.

Protestants have to a large degree abandoned their true evangelical *doctrinal* heritage, and they have replaced it with a kind of *cultural* quasi-evangelicalism that is perfectly acceptable to Rome. Unless some new Reformers rise up in the generations to come, we may well be witnessing the dying gasps of the Protestant Reformation.

What I want to do in this hour is examine some of the best arguments given in favor of Catholic-evangelical ecumenism, and then explain why I'm still in favor of vigorous opposition to the doctrine and the institution of the Roman Catholic Church.

WHAT'S SO APPEALING ABOUT ECUMENICAL RELATIONS WITH ROME?

First, let's look at the reasons that so many evangelicals find the idea of ecumenical fellowship with Rome appealing. And what I want to try to do is give you some of the *best* reasons being set forth for seeking warmer relations with the Roman Catholic Church. If for the next 15 minutes or so it sounds like I'm arguing in favor of the ecumenical side, I hope you know me better than that. But in all fairness, I want to tell you what those who are advocating ecumenical relations with Rome are saying. And I want to give you what I think are their *best* arguments. And then I'll respond to those arguments.

Incidentally, while I disagree vehemently with the advocates of Catholic-evangelical cooperation, I am not suggesting that these are ignorant or unlearned men. Take, for example, the individuals I have already named. John Armstrong is as well-read in church history as any Baptist pastor I know anywhere. Timothy George quite literally wrote the book on *The Theology of the Reformers*. (That's the title: *The Theology of the Reformers*. It's one of my two favorite books on Reformation theology. You ought to get it and read if you haven't.) Mark Noll, despite a multitude of things he has written that really irritate me, is generally a careful, skilled, and sought-after scholar. J. I. Packer, one of the main cheerleaders for Evangelicals and Catholics Together, is a knowledgeable theologian and superb writer—better than anyone else I know at putting difficult theological concepts into terms lay people can grasp.

So I'm not questioning the intelligence or the academic credentials of the people who are promoting ecumenical cooperation with Rome. I *do* question their discernment on biblical grounds, and I'll explain why in a moment.

But let's see what they are saying. What are their arguments in favor of evangelical cooperation with Roman Catholicism? They fit into roughly five categories: There are practical arguments, political arguments, historical arguments, theological arguments, and biblical arguments. I'm not going to give you a catalogue of every single argument, but I do want to show you the kinds of arguments that are being set forth, and as far as I am able, I want to give you examples of the *best* arguments that are being made.

First, the **practical arguments**: Mark Noll's book begins with a digest of practical and pragmatic arguments. (By the way, just as an aside, he includes a history of Billy Graham's early relationships with Roman Catholics that is shocking for its frankness. I'm sure it was not his intent to embarrass Billy Graham—and, in fact, he writes as someone who is sympathetic to Graham—but frankly, if Mark Noll's account of Billy Graham's first dalliances with Roman Catholics is accurate, it is shocking and disturbing, and it corroborates every one of the complaints the fundamentalists of that era voiced about Billy and his politicking. But I'll let you read that for yourselves.)

Mark Noll analyzes Billy Graham's approach to ministry and Rome's acceptance of Graham's influence, and he concludes that for all practical purposes, there really is no longer any substantive difference between Roman Catholics and evangelicals. This is true especially in North America, but Noll sees the same trends happening worldwide. In a lecture he gave in which he summed up his own argument, he said it like this: He says there are

many, many instances where in the United States and around the world today it is possible for evangelicals to observe Roman Catholics acting pretty much like, well, evangelicals—for example, showing the “Jesus Film,” conducting Alpha classes, protesting against public immorality of one kind or another, promoting study of the Bible, seeking the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so on.

And that's generally quite true. In many ways, Roman Catholics and Protestants have become almost indistinguishable. They use the same materials, follow many of the same fads, read the same books, and share the same interests.

Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism has a greater emphasis on the role of the lay person. Catholics are encouraged to read the Bible for themselves. There are Catholic lay conferences. And in Mark Noll's words, there are “Bible studies, workshops for peace, coalitions for the right to life, base communities...practicing a theology of liberation, masses with guitars and contemporary music, traditional masses in Latin, and on and on.” Noll says, “To outsiders, these developments look like a Catholic acceptance of some aspects of Protestant emphases on ‘the priesthood of all believers.’”

