

EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS – TOGETHER?

Perhaps for Scotland the final punctuation needs strengthening – ‘Together?!?’ This is after all the country in which a leading Scottish theologian has recently had his orthodoxy called into question apparently for, *inter alia*, evincing a more appreciative attitude towards Pope John Paul II than the Westminster Confession’s portrayal of the papacy as the Antichrist might have suggested. A few years ago the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland took the trouble to exclude this bit of the Confession from the scope of the Church’s adherence to it as its subordinate standard – a curiously otiose action, one might have thought, since *this* was obviously one issue to which all could agree that ‘liberty of opinion on points not entering into the substance of the faith’ applied. (And it was a misleading vote too, if it seemed to imply that the General Assembly took the substance of the Confession with unembarrassed seriousness.)

It is an oddity of our ecclesiastical times that those most likely to paint the present Bishop of Rome in apocalyptic colours are not your hotter Protestants but free-thinking liberals who cannot stomach his conservatism. If there is a schism anywhere in the Roman world it will be fired by the desperation of the modernizers. By contrast, Evangelicals and Catholics more often find themselves together, perhaps most frequently in the sphere of bio-ethics but also in more centrally credal issues. Members of laissez-faire mainline churches which have not practised doctrinal discipline for decades may be allowed a sneaking admiration that Rome still dares to exercise it.

‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium’ was originally published in the lively American monthly *First Things* in 1994. It is reprinted in a collection of essays edited by the two main animators of the project, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus. The book is entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Toward a Common Mission* (Word Publishing, Dallas, 1995; Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1996; xxxvi + 236pp., £9.99; ISBN 0 340 66507 6). The British edition carries a preface by David Alton, M.P., but otherwise both declaration and book are North American in origin.

Among the conversationalists who produced ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together’ (ECT) were, in addition to Colson and Neuhaus, Kent Hill and John White on the evangelical side, and Avery Dulles and George Weigel on the Catholic side. When first published ECT had enlisted endorsements from a number of other Catholics and Evangelicals, the latter including Bill Bright, Os Guinness, Nathan Hatch, Richard Mouw, Mark Noll, Thomas Oden, James Packer and Pat Robertson. The book comprises six substantial chapters: Colson on ‘The

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Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective', Weigel on 'Faith, Freedom and Responsibility: Evangelicals and Catholics in the Public Square', Noll on 'The History of an Encounter: Roman Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals', Dulles on 'The Unity for Which We Hope', Packer on 'Crosscurrents among Evangelicals', and Neuhaus on 'The Catholic Difference'.

ECT cannot conceal its American provenance, and readers in Scotland and elsewhere, Evangelicals or Catholics, will not necessarily identify with its defence of a free market economy – let alone of 'the American experiment'. But these elements can be detached without detriment to the importance of ECT for the readers of this *Bulletin*, which is a journal of *evangelical* theology. We must, therefore, take seriously ECT's assertion that 'The two communities in world Christianity that are most evangelistically attentive and most rapidly growing are Evangelicals and Catholics.' Where Evangelicals talk of 'evangelism' (and not solely of 'mission'), Catholics use the more comprehensive concept of 'evangelization' – which embraces the larger perspective of Christian formation and growth within the life of the church. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to find this focus on the missionary task:

[T]he Christian mission to the world is vibrantly alive and assertive. We do not know, we cannot know, what the Lord of history has in store for the Third Millennium. It may be the springtime of world missions and great Christian expansion.

Yet this is no triumphalistic declaration: the next millennium may equally be 'the way of the cross marked by persecution and apparent marginalization'. Nor does ECT ignore disagreements, although the list of ten 'points of difference in doctrine, worship, practice, and piety that are frequently thought to divide us' is not the strongest section of the statement. To put it another way, this brief enumeration of differences reveals how elusive some of the supposed divides between Catholics and Evangelicals turn out to be. For example, between 'Sacraments and ordinances as symbols of grace or means of grace' Reformed theology will not wish to choose either to the exclusion of the other. 'The church as visible communion or invisible fellowship of true believers' again sets up a false choice – or at least one on which Presbyterians are likely to opt for the supposedly Catholic alternative. From a Scottish perspective of strong ministerial leadership exercised through one-person expository preaching, even 'The sole authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) or Scripture as authoritatively interpreted in the church' invites no instinctively straightforward choice.

That evangelical Protestants should find more in common with Bible-believing, creed-professing, Christ-loving, evangelistic Roman Catholics than with fellow-Presbyterians or fellow-Anglicans may still seem an alien, even repugnant, suggestion to some. Yet this is an era when we may expect to observe some significant re-alignments among communities of Christians – such is the gravity of the departure from the

apostolic faith that is proceeding apace in some traditional denominations. We dare not remain trapped unthinkingly in the agenda set by past divisions. Scotland has perhaps a lot of catching up to do. We badly need an Evangelical-Catholic dialogue within Scotland, and we must move to welcome developments such as the Dublin-based Evangelical Catholic Initiative, which unites 'Catholic Christians who are evangelical by conviction and committed to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ'.

The spectre of doctrinal indifferentism will already be haunting the minds of some readers. I doubt if our Catholic co-conversationalists would allow it to hover around for long. (It is a common early experience of inter-confessional dialogue that each side gains a sharpened awareness of its own distinctives.) In any case, the day is coming and now is, when orthodoxy alone will not save the church, nor enable her to grow. Which is reason enough to take ECT and the accompanying book with respectful seriousness. There are many others.

Correction

In the last issue of the *Bulletin* (14:1, Spring 1996) a regrettable misprint occurred in the article by Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh, 'Creative Tensions: Personal Reflections of an Evangelical Christian and Gaelic Poet'. On p. 41, line 8, 'anatomy' should have read 'autonomy'. We apologize to the author for this error.