

Feature Article: JAC165

## RETURNING TO ROME: SHOULD EVANGELICALS ABANDON THE REFORMATION?<sup>1</sup>

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### SYNOPSIS

In recent years there has been a steady migration of prominent evangelical leaders into the Roman Catholic Church. Frank Beckwith, J. Budziszewski, Thomas Howard, Peter Kreeft, and Richard John Neuhaus, to name a few, have startled, even upset, many in the evangelical community by their move to Catholicism. Prominent evangelical leaders such as Charles Colson and J. I. Packer have led the way in seeking to bring together Catholics and evangelical Protestants, claiming that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Catholics and evangelical Protestants have worked well together for the well-being of society because of our mutual agreement on key moral and social issues, but there still remain significant doctrinal differences between us. The Reformation set forth key doctrines that denounced established Roman Catholic teachings, and in response the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent reaffirmed the tenets of Roman Catholicism and anathematized or accursed those who embraced the doctrines of the Reformers. Despite progress in ecumenism since Vatican II, this doctrinal divide between Roman Catholicism and orthodox Protestantism remains to the present day.

This being the case, the only way an evangelical can convert to Roman Catholicism is if he or she abandons the Reformation. Likewise, no Catholic can be considered an evangelical and still adhere to the teachings of the Council of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. On the basis of the clear teachings of Scripture, evangelicals should recognize the historic necessity of the Reformation for the restoration of the unadulterated gospel of salvation, and also the necessity for them to continue reaffirming boldly those Reformation essentials, such as a believer's justification by faith alone apart from works.

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Peter Kreeft converted to Roman Catholicism from the Dutch Reformed Church<sup>2</sup> more than 30 years ago, and Richard John Neuhaus, Lutheran theologian and editor of the popular journal *First Things*, converted to Rome in the mid-1980s. In his book *Surprised by Truth*, Patrick Madrid describes the various journeys of people into the Catholic Church. In the foreword Scott Hahn writes,

None of the conversion testimonies you're about to read is like another. These people come from different backgrounds. They're scholars, pastors, teachers, preachers, and writers. They have different personalities. They followed different roads to Rome. Yet the title of this book, *Surprised by Truth*, sums up every one of these stories, because each relates the earnest quests of persons seeking the whole truth about Christ, and each describes the surprise discovery that the truth of Christ—in Scripture, history, and logic—lies in the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup>

Other high-profile evangelicals who have recently joined the Roman Catholic Church include J. Budziszewski, professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, and Francis Beckwith, professor of philosophy at Baylor University and former president of the Evangelical Theological Society.

## REASONS PEOPLE RETURN TO ROME

In view of this relatively recent phenomenon, a natural question is, what would compel an evangelical Protestant to convert to Catholicism? Ralph MacKenzie has identified three main reasons for the evangelical exodus to Rome, and I would add one additional reason.

First, MacKenzie observes that Catholicism is older. Since the Roman Church (allegedly) is able to claim connection to Peter as first bishop of Rome, and Peter received primacy of authority from Jesus, the church of Rome is the oldest ecclesiastical representative of apostolic authority.

Second, evangelicalism lacks tradition. Author and Roman Catholic convert Thomas Howard states that as an evangelical he was unaware of great Christian leaders prior to the Wesleys, Calvin, and Luther. "Before them there was a blank until I came to the apostles."<sup>4</sup>

Third, the grandeur of the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church has a strong aesthetic appeal in contrast to the more "flat" nature of average evangelical churches. One convert to Rome stated, "I was like a man who all his life had been told that he must build a house but has never been given a hammer and a saw. Now, in the Divine Office, the rosary, the stations of the cross, and Eucharistic adoration, I had discovered a whole treasure-trove of tools."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, I would add that many find security in the magisterial authority of the Catholic Church. This is because of its alleged connection to the apostles. I will respond to reasons one through three later, but it is important to address this last point first, since it relates to the very nature of Roman Catholicism and its foundational claims to authority.