In a similar vein, the charismatic movement infiltrated the Roman Catholic Church beginning nearly four decades ago. Wherever you find Catholic charismatics, you will find a style of worship and a look and feel that in some ways seems the very antithesis of traditional Roman Catholic sacramentalism. Walk into the typical meeting of Catholic charismatics, and except for the nuns' habits and sacramental paraphernalia, you might think you were in a Protestant charismatic worship service.

Many charismatics and Roman Catholics have enjoyed long-standing relationships because of their shared experience. The typical adult charismatic in this generation can't fathom why any Protestant would even wonder whether a devoted Roman Catholic is a true brother or sister in Christ.

At the same time, the fundamental character of the evangelical movement has also radically changed over the past three decades. The evangelical movement, which used to draw its boundaries along theological lines, has morphed into a movement that is now defined in terms of *style* and *practice*. Therefore, as the look and feel of Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism become more and more similar, fewer and fewer evangelicals are able to understand why the two movements should not join hands and embrace one another in full communion.

Mark Noll is very honest about this. It is the starting point and the main thrust of his key argument: If Roman Catholics and evangelicals look alike, talk alike, worship alike, share common concerns, and whatnot, he honestly has no problem treating our doctrinal differences as if they were essentially inconsequential differences of opinion.

That's a pragmatic argument, and because so many evangelicals these days sold out to pragmatism years ago, they find that argument absolutely persuasive.

There have been a few **historical arguments** put forth to persuade evangelicals and Roman Catholics to embrace one another. One of the more obvious of these arguments is that the dispute over justification by faith has not been settled in 500 years and probably never will be. The Council of Trent (the Roman Catholic council that ruled decisively against the Protestant position) didn't settle the debate; it only enflamed the Protestants. The Puritans cranked out volume after volume defending *sola fide* with the most meticulous array of biblical and logical arguments. If you have ever read John Owen on the subject, you know that the way Puritans argued could get tedious at times, but it proved almost impossible to refute.

That ultimately didn't matter. It didn't persuade the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and there have been some knowledgeable Protestant churchmen who have followed in their wake who weren't persuaded either. What about John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement in the 1800s? Newman was a leading Anglican writer who studied justification by faith and didn't fully buy the Protestant view of justification. He soon converted to Roman Catholicism and finally became a cardinal in the Catholic Church. And he took dozens, perhaps hundreds, of intelligent Protestants with him.

If the doctrine of justification by faith and the principle of *sola fide* were as cut and dried as the Reformers and Puritans claimed, why do Protestant scholars keep entertaining debates over *that* article of faith?

Here's another historical argument: Most of the Reformers and Puritans ultimately concluded that the Roman Catholic Church is no true church but an apostate body. If that's true, where was the church prior to the Protestant Reformation? Where were the principle of *sola fide* and the doctrine of justification by faith? Would any Protestant claim that no one was ever saved before Luther?

A few evangelical leaders have asked that question—including a few Presbyterian pastors who subsequently became Roman Catholics. They concluded that the Roman Catholic Church has a stronger historical claim than the Reformation does. Catholics can point to an apostolic pedigree. Catholics seem more comfortable than Protestants do with the early history of the post-apostolic church. In fact, to listen to some Protestants, you would think church history began in the 1500s.

Mark Noll himself writes as a historian, and in my assessment, his book is strongly slanted in a direction that is overwhelmingly positive to the Catholic view of history. Listen to the words of one Protestant convert to Roman Catholicism, evaluating Noll's book. He writes: "Mark Noll is a historian, he seems especially attuned to the strength of the Catholic position, and the weakness of the Evangelical position, vis-à-vis history. Anyone who looks closely at the history of the Church in the first few centuries following Christ's resurrection will see clearly that it very early on takes on a Catholic appearance."

If you really think about it, except for some Baptists who trace their heritage through some questionable groups that stood outside the Catholic tradition, we evangelicals *do* share a common heritage with Rome for most of the first 1500 years of church history. Should we not honor our common roots?

Those are just a few of the *historical* arguments for declaring a truce with Rome.

There are also a number of **political arguments** commonly set forth as reasons why evangelicals and Roman Catholics should lay aside their differences and embrace one another as full brothers and sisters in Christ.

