

Editorial

It seems that the controversy over 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together', an initiative sponsored by the basically Catholic Religion and Public Life Foundation in New York, will not go away. Those who have participated in the ECT meetings are bewildered by the negative reactions which have come often from people with little knowledge of the background to the discussions. They can be found in fairly equal numbers among both Evangelicals and Catholics, and although there are not very many of them overall, they tend to be both committed and vocal, with the result that a far wider circle of spectators has been drawn into the discussion. Clearly some explanation of ECT's activities is required beyond what has so far been generally available if the fears of such people are to be laid to rest.

'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' began as a (mainly) lay initiative geared to the American social and political situation. In that country there are four major competing pressure groups which may loosely be defined as Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Liberal Protestant and secular. For most of the past century the latter two have dominated American life to such an extent that they have created a culture in which confessing Christians feel increasingly uncomfortable. Both Evangelicals and Catholics have long wanted to do something to arrest and if possible reverse this trend, but neither group is strong enough to act on its own. Together though, they can command up to half the American electorate, and on some issues perhaps considerably more. Hence the need felt on both sides to co-operate if anything in their almost identical political agendas is to be achieved. (Anglicans will recognize the similarity to their traditional tactical alliances between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics.)

For many of those involved in ECT, the political dimension remains uppermost and the widespread concern felt among American Christians that they have lost control of their society guarantees that it will be regarded favourably. But it is not possible to establish long-lasting co-operation between Evangelicals and Catholics without discussing the theological questions which both unite and divide them, and this is what has led to ECT. The results have been first a book, which after an initial splash seems to have made little lasting impression, and then a statement which has received wide publicity and has attracted most of the negative comment on ECT as a whole. It should be said immediately that ECT has no official status of any kind, that its statement does not represent a hard and fast 'agreement' and that probably none of the people involved regards it as definitive or binding on anyone. It was never intended to be any more than a preliminary report of what had been discussed, listing matters on

which some kind of consensus might be possible. Basically it was no more than a checklist of items to be kept on hand for future meetings, which were intended to explore whether any more fundamental convergence was possible. However, this was not what came across in the media, with the unfortunate result that many people have been led to assume that the document possesses a much more exalted status (at least in the eyes of those who wrote it) than is in fact the case.

The statement's attempt to state a shared view of justification by faith has caused particular disquiet among some Evangelicals, who regard this doctrine both as the chief cause of our separation from Rome and as the 'article of a standing or falling church' as the traditional formulation has it. The first problem which has to be faced when dealing with this is the tendency which most of us have to simplify Christian theology into formulaic slogans like 'justification by faith', isolating them from their context, and then assuming that everything hangs on them. ECT can fairly be accused of having done this and has produced a form of words to which both sides might assent, but which has little real meaning. For it is true that if 'justification by faith' is removed from its wider theological context, it is possible for Evangelicals and Catholics to devise a formulation of it which will satisfy both sides. That is nothing new – it was done in the sixteenth century, when Lutherans and Romanists tried to patch up their differences shortly before the Council of Trent. To that extent, ECT is merely going back to 1541, and nobody should be surprised by, or object to, what it has concluded.

Where the real difference between Evangelicals and Catholics becomes clear is not in the formula 'justification by faith', but in the doctrine of assurance of salvation which Evangelicals believe must follow from it and which Catholics regard as spiritual presumption. Here there is a real and unresolved controversy based on different understandings of the way 'justification by faith' works out in the life of the believer, and ECT has not even begun to address that. If and when it ever does, it will raise all kinds of thorny issues in its wake, like the question of purgatory, prayers for the dead, and so on, and it is most unlikely that any common mind will be found.

Another important aspect of ECT, which has not received much publicity, is that many Catholics would like Evangelicals to declare publicly that they regard the Roman Church as a sister communion in much the same way as Baptists look on Presbyterians, and that they will co-operate with Rome in their evangelistic outreach. This has particular relevance to the Latin American scene, where Rome is deeply worried by the recent explosion of Evangelical Protestantism. In some countries, Protestants who a generation ago were an infinitesimal minority, are now at

least a quarter of the population and probably represent the majority of regular churchgoers. What Rome wants is a declaration of solidarity from evangelical leaders which will stop what they see as sheep-stealing. The Evangelicals in ECT know perfectly well that they have no power to do this, but more importantly, they have no wish to do so either. One of the most painful parts of the ECT dialogue has been the need for Evangelicals to explain to the Catholics involved that we cannot regard the Roman Church in the way that a Baptist might look at Presbyterians. There is a qualitative difference between us which makes it necessary for Evangelicals to maintain a separate witness, and even to encourage conversions. In practice, Evangelicals do not normally seek to poach active Catholics from their churches; most of the time they concentrate on the nominal, non-practising majority. But of course, if there are devout Catholics who want to become Evangelicals, Evangelicals will encourage them to do so, just as Catholics are not averse to welcoming evangelical converts into their fold. This fundamental cleavage remains in spite of all the ECT discussions, and critics of the latter would do well to remember this.

The value of ECT is that it brings together people who would not otherwise meet or have much opportunity to engage in theological discussion. Evangelicals who read what Catholic literature says about them are quick to see how they have been caricatured, and the same is true of Catholics who read anti-Roman evangelical tracts. At the very least, we cannot expect anyone to be persuaded of the validity of another viewpoint if those promoting it misrepresent the beliefs of their intended audience, and so getting to know each other in this way is an important and valuable exercise. It is also essential, given the conditions of modern life, that we should recognize where we can and cannot co-operate, and understand as clearly as possible what the limits are and why. Reliance on sixteenth-century polemics is not enough – indeed, it can be seriously misleading since the nature of Protestant-Catholic relations was rather different then from what it is now.

For example, the *Homilies* of the Church of England are greatly valued by Protestants as an expression of the reformed faith, but two of them (the one on the misery of man and the one on charity, of all things) were written by Catholics, and were reprinted as anti-Protestant tracts on 17 September 1555, barely five weeks before Ridley and Latimer were burnt at the stake. It is therefore quite possible, perhaps even probable, that some of the men who stoked that fire were even then deriving spiritual profit from reading the very same texts which are so prized by Protestants today. Furthermore, modern research has shown that Thomas Cranmer lifted much of his homily on justification from the writings of Cardinal Cajetan, who was Luther's great opponent on precisely that subject (see

D MacCulloch *Thomas Cranmer* p 375). Even in times of acute controversy, life is more complex than any theological system – however complete and self-contained it may be – is able to make it, and we should never suppose that our particular form of orthodoxy is the only one we can ever learn from or make use of.

ECT has its problems; there can be no doubt of that. It was most unwise of it to issue a statement which was almost bound to be misunderstood, and in future it will probably refrain from doing so, even if the politicians in it continue to press for scintillating media copy. There are very definite limits beyond which it will be impossible to go, and the sooner that fact is understood by all involved the less will be the pain felt by some when those limits are reached. Evangelical diehards can relax – there is no sellout to Rome or to anyone else. ECT is a limited operation with very restricted goals, some of which are unattainable. That does not invalidate the discussions or make them useless, but it ought to make everyone realize that what is going on is less dramatic and will have far less impact than some alarmists seem to fear.

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