The early post-New Testament church did not fully adhere to apostolic teaching in its doctrinal formulations. The earliest fathers already had begun to deviate from the apostles' practices and teachings. Although the Roman Catholic Church emerged from ancient Christianity, it is not the same thing as ancient Christianity, the ecclesiastical bodies of which comprised both a Western and an Eastern church. The Roman church is only *an* expression of earlier Christianity; it does not reflect all of the components found within the Christianity of the first century. The church fathers were not monolithic in their views. The Eastern church, with its various branches, differed at several points with the church that governed from Rome.<sup>6</sup> The Roman Catholic Church does have historic continuity with the first-century Christian church, but it has at many points deviated from the teachings of the Lord and of the apostles, including its claim to have received from them a gift of infallibility. Once the lack of support for that claim is recognized, then its other claims and teachings can be put to a fair test as to their biblical fidelity; if that lack of support is not recognized, however, then we must blindly accept the Catholic Church's claim to apostolic fidelity, no matter how far from Scripture the teachings appear to wander.

## ORIGINS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The words "Catholic Church" occur for the first time in a letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans: "Wherever the bishop appears let the congregation be present; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."<sup>7</sup> In works by a number of the church fathers, the term is used for the faithful throughout the known world. Only in the period after Nicaea did the word "Catholic" begin to be identified with the church at Rome. In the late fourth century it came to be used for the church throughout the empire that was adhering to the apostles' teaching as represented by the church at Rome over against those who advocated heretical teaching. Such a meaning is found, however, as early as the late third century, in the works of Clement of Alexandria. Even Pope Benedict XVI admits that "we are fairly certain today that, while the Fathers were not Roman Catholics as the thirteenth or nineteenth century world would have understood the term, they were, nonetheless, 'Catholic,' and their Catholicism extended to the very canon of the New Testament itself."<sup>8</sup>

It is likely that the Christian community at Rome probably began with Jews coming back from the feast of Pentecost who had embraced Jesus as Messiah, and was composed largely of Jews until AD 49 when Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in AD 55, the church had become predominantly Gentile. Paul, interestingly, never visited the church until the

early 60s when he appeared before Nero. There is no evidence either in Scripture or in the writings of the first century of the church that Peter was either the founder of the Roman church or the first bishop.<sup>9</sup> In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter calls himself a fellow-elder (a term used synonymously in the New Testament with bishop; see, e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:5, 7), not the chief elder.

Being in the capital of the Roman Empire, the church in Rome naturally did gain greater influence and eventually greater power than those exercised by the other patriarchal centers. Only in the late sixth century AD, when John the Faster, bishop of Constantinople, sought to assert his authority over the entire church, did Gregory I, bishop of Rome, gain ascendancy with the help of the Roman emperor. I and many other scholars believe it is when Gregory claimed such jurisdiction that the Roman Catholic Church officially began, though others would trace the unique organizational authority of the church to the writings of Augustine.

Philosopher and theologian Norman Geisler describes the development of the church of Rome from its origin to its current status as the Roman Catholic Church. He argues that in AD 1215 we reached the point at which “one can see the beginning of Roman Catholicism as it is subsequently known....For it is here that the seeds of what distinguishes Roman Catholicism are first pronounced as dogma. The doctrine of transubstantiation, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, and seven sacraments are pronounced. Many consider this a key turning point in the development of Roman Catholicism in distinction from non-Catholic forms of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup>

It is natural that components of the earliest Christianity of the first two centuries would be retained in some manner by Christians of later centuries, while other elements would go by the wayside. The first hundred years of the Christian church (AD 30–130) reveals a more simple, and more Jewish, community of believers than the predominantly Gentile Eastern and Western church we observe in the ensuing centuries. Jesus and the apostles used the Hebrew Scriptures, and the method of apostolic interpretation was a form of rabbinic interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

The early apostolic church patterned itself after the Jewish synagogue. This included local rule by elders, unlike the rule of one bishop along with the elders by the early second century, and the rule of geographical areas by bishops that developed more than two centuries later.<sup>12</sup> During the first hundred years of its existence the church followed a congregational structure, with elders and deacons. Even the strong emphasis on the bishop by Ignatius<sup>13</sup> was not beyond the authority of the local church and its ruling elders.