Many of these are obvious. High on the evangelical political agenda for years has been the subject of abortion and the right-to-life movement. Roman Catholics and evangelicals generally agree completely that abortion is a kind of genocide against helpless children. We have many common political enemies. We share many of the same moral concerns and convictions.

The culture around us is unraveling while Protestants and Roman Catholics argue and anathematize one another over 500-year-old doctrinal disputes. Wouldn't it be more civil and more constructive to set aside our doctrinal differences and join together in attacking the moral decline that is threatening our society?

That is the central argument in the original Evangelicals and Catholics Together document itself. And no wonder. Both of the main authors of that document, Charles Colson on the Protestant side and Richard John Neuhaus on the Catholic side, share a common interest in conservative politics, and both are outspoken activists on the same side of public policy debates dealing with moral and social issues—like abortion and pro-life causes, opposition to the homosexual rights agenda, prison reform, and so on.

Another major political argument that some evangelicals have found persuasive is based on heightened awareness of the threat of Islamic terrorism. With Islam wielding so much power worldwide (so the argument goes), Protestants and Roman Catholics should stop trying to convert one another and work together in doing more to evangelize the non-Christian world. Is it right for us to fight with one another and anathematize one another over the definition of justification by faith with the threat of Islamo-fascism hanging over the world?

I hope you can begin to see why these arguments seem persuasive to so many. I don't for a minute find them persuasive, but I can see why millions of evangelicals in this generation *do* find those arguments persuasive. After all, they have grown up in churches where doctrine has been deliberately discounted; worship has been purposely dumbed-down and made as cheesy and as shallow as possible in order to appeal to the worldliest tastes; the church herself has been treated like a commodity to be peddled in the public square by clever marketing strategies; and people have been fed a steady diet of sermons that cater to narcissistic concerns about their personal hurts, their felt needs, and their desire for prosperity.

Would you *expect* this generation to care about doctrinal accuracy?

Nonetheless, there are also a few **doctrinal arguments** commonly set forth in favor of the ecumenical shift, and some have found these persuasive as well.

One, obviously, is the fact that in the big scheme of things, there really does seem to be quite a lot that Roman Catholics and evangelicals can agree on. We affirm all the major ecumenical creeds together: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the definition of Chalcedon, and the Athanasian Creed. That means we are in agreement on many difficult and technical theological issues, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the dual natures of Christ and the doctrine of the hypostatic union, the eternal generation of the Son of God, and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.

We admire and are deeply indebted to some of the same church fathers and theologians, such as Irenaeus, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine, Athanasius, Anselm, and many others. Both evangelicals and Roman Catholics formally reject Pelagianism, Arianism, and a dozen other Christological errors. Both groups formally affirm the inspiration of Scripture.

(Catholics will even tell you that we are indebted to them for our canon. That claim is pretty questionable, I think, especially since we don't technically affirm the same canon.) But the Roman Catholic Church would recognize every book in our Bibles as canonical, and they formally affirm all of them all as divinely inspired.

So in an important sense, we really do seem to share a number of our most basic theological convictions. That would seem to be a very large platform of agreement to build on.

Finally, there are also a few **biblical arguments** that are sometimes set forth as reasons why evangelicals and Roman Catholics should cease hostilities and embrace one another in full communion. Virtually all of these have to do with the various appeals for peace and unity in Scripture.

Romans 12:18, for example, commands us to seek peace with all men, and it doesn't even restrict the scope of that commandment to fellow Christians. Paul writes to the Romans: "**If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.**"

And when it comes to fellow Christians, Scripture puts a very high premium on unity. Ephesians 4:3: "[**Endeavor**] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Why? Verses 4–6: "[because] **There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.**"

Given the number of Protestant denominations, church splits, and designer congregations that are tailored just to fit the tastes of generation-Xers, baby-boomers, yuppies, or whatever—cowboy church, clown church, or drive-in church for people who want to worship in their cars—you can see how a Roman Catholic who reads that passage and looks at the Protestant smorgasbord might question whether Protestants really take the doctrine in that text very seriously.

As a matter of fact, the apostle Paul says Christian unity is the measure of maturity. Ephesians 4:13–16:

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

And what about Christ's high-priestly prayer, where He prayed, "**that they may be one, as we are**" (John 17:11)? Or verse 21: "**That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me**"?

