



STATEMENT DC295

**A Summary Critique:
Evangelical Catholics
Keith A. Fournier
(Thomas Nelson, 1990)**

Evangelical Catholics is a disturbing book — for two reasons. First, it legitimately challenges many evangelicals' preconceptions about Roman Catholicism and Roman Catholics. Second, the author's protests and good intentions notwithstanding, it glosses over important doctrinal issues that continue to divide Catholicism and Protestantism.

No doubt some hard-hearted, prejudiced readers could fail to feel warm sympathy, friendship, and brotherhood toward Keith Fournier despite reading in *Evangelical Catholics* of his profound conversion to Christ, his love for Scripture and the God who inspired it, and his genuine concern for the peace, purity, and unity of the body of Christ. The Jack Chicks and Alberto Riveras of this world will never be convinced that any outspoken Catholic is other than a subversive, deceptive papist bent on restoring the Inquisition and the Dark Ages.

But readers more acquainted with the grace of God, who know His ability and willingness to work in ways that surprise our narrow expectations, are bound to think of Fournier as a personal friend after reading his book. Fournier's candor is complete as he tells of his early rejection of Christianity his spiritual hunger and the wanderings it produced, God's inexorable tugging at the strings of his heart and mind, and his conversion while sitting on a beach reading a letter from a Jewish friend who had just come to know Jesus as Messiah. His experiences in fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic church, college, and small groups were varied; his commitment to them was genuine. His *ongoing* activity in transdenominational ministries and movements attests to his genuine willingness to embrace Protestant and Eastern Orthodox believers as fellow Christians.

If the heart of Christ expressed in His prayer for the unity of His church in John 17 has shaped our hearts, we will share Fournier's growing passion to see that unity expressed outwardly among His people today. And if Christ's concern for the salvation of the lost and the transformation of people and cultures rules in our hearts, we will applaud a great deal of what Fournier has to say in *Evangelical Catholics* about practical outworkings of Christian faith.

But those who find spiritual refreshment in the Protestant — and biblical — principles of grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, and Christ alone will be disturbed when Fournier explains that his love for Christ, for Scripture, for the lost, and for the body of Christ all directed him back to Rome. They will be disturbed because, although Fournier effectively counters *some* Protestant criticisms of Catholicism (those based on caricatures rather than fact), whether intentionally or unintentionally, he skirts *others* that are far more important. And they will be disturbed also by Fournier's proclivity (shared by Charles Colson in the foreword to the book) to minimize the doctrinal distinctions of Protestantism, evangelicalism, and Catholicism.

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The first chapter (“Evangelical Catholics: A Contradiction in Terms?”) sets the tone for the book. Here Fournier explains first what makes him a *Christian*, second what makes him a *Catholic*, and third what makes him an *evangelical*.

What makes him a Christian? “I have personally placed my trust in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord; I have committed my life to following Him” (p. 13). Furthermore, he believes the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, defining statements of Christian faith.

What makes him a Catholic? “Literally, the word *catholic* means universal or all-inclusive” (p. 15). In light of this, he wants to focus “on Jesus’ greatest desire for His church: *unity clothed in love*” — “not a false nondenominationalism which denies distinctives of doctrine or practice” but a willingness to work together to bring the saving gospel to a lost world (p. 16). To these things most Protestants could agree. But then he lists beliefs that define him as Catholic: (1) “in a church rooted in a two- thousand-year history of progress and mistakes...which continues to display the wonder of the Incarnation by revealing the Lord’s love in ‘flesh and blood,’ a church which is not the Kingdom but merely a ‘seed of the Kingdom’”; (2) in “the Bible [as] the Book of the church, not...the church [as] the church of the Book...The Bible is a gift to that church and a measuring stick (canon) for all her actions” (emphasis added); (3) that “Jesus literally meant what He said about the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist” and that “it would be ingenuine for believers who do not agree on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist to join this sacrament of unity”; (4) “that God reveals Himself in sign and symbol” (“I am a sacramentalist) and “that a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by God to give grace; (5) “that belonging to Christ must affect our whole lives and give rise to an incarnational world view, a genuinely Christian culture, and an integrated piety”; (6) “that the church of Christ must be both hierarchical and charismatic, institutional and dynamic, and that she is indeed the ‘universal sign (sacrament) of Salvation’ still revealing Christ’s presence in the world. Therefore I have submitted myself to the teaching office of the church and its leadership” (pp. 17-18).

I expect that most thoughtful evangelicals would quickly agree with the first and fifth of these points. On the others, however, they would at least question their implications. Does submitting “to the teaching office of the church and its leadership” mean adopting the whole Roman Catholic view of the unquestionable authority of ecclesiastical tradition, the infallibility of papal bulls, and the unalloyed truth of conciliar creeds? Does calling the Bible “the Book of the church” and “a measuring stick for all her actions” mean placing the Bible under the authority of “the teaching office of the church” rather than vice versa? Does calling a sacrament “an outward sign instituted by God to give grace” imply baptismal regeneration? How many sacraments are there? (Fournier later affirms Rome’s seven in contrast to Protestantism’s two.)