Certain nonapostolic doctrines developed in the ensuing centuries, such as baptismal regeneration, the number and nature of the sacraments, and the person of Mary, mother of Jesus. Other doctrines that constituted proper refinement and exposition of biblical teaching, however, such as the Trinity, the person of Christ, the sinfulness of humanity, and justification by faith<sup>14</sup> were generally held by the church throughout the empire. Forensic justification and individual access to God (and Scripture) also are supported in the New Testament and implicit within the writings of the Fathers.<sup>15</sup>

## **REASONS PEOPLE SHOULD NOT RETURN TO ROME**

As noted earlier, one reason for returning to Rome is that Catholicism is older and more closely connected historically to the apostles (i.e., Catholic bishops are believed to have apostolic authority to represent Christ’s teachings accurately because they are believed to be in a direct line of succession from the apostles). One evangelical states that his reading of the fathers of the church was a major reason for his conversion to Romanism because he concluded that Catholicism and the early fathers were doctrinally connected. This is a poor rationale, however, because patristic or early church theology only finds unique agreement with Roman dogma at certain points. When similarities to Catholicism are noted, they are just as likely to be similar to what is found within Protestantism. At other times, the likeness may be superficial, with different meaning in the fathers than is found in the development of the dogma of the Roman Church.

Other reasons for returning to Rome involve the objection that Protestantism lacks the tradition, liturgy, grandeur, or aesthetic appeal found in Catholicism, particularly with regard to worship. I find that many aspects of worship in a Roman church are very meaningful and inspirational, but for those looking to

more formal worship than is found in many evangelical or fundamentalist churches, they may go to a number of Protestant churches that still use more liturgical worship without giving up the principles of the Reformation. Additionally, one might argue that the formal worship in a Roman church may be sacrificing some personal expressions of worship experienced by those who use less formal worship.

One final reason is that, for Christians who struggle with the fact that Protestantism is quite diverse doctrinally, the fact that the Catholic Church is guided by a single authority provides a sense of security. On further examination, however, one finds that within Roman Catholicism many disagreements exist, and certain doctrines held as dogma by the church of Rome were never held with such certainty by the earliest fathers of the church or by the clear reading of Scripture. Furthermore, within the Roman church the various orders (Marists, Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines, Augustinians, etc.), like Protestants, have a wide-ranging diversity of thought and emphasis, though it is to be admitted that Romanism provides for finality in certain doctrines to which all Catholics and orders of the Church must adhere.

The Roman Catholic security blanket is thin cover for the Christian seeking certainty in doctrine.<sup>16</sup> True doctrinal security is in the words of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the apostles of the Greek Scriptures. The Apostle Paul says that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16<sup>17</sup>), and local elders of a church are to discharge their responsibilities in view of the nature and purpose of Scripture (2 Tim. 4:1-5). Believers, moreover, are to give diligence to a study of Scripture so as to be approved before God (2 Tim. 2:15). No bishop or pope alleviates our responsibility to become knowledgeable of the Word of God and to enact its guidance in our lives and the lives of our churches.

## **RECONCILIATION AND UNITY**

Within the last ten to fifteen years there has been a concerted effort by numerous evangelicals and Catholics to minimize the animosity that has existed between Protestants and Catholics since the Reformation. They have been exploring their respective differences and working toward the possibility of finding significant common ground between the two traditions. To facilitate dialogue and identify both points of agreement and disagreement, two seminal documents were produced.