And then there's John 13:35, where Jesus told His disciples: "**By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.**" If the mutual love of Christians for one another is such a significant sign to unbelievers about the truth of the gospel, isn't that a biblical argument in favor of thawing the relationship between Rome and the Reformation?

And don't forget Jesus' rebuke of the disciples in Mark 9 and John 9:49. The disciples told Jesus, "**Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbid him, because he followeth not with us.**" "The guy isn't part of our group, so we forbade him to minister in your name!"

Jesus did not countenance that kind of sectarianism. He told the disciples, "**Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us.**"

Now, what about all that? Those are some of the best arguments set forth by people who insist that Protestants should set aside their differences with Rome and embrace all Roman Catholics as our brothers in Christ—for the sake of peace, for the sake of our testimony, and for the sake of increasing our clout in the culture.

I hope you understand that I do not agree with that position. I strongly oppose any kind of ecumenical linkage between evangelicals and Roman Catholic Church, and I'm going to explain why that's my position.

But meanwhile, you have to admit that's an imposing array of arguments. And if you understand the spirit of the age in which we live, I think you can see why the push for evangelical/Roman Catholic unity has found such widespread acceptance.

As I said, I think those are the *strongest* arguments for evangelical-Roman Catholic détente. That is admittedly a subjective opinion. I know of one fellow who was persuaded to abandon his education in a Presbyterian seminary in order to join the church of Rome because his conscience told him all birth control is evil, and he felt the Roman Catholic Church's stance on that issue proved Rome is the true church and Protestantism is false. So now he is reciting the rosary and praying to Mary. And in one of those ironic twists of logic people often accept when they surrender their conscience to the authority of the Catholic Church, this fellow who originally concluded that birth control is evil because it is a violation of the command to be fruitful and multiply has taken a vow of celibacy and joined the priesthood.

So you never know what is going to persuade people, but I have done my best to outline the main arguments in favor of the position I oppose. And now I want to answer them.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH SEEKING AN ECUMENICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH ROME?

I'm not going to answer each of the arguments for ecumenism point by point. I *will* try to answer the biblical arguments as we go through this, but I'm not going to spend time on every one of the other arguments. Because I think there is one powerful argument *against* evangelical/Roman Catholic fellowship that trumps all those arguments and reveals the fallacy behind all of them in one fell swoop. This is the argument that persuades me, and if this one argument is true, all the others are false.

Here's my basic argument: The doctrinal disagreement between Rome and historic evangelicalism is not small but profound, and it is twofold. *First* of all, we disagree on the most essential point of the gospel. We are actually giving two fundamentally contradictory answers to the question "What must I do to be saved?" And *second*, we disagree on the question of who has the authority to settle that disagreement. Who is head of the church? What is the final court of appeal in disputes over matters of faith? Catholics and true evangelicals again give contradictory and incompatible answers to those questions.

Therefore, two major things are at stake in the conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholicism: the gospel and the authority of God's Word. And neither of those things can righteously be compromised. Those are the very things we are commanded by Scripture to

contend earnestly for. And conversely, Scripture forbids us to seek spiritual fellowship with anyone who propagates that kind of error.

And let me say this before I elaborate on my argument: If you conclude that my argument is wrong—if you go the route many postmodern and neo-orthodox church leaders have proposed and decide that the propositional content of the gospel really doesn't matter much if we can simply agree that Jesus is in some sense Lord, then watch out. Because by that same logic, you will soon be accepting the idea that we should embrace Mormons as our brothers and sister in Christ. There are already evangelicals lobbying for that kind of ecumenical cease-fire, too. In effect, they have cast aside the church's long war against gnosticism and capitulated to gnostic error in the form of Mormonism.

And what will be next? Shall we declare the Arian controversy a big mistake, too, and embrace Jehovah's Witnesses as our brothers and sisters in Christ? Because if the argument is that we have a duty to embrace anyone and everyone who professes faith in Christ as Lord, there's no end to that kind of compromise.

Peter Kreeft, a Protestant apologist who converted to Roman Catholicism, wrote *Ecumenical Jihad* nearly a decade ago now. In it, he pleaded for ecumenical relations between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all other kinds of theists. He sees that sort of broad ecumenism as a necessary means of strengthening our hand in the culture war against atheism. I hate his position and deplore the book he wrote, but you have to congratulate him on the consistency of his position. If sound doctrine (even on the most fundamental tenets of our faith) really doesn't matter in any ultimate sense, and if the truth or falsehood of the gospel itself can be safely set aside in order to declare ourselves spiritually one with others on the basis of moral convictions we may share in common, then why rule out ecumenical union with *any* religion? Isn't the most important goal the triumph of morality in our culture anyway?

