



## Editorial

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# How could any Protestant go ‘home’ to Rome?

One year ago, I reported that many Protestants are ready to “cross the Tiber” into Roman Catholicism. The expression “crossing the Tiber” refers to fording the river that runs alongside Rome, symbolic of the barrier between Rome and Protestants. With grief, I had to report that even leaders in our mother church are talking about making the crossing.<sup>1</sup> Some church leaders are sending not-so-subtle messages to members: *It is permissible, and probably time, to unite with the Catholic Church.* One Calvin Seminary faculty member wrote that Protestants and Catholics are “pilgrims on the same journey, serving one Lord with one faith” who “will come nearer to their goal if they walk together than if they walk separately.” If I had not read his words with my own eyes, I would have been disbelieving of such a report.

The campaign to bring Protestants (‘Evangelicals’) into Rome gained momentum from a 1995 project called ECT—Evangelicals and Catholics Together. ECT is an ad hoc committee that in 1995 published a major document, signed by influential Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders, expressing agreement in fundamental areas of doctrine and voicing commitment not to proselytize one another’s members. Since 1995, ECT has published at least nine more statements of unity in faith. Protestantism’s friendliness with Rome, however, has far deeper roots (down to the early 1900s) and a much wider reach than ECT (extending broadly into Protestantism).

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1 See my editorial of March 1, 2018, “Gathering at the river,” in which I referred especially to the Fall 2017 issue of *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum* entitled, “Reformation Reflections: What can Catholics and Protestants learn from one another today?” In this issue, five prominent members of the seminary propose rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church.

In the year since I wrote that editorial, no other alarms have been raised about this movement. The silence in church magazines of conservative Protestantism is grievous. The original pushback in a few good books has seemed to end. A smattering of Internet articles speak out against it, but even these are not from the sources we would hope—Reformed and Presbyterian churches.<sup>2</sup>

Members of denominations whose leaders *support* this move to Rome ought to be up in arms. In churches that are *silent*, Christians ought to ask their leaders why no warnings are issued. Readers who have relatives and friends in denominations that lean toward Rome should equip them with good information, so they can take the action God requires of them: protest the leanings or leave those churches, for the salvation of their generations. Those inclined to *join* such a denomination where the children are not inoculated against false doctrine may be warned.

This is their warning, given in love for their souls: To go to Rome is to lose the gospel. There is no good news in Rome. In order to join Rome, those churches that call themselves Protestant must abandon the truth for which our fathers died and on account of which they left Rome. By definition, Protestants *protest*. Their protest was against *Rome*. By courting Rome, these Protestants abandon Protestantism.

How could it happen that churches so radically different historically could consider each other of the same faith and on the same journey?

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2 The seminary gets dozens of magazines from a wide spectrum of churches. Most ignore it. One exception to this silence is *The Trinity Review* ([trinityfoundation.org](http://trinityfoundation.org)). Another are the works of D.G. Hart, most recently his, *Still Protesting: Why the Reformation Matters*, Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018.

## Evangelicals (Protestants) and Catholics are coming together

Definition of a few terms is in order.

*Catholics:* A reference to Roman Catholicism, the world-wide religion based in Rome under the pope. To refer to followers of the pope merely as *Catholics* is mistaken since the real *catholic*, that is, *universal* church is the true church of Christ, not Rome. Followers of the pope are *Roman Catholics*.

*Evangelicals:* A term harder to define, but generally considered to be *conservative Protestants*. *Protestants* are non-Roman-Catholic Christians, but these are *conservative* Protestants. They have not gone *liberal* in rejecting the authority of Scripture, the necessity of regeneration for salvation, miracles, the Virgin Birth, etc. Their claim to retain the *gospel* explains the label *evangelical*. So, Evangelicals have been the branch of Protestantism that seeks to maintain Reformation orthodoxy. They are found in most branches of Protestantism, from Lutherans to Baptists, Presbyterians to Pentecostals to Methodists.<sup>3</sup>

*Together:* A reference to reconciliation. Some Evangelicals and Roman Catholics desire to break down what walls still separate them. They meet unofficially to discuss common beliefs and assure one another that what differences exist between them fall into three categories: a great deal is simple misunderstanding or misrepresentation; much is explained by historical circumstances no longer applicable; discussing the rest will cultivate deeper mutual appreciation.