### **Evangelicals and Catholics Together**

In the mid-1990s evangelicals desirous of finding common ground with Roman Catholics signed a statement entitled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," recognizing each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. These evangelicals included Chuck Colson, J. I. Packer, and Bill Bright.<sup>18</sup> Many, however, within the evangelical world had serious reservations regarding this document, believing that it lacked the necessary clarity regarding the essence of the gospel. For example, James White, President of Alpha and Omega Ministries, says "ECT seeks to provide a basis for a common front against the evils of our age, but in the process, it does away with the single means by which these goals can be obtained: the gospel. The simple fact is that Roman Catholics and Protestants, if they are honest, are far apart on the issues of the gospel."<sup>19</sup> Additionally, John MacArthur strikes hard against the document and intent of the ECT group: "Far from being an incentive for Rome to reconsider her position, this document grants an unwarranted stamp of legitimacy on the Roman Catholic system. It makes it harder than ever for doctrinally-minded evangelicals to mount an effective polemic against Rome's 'different gospel.'"<sup>20</sup> Rick Wade, on the other hand, presents a more positive view of the document, though recognizing many problems with ecumenism.<sup>21</sup>

### **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification**

Another attempt at reconciliation between Protestantism and Catholicism is the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," which was signed October 31, 1999.<sup>22</sup> Among the forty-four paragraphs of the document (excluding the appendix) is the following:

13. Opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical message of justification were in the sixteenth century a principal cause of the division of the Western church and led as well to doctrinal condemnations. A common understanding of justification is therefore fundamental and

indispensable to overcoming that division. By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner.<sup>23</sup>

In response theologian Timothy George writes,

It is up to Catholics to say how such statements can be squared with the official position of the Catholic Church as expressed in the Joint Declaration on Justification, which says nothing about Mary but does affirm that justification means that "Christ himself is our righteousness," and that "by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works"....The Roman Catholic dogma on the Immaculate Conception of Mary is very problematic: "The Immaculate Conception is a problem for anyone who takes seriously, as I do, the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. This is one reason why the idea that Mary, from the first moment of her conception, was kept free from the stain of original sin proved controversial for centuries in the Catholic Church and was denied by no less a theologian than St. Thomas Aquinas."<sup>24</sup>

Given the significant doctrinal differences between Catholics and evangelical Protestants, it is unlikely that the Reformation themes and the Council of Trent can be reconciled. A comparison of the Council of Trent and the teachings coming out of Vatican II indicates that the Roman Catholic Church has not modified its position on those doctrines that separate Protestantism from Catholicism. Both Trent and Vatican II hold to an enlarged Canon,<sup>25</sup> that the interpretation of Scripture must not be contrary to Church teaching,<sup>26</sup> and that tradition is as authoritative as Scripture.<sup>27</sup> In regard to sacraments, both Trent and Vatican II teach that water baptism removes original sin,<sup>28</sup> absolution is received by confessing sins to priests,<sup>29</sup> and the elements of the Lord's Supper change into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Doctrines in the Council of Trent pertaining to Mary that Protestants find unacceptable, such as Mary's perpetual sinlessness, remain intact.<sup>31</sup> Even though Catholics and Protestants have attempted a rapprochement to ease the rift that started with the Reformation,<sup>32</sup> the Council of Trent was not undone by Vatican I or II in any significant way, and the Unum Sanctum (the 1302 papal bull [e.g., official document] by Pope Boniface VIII asserting papal authority over the state as well as the church) is still in force.<sup>33</sup>

### HOW SHOULD WE THEN RELATE?

How then do we deal with the differences that divide evangelical Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic believers? What is important enough to separate Protestants, including evangelicals, from Rome? This famous dictum may help us in a balanced approach to speaking the truth in love:

*"In necessariis unitas"*      *"In essentials unity"*  
*"In dubiis libertas"*      *"In doubtful things liberty"*  
*"In omnibus autem caritas"*      *"But in all things charity"*<sup>34</sup>

The advocates of the beliefs of the Reformation are properly called to love those within Christianity with whom they differ. There are essential elements of the authority of Scripture and the essence of the gospel, however, that cannot be compromised, namely *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), and *soli Christi* (in Christ alone).