Fournier hints at the problem with the sentence that follows this list of Catholic beliefs: “I could continue my list, but it would lead to another book” (p. 18). Theologically informed Protestants will be disturbed enough by what is on his list. But they will also recall things *not* on his list yet nonetheless fundamental parts of Catholicism (fundamental in that, by Catholicism’s own assertion, they cannot be denied without meriting ecclesiastical condemnation).

They will think, for instance, of the doctrine of the mass, in which Christ is believed (some modern Catholics’ claims to the contrary notwithstanding) to be sacrificed again and again: “Forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated [the word means “offered as a sacrifice”] in an unbloody manner who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the Holy Synod teaches that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory” (i.e., it appeases God’s wrath against sin) and that “the Lord, appeased by the oblation thereof and granting the grace and gift of penitence, forgives...For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different. The fruits indeed of which oblation, of that bloody one to wit, are received most plentifully through this unbloody one; so far is this [latter] from derogating in any way from that [former oblation]. Wherefore, not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities of the faithful who are living, but also for those who are

departed in Christ, and who are not as yet fully purified, is it rightly offered, agreeably to a tradition of the Apostles." (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 22, Chapter 2*).

As if this were not enough, the Council of Trent declared not only that this was their belief but also that anyone who denied it should be accursed: "If any one saith, that in the mass a true and proper sacrifice is not offered to God; or, that to be offered is nothing else but that Christ is given us to eat: let him be anathema" (Canon 1); "If any one saith, that by those words, 'Do this for the commemoration of me' (Luke 22:19), Christ did not institute the apostles priests, or, did not ordain that they and other priests should offer his own body and blood: let him be anathema" (Canon 2); "If any one saith, that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving; or, that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice; or, that it profits him only who receives; and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, pains, satisfactions, and other necessities: let him be anathema" (Canon 3); "If any one saith, that, by the sacrifice of the mass, a blasphemy is cast upon the most holy sacrifice of Christ consummated on the cross; or, that it is thereby derogated from: let him be anathema" (Canon 4); "If any one saith, that the canon of the mass contains errors, and is therefore to be abrogated: let him be anathema" (Canon 6).

Protestants will think also of the Catholic view of justification as not only God's verdict that the believer is innocent because his guilt was transferred to Christ and Christ's righteousness to him, but also the believer's becoming righteous in heart and conduct (thus combining in the one term what Protestantism — rightly, if we examine the biblical usage of the terms *justify* and *sanctify* — puts under two: *justification* and *sanctification*),* a view that entails synergism in salvation. They will recall that Roman Catholicism not only believes this but also condemns anyone who denies it: "If any one saith, that, by the Catholic doctrine touching justification, by this Holy Synod set forth in this present decree, the glory of God, or the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ are in any way derogated from, and not rather that the truth of our faith, and the glory in fine of God and of Jesus Christ are rendered [more] illustrious: let him be anathema" (Session 6, Canon 33).

It is bad enough, in the informed Protestant's mind, that Roman Catholicism should believe these doctrines that we consider contrary to Scripture. Worse, by anathematizing those who deny these doctrines, Rome implies that these are fundamental, essential parts of the saving gospel and that whoever denies them is accursed from God, separated from Christ (i.e., damned).

The word *anáthema* is used in the New Testament only six times: once (Acts 23:14) of the curse by which the conspirators against Paul bound themselves (not to eat or drink until they killed him; i.e., that they should die if they failed); once in Paul's saying (Rom. 9:3) that he would willingly be "accursed from Christ" (i.e., separated from Him and so damned) for the sake of his brethren; once in Paul's saying (1 Cor. 12:3) that (Holy) Spirit-controlled people could not call Christ accursed; once in Paul's saying, "If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed" (1 Cor. 16:22); and twice in Paul's saying that anyone who preached another gospel should "be accursed" (Gal. 1:8,9). In each instance, death or its spiritual equivalent, damnation, is the sense of *anáthema*.

That anyone who, in the end, was *anáthema* would spend eternity in the presence of God would have been unimaginable to New Testament writers. Paul called only those who did not love Jesus or who preached "another gospel" *anáthema*, clearly indicating that only the most heinous sin — unbelief in Christ — deserved that epithet. For the Roman Catholic church to attach *anáthemas* to the smallest details of its doctrines, as it did at the Council of Trent, whose decrees and canons it has *never repudiated*, is for it either to empty the term of all its biblical significance and hence to invite everyone not to take it seriously, or to consider all of its doctrines essential to the gospel of salvation and to imply, therefore, that no one who denied any of them could be saved.

This brings us back to Fournier's book, to the third part of his first chapter, in which he explains why he considers himself an *evangelical* Catholic: "The root of *evangelical* (euaggelion) literally means good news or gospel, and the term *evangelical* has been used to refer to the essential message of the gospel — salvation by faith in the death of Jesus Christ....An evangelical Christian then is one who believes that good news about Christ and proclaims it. In other

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words, an evangelical Christian *is* a Christian” (p. 21). In the face of the Roman Catholic church’s pronouncements at the Council of Trent, never repudiated, what are we to think is “the essential message of the gospel”? Fournier tells us it is “salvation by faith in the death of Jesus Christ.” But the Council of Trent tells us that anyone who denies its doctrines of the mass, justification, and a myriad of other issues (e.g., the eucharist) is accursed from God. Can one enjoy “salvation by faith in the death of Jesus Christ” and yet deny some of the decrees and canons of the Council of Trent? Can one, in other words, be saved and yet be accursed from God?