*Ecumenical:* Relating to a movement that aims at world-wide union of all Christian churches. The word comes from the Greek for “the inhabited world.” The “togetherness” that Protestants and Roman Catholics seek is nothing less than the complete unity of all Christian denominations, world-wide.

Roman Catholics and Evangelicals *are* reconciling. Evangelicals are ecstatic about the project. Roman Catholicism is on board, even though initially, in the early 1900s, it was cold toward any ecumenical efforts because of fear it would “lose its distinctive Catholic dimensions.” That changed in 1962 when the pope convened a major council (Vatican II) that brought the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement. Vatican II declared unity with their “separated brethren” one of the “principle and essential goals of the RCC.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There are other uses of the word *evangelical*, for example, in some denominational names. These denominations are not necessarily associating themselves with “evangelicalism.”

<sup>4</sup> This, and much information for this article, are from the pro-

## How can this be?

How can it be that Evangelicals, most of whom formerly said “Catholics are not Christians,” are now able to see unity as possible, desirable, even necessary? And why is Roman Catholicism no longer fearful of losing its distinctives?

The answer has two parts: Evangelicals are no longer evangelical. And Roman Catholics are not changing but engaging in creative shapeshifting. Evangelicals are guilty of massive compromise of Reformation faith. Roman Catholics are back to their old tricks, guilty of subterfuge.

From the side of Evangelicals, consider three major factors that contribute to their ability to consider Rome their home. At the same time, ask whether your own church or family may be guilty of these weaknesses, and thus in your generations may be vulnerable to Rome, *where there is no gospel*.

### 1. Ignorance of Scripture

Evangelicals can consider Rome as home because they are ignorant of the doctrines that stood at the heart of the Reformation. *Rome* has always depended on their sheep’s ignorance, but now Evangelicalism is destroyed for lack of knowledge. While some Evangelical leaders are educated, most of the common members are woefully ignorant. Public education (not Christian schools) is the norm and good catechetical instruction in Scripture and creeds is rare. This paves the way for the attitude that, as long as someone sincerely says “I love Jesus” and lives a moral life, he must be a Christian. A hundred years ago *liberal* Protestantism imploded from ignorance. Now, Evangelicals follow the same path. This time, to Rome.

### 2. Distaste for battle

Formerly, Evangelicals understood that Christians must adopt a militant stance in the world. They understood the antithesis and knew that engaging in spiritual and theological battles was essential for the church’s existence. They wrote “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and sang it with conviction. Now, most have forgotten that the church is a battling church, that Christians are to be armed (Eph. 6:10-17). Many have removed the battle hymns from their songbooks and would sneer if you would tell them that your Lord is “a man of war” (Ex. 15:3). So when someone proposes that there are errors in the Roman church that must be fought, false teachings that must be destroyed in ecclesiastical battles, these Evangelicals react with surprise and dismay.

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ECT book, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together at Twenty: Vital Statements on Contested Topics*, eds., Timothy George and Thomas Guarino (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

Their misunderstanding of the peace-making calling of the church mutes their war cry.

### 3. *Abandonment of Reformation principles*

The majority of Evangelical Christianity today has renounced the gifts God restored to His church at the Reformation. The reader who doubts this would do well to go to the bookstores and read what is published by major Christian publishers. It will soon be clear that churches have lost the marks of the true church: truth in *preaching*; proper administration of the *sacraments*—a part of the larger concept of biblical *worship*; and Christian *discipline*—a part of the larger reality of proper *church government*. Let me explain:

*Church government.* There is no pope in Evangelicalism, but there are many little ‘popes.’ They are the presidents of their ministries, the senior pastors (think CEOs) of their mega-churches, the celebrity speakers on the conference tours, the big names that make money for the publishing houses. How much weight do these heavyweights carry in their circles? How often do Christians look to them as their authority rather than Scripture?