Evangelicals used to know the answer to that question when liberals were the ones asking the question. Liberalism and ecumenism decimated most of the major mainline denominations, but evangelicals apparently have not learned the lesson.

Instead, evangelicals are eagerly embracing the spirit of the postmodernism, and in effect, the advocates of ecumenical union have therefore already won the day. The dominant view in the wider evangelical movement is that truth doesn't matter much at all. The only thing that counts is *relationships*. That may sound warm and friendly and nice and perfectly amiable, but it reflects the wholesale abandonment of everything that was truly good about evangelicalism.

I will be dealing on different levels with the subject of evangelicalism and its recent demise in a couple of my seminars, and this seminar is a perfect place to more or less introduce the subject.

I want to give you a thumbnail sketch of evangelicalism and what makes it unique, and this will be good background information for you to keep in mind if you are coming to any of my other seminars—particularly the ones on the fad-driven church (that's the first seminar session tomorrow) and on fundamentalism (which will be during the second seminar session tomorrow).

This is material that I won't be able to repeat in those seminars, but it lays a good foundation for what I will say in them:

Evangelicalism used to be defined by a clear, specific *theological* stance. When we said someone was *evangelical*, we meant that person adhered to a doctrinal perspective that was built on two essential theological convictions: (1) the absolute authority of Scripture and (2) the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. The Reformers used the familiar Latin slogans *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide* to identify these two doctrines.

I'm sure most of you are somewhat familiar with those expressions (*sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*). There are actually five Latin slogans that more or less capture the spirit of the Reformation—sometimes referred to as “the five solas,” because they all contain a form of the Latin word *solo*, meaning “alone.” The five expressions are: *sola Scriptura*, “Scripture alone”; *sola fide*, “faith alone”; *solus Christus*, “Christ alone”; *sola gratia*, “by grace alone”; and *solus Deo gloria*, “glory to God alone.”

These are five slogans we associate with the Reformation, and they cover all the fundamental issues of the Protestant Reformation.

But two of them stand out above the others as the key issues over which most of the debate took place. And because these two issues were so much at the heart of the reasons for the Reformation, *sola Scriptura* is sometimes called the *formal* principle of the Reformation; *sola fide* is known as the *material* principle of the Reformation.

Now, notice: these two issues, the formal principle and the material principle of the Reformation, are also the distinctive doctrines of historic evangelicalism. All true evangelicals from the dawn of the Protestant Reformation until about 30 years ago have affirmed *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*. That is what made them “evangelical.” Only in recent years, under the influence of *Christianity Today* and its partners in crime, has the expression *evangelical* been broadened to include people who deny one or both of those principles, *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*.

The expression *sola Scriptura* was used by the Reformers to refer to the authority and the sufficiency of Scripture. It is called the “formal principle” because this was the principle on which all the doctrinal formulas of the Reformation were based and by which they were determined.

The Reformers insisted that Scripture was the only final authority in all matters of faith and practice, and that it was a completely sufficient rule of faith for the Christian. No higher court of appeal exists, and none is needed. No other source of spiritual truth is needed. But everything necessary for God's glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, either is expressly set down in Scripture or can be deduced from Scripture by sound and necessary logic.

Furthermore, *sola Scriptura* means nothing is to be added to Scripture through tradition or by any kind of new revelation.

Because the Reformers saw Scripture as the absolute, sufficient authority for all spiritual matters, they rejected Catholic teaching about papal authority, church tradition, a host of doctrines about Mary, purgatory, veneration of the saints, the sacerdotalism of the Mass, and on and on. When we think about all the points of doctrine and practice on which Catholics and evangelicals differ, before we descend into discussing the minutiae, we must bear in mind that *all* those differences stem from this one principle: the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*—or the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. And that is why it is called the *formal* principle.

The other key doctrine, *sola fide*, was known as the *material* principle of the Reformation. This one point of doctrine summarized the main doctrinal point that was at stake in everything under dispute between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The whole substance and matter of every Catholic-Protestant disagreement can ultimately be boiled down to this one issue. And it is a dispute about the most basic issue of the gospel.