### The Question of Authority

Of utmost importance in this entire discussion is, to what authority are we obligated to submit personal conscience? Is it to the church or, as Luther boldly proclaimed, is our conscience to be captive exclusively to the Scriptures? Roman Catholicism stipulates that the source of authority for Christians is both Scripture *and* tradition. Roman Catholics affirm that the Old and New Testaments are the infallible words of God (though with an extended canon that includes the apocrypha), but that Church tradition serves as a needed authority to interpret Scripture.<sup>35</sup> As nineteenth-century German and Catholic theologian Henry

Denzinger records, the Council of Trent states, "This truth and instruction are contained in the written books *and* in the unwritten traditions, which have been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the apostles themselves...have come down to us."<sup>36</sup> Denzinger adds, "The written source of revelation is the canonical books of both Testaments....Another source of revelation is ecclesiastical tradition."<sup>37</sup>

Evangelicals contend that the authority of Scripture comes from its inspiration by God and not from the authority of the church. The Old Testament was written hundreds of years before Christ and was accepted by Him and the first-century church as being the infallible words of God. Second, the New Testament was written between AD 50–95 (most books before 70), in Greek, in the eastern empire, and not under the auspices of the Western church. If anything, the Roman church *received* the canon of inspired Scriptures rather than creating them.<sup>38</sup>

Evangelicals, along with other Protestants, do not deny that there is valuable information, and much truth, in the traditions of the church fathers and in the creeds of the church. We do deny that they are revelation from God, however; the Fathers and the Councils never viewed their writings and decrees on a par with the biblical text. The Reformation position on *sola Scriptura* states first that Scripture comes directly from God and is fully authoritative as the very word of God. Second, since Scripture comes from God, it is the sufficient and final authority for the Christian in matters of theological truth and practical Christian living. Third, since God desired to communicate to His people through written revelation, it is understandable through ordinary means of literary interpretation.

The Roman Catholic Church, by contrast, believes that the *magisterium* (teaching authority) of the Church is infallible when speaking on matters of faith and morals and that this is expressed specifically through the infallibility of the Pope. According to Vatican I,

the Roman Pontiff, 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*.<sup>39</sup> (emphasis in original)

Papal infallibility is directly related to the dogma that the bishop of Rome is the successor of the apostle Peter and he sits in Peter's chair as the Christ-appointed shepherd of the entire church:

...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>40</sup>

The Roman church has sought to support its position on the Pope from the New Testament by arguing that Peter was given chief authority over the apostles and the entire church by Christ. Several passages are used to demonstrate their view including Matthew 10:1; 16:18; Luke 22:31; John 11:49–52; and John 21:15–17. The Church also argues that tradition supports papal infallibility, even though this did not become official until 1870 at Vatican I.<sup>41</sup>

It is true that Peter is accorded special recognition among the twelve apostles. Scholars generally acknowledge that for several years after the Resurrection, Peter continues as a prominent member of the governance and evangelism of the early church (John 21:15–19; Acts 1:15; 2:14; 8:14; 11:4ff; 1 Pet. 5:1ff). Peter was the oldest member of the twelve and spokesman for the group. There is, however, no indication in the texts just listed that this leadership was to be exercised over the entire, worldwide church.

Matthew 10:2 records the names of the apostles, mentioning Peter first. French theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange concludes from this Peter's primacy. "The Greek word *protos* (or Latin *primus*) in Matthew 10:2 unequivocally states Peter's primacy, declaring that the word *protos* in its context means 'primary first,' and that Peter, out of all the Apostles, was first in the eyes of Christ."<sup>42</sup> Part of the reason

for this view relates to the meaning of *protos* as chief in certain contexts.<sup>43</sup> Protestant scholar Donald Hagner sees the passage, along with Matthew 16:18, as indication that Peter was the most prominent member of the band of disciples and the rock on which Christ built the church.<sup>44</sup>

In Matthew 16:16 Peter is called a rock (*petros*) by Christ, followed by the statement, "Upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church." The standard view of Catholic exegetes is that the original statement was in Aramaic and there was no distinction of genders or meaning in the Aramaic. Catholics claim that Jesus is saying Peter is the rock on which Christ builds the church. Whether *rock* is distinguished in Aramaic is irrelevant to the argument, however, since the inspired text is Greek and the inspired Greek does make this distinction. Some have said that only the classical Greek makes this distinction,<sup>45</sup> but Bauer's Greek-English lexicon shows a difference between *petra* (the rock on which the church is built) and *Petros* or stone (the meaning of Peter's name).<sup>46</sup> According to Geisler, many other exegetes of this text, including Augustine and Chrysostom, have argued that the rock on which the church is built is confession of Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> In concert with this understanding of Matthew 16:18 is the perspective of Eastern Orthodox commentator Apostolos Makrakis:

Therefore the stone upon which Christ promises to build his Church is the confession of Peter, the truth revealed to him by the heavenly Father which abides for ever, the truth which gives birth to Peter and the stones of the divine structure. But the Papists destroy this scriptural passage toward their own damnation, arguing sophistically and erroneously that Christ promised Peter to build upon the latter's person His church; and the phrase "upon this rock" which clearly signifies the confession of Peter they interpret upon thee Peter....The foundation of the Christian Church is Christ and Peter's testimony."<sup>48</sup>

If Peter were the first pope, certainly the early church fathers would have acknowledged him as such. According to William Cunningham, however, Peter's supremacy as the first Pope cannot be supported by the early church fathers. He does point out that sixteenth-century Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, a canonized saint and "doctor of the Church," attempted to prove Peter's papal supremacy from the writings of Irenaeus, Origen, and Cyprian, but concluded that they do not support it: "Romanists could not produce the consent of the Fathers, even of the fourth and fifth centuries, in support of their interpretation of those passages of Scripture on which they found the supremacy of Peter."<sup>49</sup>

### **The Question of Justification**

The Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone is the source of significant tension between Catholics and evangelical Protestants. In Roman Catholicism justification is not simply God declaring a man righteous. Justification, rather, follows conversion.<sup>50</sup> Justification, which is conferred in baptism,<sup>51</sup> "entails the sanctification of his whole being."<sup>52</sup> Protestants differ significantly from Catholicism in defining justification, however.

Protestants view justification not as a change in man from being unrighteous to being righteous, but rather as a declarative statement by God that is objective or forensic in nature. As systematic theologian John Murray says, "Justification does not mean to make righteous, or good, or holy, or upright....In a word, justification is simply a declaration or pronouncement respecting the relation of the person to the law."<sup>53</sup> Theologian Wayne Grudem writes, "Justification is a legal declaration by God."<sup>54</sup> James White also explains that Paul's doctrine of justification is "forensic/legal."<sup>55</sup>

Protestants insist that justification is obtained by faith only and not by works. Works may provide evidence of faith in the thinking of many evangelicals, but it is faith in the obedience and satisfaction of Christ that obtains justification.<sup>56</sup> Theologian Charles Hodge affirms that it is "faith alone" that acquires for us the righteousness of Christ that is justification.<sup>57</sup> New Testament scholar Leon Morris states that there is not "the remotest possibility of justification being wrought by merely human effort."<sup>58</sup> Man is not even to be thought of as acting synergistically with God in justification by authoring his own act of faith.

As for the Fathers and justification, it is not difficult to find in the Fathers the idea of justification by faith alone apart from works. Origen says that "man is justified by faith alone apart from works."<sup>59</sup> Augustine declares that "works do not precede justification," and, "if by grace, then it is no more of works."<sup>60</sup>

According to fourth century Greek father John Chrysostom, God justifies as a judge who “declares us just.”<sup>61</sup> Justification is instantaneous (occurring “straitway”), and it is only after the grace of justification that “a life suited to it” begins. Therefore, justification, itself, is best seen as being objective.<sup>62</sup>

The righteousness of God in the work of Christ is “reckoned” to believers as righteousness (Rom. 4:3–4) as they exercise saving faith. The word “reckon” (*logizomai*) used in connection with “faith” indicated not only that man’s faith is not meritorious, since faith is only “counted” as righteousness by God,<sup>63</sup> but the word “reckon” also is evidence that this righteousness is not *infused* but rather *imputed*.<sup>64</sup> For this reason Murray defines justification as “a constitutive act whereby the righteousness of Christ is imputed to our account.”<sup>65</sup>

The terms that are connected with justification, finally, underscore the objectivity of that event. In the Hebrew Bible where the root *tsda* is used, as Morris says, “there can be no doubt that the meaning is to declare righteous rather than to make righteous.”<sup>66</sup> Morris argues this from Isaiah 5:23, where righteousness cannot be a moral quality, and Job 13:18, where Job “can only mean that he will be declared righteous, as by a judge giving sentence in a law suit.”<sup>67</sup> Scripture certainly supports the Protestant doctrine that justification is forensic and is acquired only by faith apart from works. That is why Protestants disagree with Roman Catholics about justification.