*Christian discipline.* Christian discipline is “rare as a white crow,” as already 100 years ago Abraham Kuyper lamented was the case in the Netherlands. Accountability to a body of elders, and a plurality of males who exercise authority in the church, an authority checked by the priesthood of all believers who know the Scripture, are strange concepts in Evangelicalism today.

*Biblical worship.* Worship governed by Scripture has been lost, too. The importance of proper worship as a mark of the true church appears in Calvin’s somewhat surprising testimony during the Reformation. Orthodox *teaching*, he said, stood in the *service* of proper *worship*. In other words, for Calvin, God-glorifying worship was the chief thing; truth served worship. The sacraments show that in a unique way. Proper administration of the sacraments involves both doctrine and worship. What the Roman Catholic church *taught* about the sacraments denied the gospel and, therefore, how they *used* the sacraments in worship robbed God of His honor.

What has happened in Evangelicalism with regard to worship and the sacraments is no less tragic because, although the *form* of their corruption of worship and the sacraments is different, it is just as dishonoring to God. Evangelicalism’s loss of proper worship is explained by the abandonment of the “regulative principle of worship.” *How* to worship is no longer governed by the rule of the second commandment but left to the judgments of men and women. Regarding the sacraments, baptism either is denied covenant children, or it is considered unimportant. And the ‘fence’ around the Lord’s table was broken down when discipline fell away, so that the sup-

per is profaned as badly in much of Evangelicalism as it is in Roman Catholicism. The Reformers would view Protestant worship today as smoking ruins. Weeping, they would say that the worship they died to restore is gone.

### Could your generations end in Rome?

It is easy to point out the errors of apostate Evangelicalism. Of Romanism. Of *others*. But self-reflection is always in order. Let *us* take heed who think we stand. Remember, the demise of Evangelicalism did not happen overnight.

*Ignorance.* How thoroughly are *we* “taught of the Lord” (Is. 54:13)? Do we know, for example, what the RCC teaches about salvation by grace and justification through faith? How committed to reading and studying Scripture is my family? Is it our meditation all the day (Psalm 119:97)? How much time do we and our families spend in the Word, compared with leisure, sports, entertainment?

*Authority.* In a theological discussion, how inclined might we be to give more weight to the views of a man with a big name than to the plain teaching of Scripture? At the time of the Reformation, men did not care so much about what the Bible taught as they did about what ‘papa dixit’ (the pope says). Are we returning to this?

*Discipline.* Are we thankful for our elders, willing to engage in this work? Do we support and pray for them when discipline is exercised among us? How much do we initiate discipline (Matt. 18)? Do we discipline *ourselves* and our own children?

*Militancy.* If we sometimes properly loathe the battle because we are “for peace” (Ps. 120:7), are we nevertheless always willing to be armed, ready to fight? Are we *always* fighting sin within so that we understand the threat of sin every day? Do we teach our children to be good soldiers, to put on the armor, to pray for hands that war and fingers that fight (Ps. 144:1)?

*Worship.* Is the Lord pleased with our worship? Proper worship includes a humbled heart, a right spirit, genuinely dependent on the righteousness of Christ alone and deeply grateful that His grace has been extended to *us*. Is God any less displeased with worship that is outwardly proper when our *hearts* are not right than He is with the improper worship in Evangelicalism?

If we are not spiritually cautious in all these respects, what has happened to bring Evangelicalism to Rome could happen in our families or churches. It will not be the *natural* result, but the severe and righteous judgment of God. The lesson of Evangelicalism is that it does not take more than a couple generations.

(to be continued)