This is the most disturbing thing about Fournier’s book — particularly its title. It adopts what is, Iron, the Protestant evangelical perspective, a minimalist definition of *evangelical* (“An evangelical...is one who believes the good news,” p. 21), and what is, from the Roman Catholic perspective, a minimalist definition of *Catholic* (“*Catholic*...[refers] to all Christian people,” p. 15), and then argues that these minimalist definitions are compatible. Certainly they are. But their compatibility is not what today’s readers expect to see argued for in a book titled *Evangelical Catholics*.

Indeed, the equivocation at the heart of Fournier’s book — an equivocation that I am certain Fournier does not intend — is clear from the inconsistency in his use of the key terms in relation to one famous evangelical who turned Catholic. After telling us that “the term *Catholic*... [refers] to all Christian people” (p. 15), he tells us of “Thomas Howard, now an Evangelical Catholic himself” (p. 22), who, when he wrote *Evangelical Is Not Enough* (with Richard John Neuhaus, then a Lutheran, now also converted to Catholicism), “was on a spiritual journey which eventually led to Rome and his *entrance into the Catholic Church*” (p. 23, emphasis added). If Howard was an evangelical before he took the Roman road, and “an evangelical Christian *is* a Christian” (p. 21), and if “the term *Catholic*...[refers] to all Christian people” (p. 15), then Howard was a Catholic before he was a Catholic and it is nonsense to speak of his “entrance into the Catholic Church.”

The truth is that there is much more to the terms *evangelical* and (*Roman*) *Catholic* than Fournier really deals with in his book. Etymology is a notoriously risky method of defining words. Yes, the word *evangelical* stems from the Greek word for gospel; yes, *catholic* stems from the Greek and Latin words for whole or universal. No, their etymology does not exhaust their meaning. Their meaning is determined by their usage in contemporary language, a usage that distinguishes clearly between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. The former believe firmly that justification is by grace alone through faith alone; the latter believe that it is by grace through faith and works and the proper use of the sacraments. The former believe that in partaking of the bread and wine in communion we commemorate Christ’s death and feed spiritually on Him, but deny that we offer Him up anew in propitiatory sacrifice to God; the latter believe that we both commemorate His death and offer Him up anew in bloodless oblation.

Furthermore, even operating only on the etymologies of the words, the differences between Protestants and Catholics remain deep and unresolved. What, after all, *is* the evangel (gospel) that is the root of *evangelical*? Does it include all the decrees and canons of the Council of Trent? If not, then why are those who reject any of those decrees and canons anathema? Or is the gospel not really the power of God unto salvation, as Paul said it was? And what is the church universal, that is, the church catholic? Does it include only those who affirm all the decrees and canons of Trent? If it includes those who deny some of them, then in what sense are they anathema?

The distinctions between Catholicism and Protestantism are real, and they are important. Despite Fournier’s good intentions in attempting to bypass them for the outward unity of the body of Christ, he really will do both Catholics and evangelicals only a disservice if he successfully persuades them that one can be evangelical and Catholic in the proper sense of those words.

— E. Calvin Beisner

E. Calvin Beisner writes and speaks on Christian theology, apologetics, and ethics. His several books include *Prospects for Growth* (Crossway, 1990), *Answers for Atheists* (Campus Crusade for Christ/Northstar, 1988), *Prosperity and Poverty* (Crossway Books, 1988), and *God in Three Persons* (Tyndale House, 1984).

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* According to Peter Toon, who has given much of his life and study to bringing greater understanding and unity between Catholics and Protestants, contemporary Catholic theologians have largely admitted that Protestantism was right about the biblical doctrine of justification: "There is general agreement that Protestant reformers were correct when they argued that the Greek verb 'to justify' means 'to account or reckon as righteous' rather than 'to make righteous'. The Latin verb *justificare* had been understood ever since the fifth century to mean 'to make righteous', and this explains the commitment of the medieval Church and then of Roman Catholicism to the idea of 'justification' as the process of 'making just', or making righteous. However, to state this does not mean that the best way to understand 'to reckon as righteous' is by using forensic, or legal, images drawn from Roman law, as the traditional expositors have done. The Protestant tradition of teaching on justification might perhaps have been healthier, if it had made use of the legal ideas in Hebrew law rather than those of Roman law." (Peter Toon, *Protestants and Catholics: A Guide to Understanding the Differences among Christians* [Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1983], 91.) For an excellent comparison of the Protestant and Roman Catholic doctrines of justification, with a critique of the latter, see Roger Wagner, "New Confusions for Old: Rome on Justification," *Antithesis: A Review of Contemporary Christian Thought and Culture* 1, Sep./Oct 1990, 24-33.)