### NO SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE, NO RETURN

In light of what has been presented regarding the differences between Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism, there is no sound theological, biblical, or historical basis for evangelicals to convert to Catholicism legitimately. The Reformation was not in vain, and those reformers who put their lives on the line to ensure doctrinal purity did so because their hearts and minds were captive to the authority of Scripture.

With respect to common ground on essential theological matters, both Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism will continue to be at an impasse. For Catholicism, the Council of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II are indisputable authoritative statements to which the Church appeals without reservation. Evangelicals, however, affirm the tenets of the Reformation, and unless Rome is willing to depart from Trent, or evangelicals move away from the Reformation, they will never achieve unity in matters of essential doctrine.

### NOTES

1. I want to acknowledge my deepest appreciation to Dr. Bill Grover and Stephen Ross, who assisted me with the research and editing of this article.
2. Ralph MacKenzie, “Why Some Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic,” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 4:1 (Spring 2005): 5.
3. Scott Hahn, *Surprised by Truth: Eleven Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic*, ed. Patrick Madrid (San Diego: Basilica Press, 1994), 9.
4. Thomas Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 42.
5. Thomas Ricks, “From That Old Time Religion to the Ancient Faith,” in Rosalind Moss, *Home at Last* (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 2000), 80.
6. The most well-known example, which led to a formal split, is that the Eastern church believes that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (Constantine N. Callinios, *Greek Orthodox Catechism* [New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, 1953], 33), whereas Rome says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*Catechism of Catholic Church* [New York: Doubleday, 1995], 73).
7. *Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans* 8.2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. I, Loeb Classical Series, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 261.
8. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 141.
9. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3:3:2) says that Peter and Paul laid the foundation for the church at Rome. The church, however, as indicated in the text above, began many years before Paul wrote to the church, or before both of them, by tradition, were put to death there. Irenaeus was surely aware that Paul said in the book of Romans that he had never come to Rome, and so probably did not mean by foundation that he, or Peter, began the church.
10. Norman L. Geisler, “The Historical Development of Roman Catholicism,” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 4, 1 (Spring 2005): 48.
11. See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “Rabbinic Quotations of the Old Testament and How It Relates to Joel 2 and Acts 2” (unpublished paper that may be procured at HomeOffice@ariel.org), in which he, relying on the work of Emil Shuer, David L. Cooper, et al., demonstrates that the apostles used a methodology found in the rabbis in their interpretation of the Old Testament, though with more reserve than often exercised by the rabbis.



