

Editorial

Can evangelical Christians make common cause with Roman Catholics? For many centuries, such a question would have seemed absurd. Catholics persecuted Evangelicals, or at least discriminated against them, whenever they got the chance, and the idea of sitting down to dialogue with a cardinal who, in another context, had just ordered the burning of Protestant Bibles in Latin America (or wherever) would have seemed like a betrayal of the faith. More recently, some Evangelicals have gone to the other extreme, holding up Catholic conservatism as infinitely preferable to the liberalism in power in their own churches, and overlooking many of the differences which still divide us.

Somewhere in the middle, there is now emerging a point of view which recognises that unity with Rome is unlikely in the foreseeable future because of papal infallibility, and may well be undesirable unless and until there are major doctrinal changes, but that it is no longer possible to go on treating individual Catholics as enemy number one. Other candidates for that position, notably an increasingly militant Islam, have appeared on the scene and make our traditional quarrels seem like a luxury we can no longer afford. In the USA, where different denominations live side by side to a greater degree than is the case in Europe, and where (as a result) all the churches are more like each other than is the case here, the movement towards Catholic-Evangelical reconciliation has reached a quite advanced stage. But even in Britain it is by no means absent, as the work of the C S Lewis Institute (which embraces the Orthodox as well) testifies. Clearly, there is a new movement afoot which has to be taken seriously.

What should Evangelicals who value their heritage do about this? First of all, it is necessary to recognise that this is 1995, not 1595. The world has changed, and the global forces with which we have to contend are different from what they were. It is pointless arming ourselves against the Spanish Armada, when the country may well be overrun by third world immigrants looking for a better life in the West – and bringing their own religious culture and demands with them. Faced with this prospect, it is obvious that Christians cannot go on fighting each other as if the outside world did not exist. Some Muslims, for example, hold up the divisions within Christianity as a sign of its falsehood, and present Islam (which ignorant Westerners can easily be persuaded to regard as a unity) as the answer to this confusion!

Secondly, the Catholic Church is no longer what it once was. To argue from the Council of Trent as if nothing has changed is nowadays almost like arguing from the Thirty-nine Articles as if all Anglicans subscribed *ex*

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animo to every one of them. There is a theological pluralism within the Roman Church which is only slightly less varied than its Protestant counterparts, and it is probable that Roman conservatism in this respect is merely a form of time lag. Roman Catholics today have to be evaluated on their merits, just like Protestants, and not on their ecclesiastical allegiance. In this respect, the Roman Church has been 'protestantized' since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), whatever some Roman Catholic apologists might claim to the contrary. It is by no means unusual to hear a Roman priest criticise his bishop, or even the Pope – perhaps especially the Pope – on all kinds of matters, an 'indiscipline' which would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Sadly, many of the critics are liberal in their theology, and we would not wish to associate with them any more than we would associate with the liberals in our own Church. But the idea that a typical Catholic is blindly obedient to the Pope is no longer true, even of the most conservative, and Evangelicals have to accept this.

Thirdly, there is little point in Evangelicals trying to insist that Roman Catholic believers embrace Protestantism as we know it. Why join a Church which is unfaithful to its formularies, which has flown in the face of Scripture (by ordaining women), and which permits every sort of heresy to flourish like a green bay tree? Were these not the reasons why Martin Luther revolted in the first place? In the providence of God, Rome has not yet surrendered to the forces of modern liberalism to the degree that most Protestant churches (including our own) have done, and it might just be that it will yet prove capable of recovering a truly biblical orthodoxy which will unite us all. Of course, it may well go the other way too! One of the biggest problems with the Roman system is that it is highly vulnerable to the theology of the man at the top. A conservative Pope like John Paul II may keep things in line to some extent, but if he has a liberal successor, Rome could change very quickly indeed. Already, there are Roman catholic voices warning Anglican converts that the ordination of women may not be all that far away, in spite of what the Pope has recently said. Who knows?

Perhaps the most constructive thing that Evangelicals can do at the moment is to concentrate on what unites us with all individual Christians everywhere – the love of Jesus, the Son of God, who gave his life as an atonement for sin, so that we may go to heaven even when we do not deserve to. If we get that right, then we shall fellowship with all who are one with us in the Gospel, regardless of what their Church affiliation may be. Whether we can go on from there to work out a pattern of formal co-operation is more doubtful, but it should not be ruled out entirely. Billy Graham has always had the support of Roman Catholics, and in many third world countries where other religions predominate, Western barriers often seem irrelevant. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we have strikingly

different ecclesiologies, and no Protestant, evangelical or otherwise, will ever feel comfortable in what appears to him to be the Roman straitjacket. Conversely, Roman Catholics tend to have an ecclesiology which unites them in the feeling of belonging to a common family, however, much they may fall out with one another from time to time. From this family, Protestants are excluded, however well they may be treated when visiting a Roman Catholic church.

Ecumenical co-operation has come a long way in a very short time, and it is probably too much to expect it to proceed much further at the moment. There are real differences between the churches which cannot be overcome in a hurry, and may be incapable of resolution in this life. But although we must be honest enough to recognise this, we should not allow ourselves to get bogged down in sterile polemic, when there are more pressing matters at hand. Where we cannot work together, let us go our separate ways in peace. Where we can, let us demonstrate our unity in a way which will make the world sit up and take notice. It is not an easy road to walk, but Evangelicals, who have always worked to some extent on the edge of the ecclesiastical structures, have more experience at this than most. Can we not show the way ahead for the next generation?

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