Sola fide is Latin for “faith alone,” of course. The slogan signifies the Protestant conviction that faith *alone* is the instrument by which sinners lay hold of justifying righteousness. The righteousness that is imputed to us by faith is an alien righteousness, according to Scripture. It is not our own righteousness. It's Christ's righteousness reckoned to our account, and it covers us

like a garment. Those who have that righteousness need no other righteousness in order to have a perfect standing before God here and now. Justification is not a process like sanctification. It is an instant decree—a *forensic* reality—that grants us a perfect standing with God the moment we believe and are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ.

And Scripture affirms that repeatedly. Romans 8:1: **“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”** Romans 5:1: **“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** John 5:24: **“He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”** The apostle Paul said he gave up a lifetime of his own Pharisaical righteousness and embraced Christ instead—in Paul’s words from Philippians 3:9—in order to **“be found in [Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”**

All of this points to Christ as the sole object of saving faith and teaches the sinner to trust only in Him and what He has done for sinners—rather than thinking there is something more that we must do for ourselves or some contribution we need to make to our own salvation. No ritual—not baptism, nor circumcision, nor good works, nor any sacraments prescribed by the church—can add one iota of merit to the righteousness of Christ in order to save us. And if you are trusting your own works, trusting in the church, or looking to Mary to dispense grace, you are trusting the wrong thing.

The Roman Catholic counsel of Trent flatly denied that view of justification, pronouncing anathemas on anyone who denied that the sinner’s cooperation is necessary in acquiring the righteousness necessary for justification.

Now, those are two completely different gospels. In fact, in the very point under dispute, the Roman Catholic error is the exact same error for which the apostle Paul pronounced two famous anathemas against the Judaizers and their ilk in Galatians 1. That has been the universal position of all the major Reformers and every major Protestant confession of faith from the time of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent until today. Practically every major Protestant movement that has departed from that position on justification has ultimately made shipwreck of the faith.

But that is the one most vital point of disagreement between Rome and the Reformers. Virtually everything else we disagree with Roman Catholicism on is related to or derived from that error somehow.

Take, for example, their doctrine of purgatory—an idea for which there is not one shred of biblical support. Why did Rome invent the notion of purgatory? If you understand their position on justification, it makes perfect sense. God demands a perfect righteousness. And if the righteousness that provides my justification is a righteousness that is perfected in the process of my own sanctification, it is patently clear (to most of us, at least) that no saint ever dies in a state of perfect sanctification. That is why Catholic doctrine needs purgatory in order to make up for the way its view of justification downgrades the atoning work of Christ.

All the superstition related to the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary is likewise a result of their defective doctrine of justification. Their theology suggests that Christ has not yet provided for them all that they need, so they believe they have to appeal to Mary to propitiate her Son toward sinners.

And it goes on; the odious doctrines of indulgences, the veneration of saints and relics, and the entire sacramental system of the mass are all rooted in a deficient doctrine of justification.

I'm doing a seminar in the next hour that dovetails nicely here, because it's about the doctrine of justification by faith, so I won't cover that same material here, but if you are the least fuzzy on what we as Protestants believe Scripture teaches about justification, I want to invite you to that seminar.

The bottom line is that justification is not acquired by faith plus ritual, or by faith plus obedience, or by faith plus personal holiness—but by faith *alone*. That is the consistent testimony of Scripture.

Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, insists that justification is a process involving not only faith, but also sacramental obedience and the attainment of personal merit. According to Roman Catholicism, it is a damnable error to think justification is grounded in a foreign righteousness that is imputed to us. Catholicism says God does not accept us as righteous until we really *are* righteous. And they deride the Protestant concept of justification as “a legal fiction.”

Again, these are quite simply two completely different gospels. And from the sixteenth century until now, Catholics and Protestants have agreed that this difference over justification by faith—our disagreement over *sola fide*—is so profound that whichever side is right, the other side is corrupting the gospel and cannot be regarded as authentic Christianity.

With very few unusual exceptions, the debate over *sola fide* has been almost universally recognized as a fundamental, insurmountable difference between Rome and the Reformers. It has always been assumed that until this difference is settled, until we can agree on the substance of the gospel, the breach between Protestants and Catholics cannot be healed and should not be papered over.