12. See discussion, with several examples, in Norman Geisler, "The Historical Development of Roman Catholicism," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 4, 1 (Spring 2005): 6–35.
13. Geisler suggests that many scholars believe that the statement by Ignatius should be dated later. Norman L. Geisler, "The Historical Development of Roman Catholicism," 26, 55.
14. The confusion of justification and sanctification is not evidenced to the same degree in the Greek-speaking Eastern church, where justification is separated from sanctification (*theosis*, or deification). The Latin term implied doing justice, implying "merit," whereas the Greek provided for an idea of being considered or estimated as righteous. See Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14–16.
15. See the sections labeled "The Question of Justification" and "The Question of Authority" later in this article.
16. Theologian Eric Svendsen shows that the diversity of Protestantism is not near as much as is sometimes supposed and that the unity of Roman Catholics is not near as much as Catholics often have argued. See Eric Svendsen, "30,000 Protestant Denominations?" NTRMin (New Testament Research Ministries), <http://www.ntrmin.org/30000denominations.htm> (accessed June 18, 2007). See also Eric Svendsen, *Upon This Slippery Rock: Countering Roman Catholic Claims to Authority* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2002).
17. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.
18. See the statement "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things* (May 1994), [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id\\_article=4454](http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=4454) (accessed October 1, 2007).
19. James White, "A Review of and Response to 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together': The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," [http://www.aomin.org/Evangelicals\\_and\\_Catholics\\_Together.html](http://www.aomin.org/Evangelicals_and_Catholics_Together.html) (accessed September 29, 2007).
20. John MacArthur, "Evangelicals, and Catholics Together," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 6:1 (Spring 1995), 34.
21. Rick Wade, "That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue," <http://www.probe.org/theology-and-philosophy/theology--church-missions/that-they-may-be-one-evangelicals-and-catholics-in-dialogue.html> (accessed October 1, 2007).
22. "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification—The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church," Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/index.html>.
23. "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/declaration.html>. Also, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church," [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).
24. Timothy George, "Timothy George Replies," *First Things*, May, 2007, 7.
25. Philip Schaff, "Council of Trent, Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures," *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, reprint 2007), 2:81; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 40. Hereafter the two sources are abbreviated as *Creeds* and *Catechism*.
26. *Creeds*, 2:83; *Catechism*, 31, 39.
27. *Creeds*, 2:181; *Catechism*, 31.
28. *Creeds*, 2:87; *Catechism*, 114.
29. *Creeds*, 2:152, 167; *Catechism*, 405, 407.
30. *Creeds*, 2:130, 175; *Catechism*, 384.
31. *Creeds*, 2:115; *Catechism*, 116.
32. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," *First Things*.
33. In the document *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church*, which was released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on June 29, 2007, the Roman Catholic Church affirms the position that the church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him.
34. This famous dictum has been attributed to St. Augustine, but there is no evidence from his writings that this is the case. The source of this saying is said to be Lutheran divine Rupertus Meldenius in the seventeenth century. See <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/quote.html> (accessed September 30, 2007).
35. See Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 180ff, for discussion of traditional and contemporary views regarding the relation of tradition to Scripture.
36. The Council of Trent, quoted in Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), 244.
37. Denzinger, 11–12.
38. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 255–69; see also R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957, 1969), 129–245.
39. Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), 11–12.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2005), 4:75.
42. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Evangile Selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris: 1927), 195.
43. Charles F. B. Allnatt, ed., *Cathedra Petri—The Titles and Prerogatives of St. Peter* (London: Burns and Oates, 1879), 47, quoted in Butler, 4. Lutheran New Testament Greek lexicographer, Fredrick Danker, supports this view: "Proto Simon Mt 10:2 is not meant to indicate the position of Simon in the list, since no other numbers follow, but to single him out as the *most prominent* of the twelve." Walter Bauer, Fredrick Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

44. Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 1–13, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33A, gen. ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Dallas: Word Book Publisher, 1993), 265–66.
45. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889, 1968), 636.
46. Bauer, et al., 809–10.
47. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, 77.
48. Apostolos Makrakis, “The Gospel according to Matthew,” *Interpretation of the Entire New Testament, Volume 1: The Four Gospels*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1949), 300.
49. William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1979), 1:223–26. For a more recent and thorough treatment of Peter and papal succession, see William Webster, *The Matthew 16 Controversy: Peter and the Rock* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1996).
50. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 536.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 537.
53. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 118–19.
54. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 723.
55. James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2001), 84.
56. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chaps. XVI and XI.
57. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 114.
58. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 285.
59. Origen, “Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI*, ed. Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 104.
60. Augustine, “On the Spirit and the Letter,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 5:102.
61. John Chrysostom, “Epistle to the Romans, Homily XV,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 11:452.
62. *Ibid.*, Homily VII, 11:375.
63. Hans Wolfgang Heidland, “*logizomai*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 289.
64. Strong, *Theology*, 862.
65. Murray, *Redemption*, 124.
66. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching*, 259.
67. *Ibid.*, 261.