All of that has changed over the past decade or so. For one thing, we no longer define *evangelicalism* in theological terms. When a person says he is an evangelical, more often than not he is describing an experience, or a particular style of ministry, or an interest in the pragmatics of evangelism, or something like that. The word *evangelical* has been stripped of virtually all doctrinal content.

In fact, over the past decade, mainstream evangelicals have been assaulted with a number of trends and movements whose aim seems to be to make evangelicals let go of all their doctrinal distinctives.

- There is *the pragmatism of the church-growth movement*, which encourages pastors to downplay doctrine (because doctrine is “too academic”) and focus only on the practical aspects of the Christian faith.
- There is *the anti-intellectualism of the charismatic movement*, which also downplays doctrine and suggests that experience is all that matters.
- There is *the neo-ecumenism of groups like Promise Keepers*, encouraging men to seek unity by *ignoring* doctrine and doctrinal differences.
- There is *the intense pressure to lay aside our doctrinal distinctives in order to forge a political coalition with all who share our views on the great moral issues of the day*.
- There are *various campaigns to redefine the doctrine of justification in Protestant circles*. This is a common theme among those who are enthralled with the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” the sacramental Presbyterianism represented by the Auburn Avenue Theology, so-called “reformed Catholicism,” and other crypto-Romanist movements.
- And now there is *the infatuation with postmodern ways of thinking*, which is flourishing in the Emerging Church movement, denying that propositions really matter and thus (in effect) rendering all doctrine moot in one violent act of epistemological suicide.

All those things have worked to the detriment of sound doctrine among evangelicals over the past decade. We have reached the point where evangelicalism, a movement historically defined in doctrinal terms, has ironically become a movement where *doctrine* is usually portrayed as something evil, divisive, and unbrotherly. Mention the importance of sound doctrine in most gatherings of mainstream evangelicals these days, and you are certain to be labeled contentious, quarrelsome, divisive—or worse.

The obvious casualty in all of this is the gospel. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants have insisted for five centuries that their disagreement is a dispute about the gospel. If that is an accurate assessment of the debate (I think it is; and I certainly see no good reason to question 500 years of Catholic-evangelical agreement on *that* point) then we cannot possibly set aside our differences and enter into communion and fellowship with one another without also setting aside the gospel.

That actually is true by definition. And that is why I believe the ecumenical overtures evangelicals have recently been making towards Rome are positively sinful, and they constitute gross disobedience to Scripture.

It's also absolute folly to do this under the banner of uniting our efforts to reach a decaying culture—because the only real hope for a decaying culture *is* the gospel message.

Before we close, let's go back to the biblical arguments that are being used to justify the ecumenical drift. What about those appeals for peace and unity among Christians?

Listen, the Reformers also were very familiar with those texts. None of the leading Reformers, including Martin Luther himself, wrote off the Roman Catholic Church lightly or discounted the duty of maintaining the unity of the true body of Christ.

But because the Roman Catholic Church formally abandoned the gospel of faith in Christ alone and set herself above the authority of Scripture, the Reformers were *driven* to the conclusion that the Roman Catholic Church was apostate.

The gospel was *the* issue. There's a place in Luther's *Tabletalk* where Luther says, "The pope boasts that he's the head of the church. I would gladly have conceded this to the pope if he had only taught the gospel."

And the gospel remains the central issue. There is no question that the Roman Catholic Church has changed dramatically since Vatican II. Near the beginning of this message, I read Mark Noll's list of changes that have taken place since Vatican II. It's absolutely true that those changes, and many others like them, have transformed the face of Roman Catholic style. The problem is that they are all ultimately *cosmetic*. The one thing Rome refuses to change is her doctrine. How can she? Her infallible popes have declared the church itself "irreformable."

Mark Noll's book also catalogues a list of theological statements from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the definitive layman's catalogue of authoritative Roman Catholic doctrine that was compiled and published about the same time the Evangelicals and Catholics Together document was released.

Read those statements with the utmost care. To the average untaught, anti-doctrinal evangelical at the start of the twenty-first century, they sound benign and very spiritual. But read them with care and discernment and what you will discover is that the official Catechism of the Catholic Church expressly affirms every key statement of the Council of Trent and every other historic Roman Catholic tradition that has ever been disputed by evangelicals. There is not one single substantive development in Roman Catholic doctrine anywhere in that catechism. And that *is* the latest official Roman Catholic statement of faith.

The Roman Catholic Church has not “reformed.” She can’t. Her own leaders insist she is irreformable. She has never budged an inch in the only way that would count. She still rejects the gospel message of justification by faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone. The evangelical-Roman Catholic accords do not signify the triumph of Luther; they signify the failure of twentieth-century evangelicalism.

Alongside all those verses that command us to seek unity in the true body of Christ are numerous texts that warn us about grievous wolves among the flock of Christ—men who pretended to be apostles and pastors but who would teach lies and deceive people. The apostle Paul warned the saints at Ephesus in his day that this would happen as soon as he left them. He even said that some of the false teachers would arise from among their elders. Acts 20:29–30: **“I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”**

Under those circumstances when false teachers arise from within the church itself, what obligation is placed upon believers who are truly concerned about love and the unity of the church? Scripture is clear about that, too. Romans 16:17: **“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”** When someone comes offering a different gospel or worshiping a different Christ, what is our duty? Listen to 2 John 7–11:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

Galatians 1:8–9 says the same thing. Paul writes, **“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”**

It is, after all, true love for Christ that constrains us to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints.

Let me close with an excerpt from J. Gresham Machen’s book *Christianity and Liberalism*. Here, Machen is analyzing the limits of the apostle Paul’s tolerance. He notes that in Philippians 1:18, Paul responds to some brethren who had made themselves his personal adversaries, and they even deliberately tried to add afflictions to him in his trials. There Paul says, **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.”** They were preaching Christ, and he rejoiced, despite the fact that these men apparently were his adversaries on some personal level.

But in Galatians, where the Judaizers were corrupting the gospel and preaching works in addition to Christ, Paul pronounced the most severe kind of curse against them. He condemned them in no uncertain terms. What was different about the Judaizers that they warranted such enmity rather than benign tolerance from Paul? Machen addresses that question. (This is a slightly long quote, but it’s worth it, and then I’ll close.) Machen says,

What was it that gave rise to the stupendous polemic of the Epistle to the Galatians? To the modern Church the difference would have seemed to be a mere theological subtlety. About many things the Judaizers were in perfect agreement with Paul.

The Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah; there is not a shadow of evidence that they objected to Paul's lofty view of the person of Christ. Without the slightest doubt, they believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed, moreover, that faith in Christ was *necessary* to salvation.

But the trouble was, they believed that something else was also necessary; they believed that what Christ had done needed to be pieced out by the believer's own effort to keep the Law.

From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight. Paul as well as the Judaizers believed that the keeping of the law of God, in its deepest import, is inseparably connected with faith. The difference concerned only the logical—even, perhaps, the temporal—order of three steps.

Paul said that a man (1) first believes on Christ, (2) then is justified before God, (3) then immediately proceeds to keep God's law. The Judaizers said that a man (1) believes on Christ and (2) keeps the law of God the best he can, and then (3) is justified.

[Again,] the difference would seem to modern 'practical' Christians to be a highly subtle and intangible matter, hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large measure of agreement in the practical realm.

What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law, even including the unfortunate ceremonial observances! Surely Paul ought have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity.

As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he (and others) did nothing of the kind does the Christian Church exist today. Paul saw very clearly that the difference between the Judaizers and himself was the difference between a religion of merit and a religion of grace.

If Christ provides only a part of our salvation, leaving us to provide the rest, then we are still hopeless under the load of sin... Such an attempt to piece out the work of Christ by our own merit, Paul saw clearly, is the very essence of unbelief; Christ will do everything or nothing, and the only hope is to throw ourselves unreservedly on His mercy and trust Him for all.

Paul certainly was right. The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ, 'Just as I am without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me'—that was what Paul was contending for in Galatia; that hymn would have never been written if the Judaizers had won. And without the thing which that hymn expresses there is no Christianity at all.

That is a perfect answer to those who insist it is petty and obstinate to maintain a clear division between the gospel we preach and the message of Roman Catholicism.

The gospel itself is what is at stake, and Scripture commands us to stand against such error and confront it.

All of church history affirms that the real spiritual heroes are never those who follow the flow of compromise, but men like Paul, who refused to tolerate any deviation from the pure gospel; men like Athanasius, who stood against the whole world; and men like Martin Luther, who nailed his challenge to the church door.

May we be men like them, and may God give us courage to stand.