

# **Ministering to Catholics**

## **Ecumenism**

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One of the greatest challenges in ministering to Catholics is the expectation that people have of cooperation. Our society has drifted toward viewing all religions as equal since the mid twentieth century. To be unwilling to join with others based upon religious beliefs is viewed by most people as being intolerant, and even hateful. There are reasons why uniting with the Catholicism in any way is impossible and today's class will look at why we should refrain from joining with the Roman Catholic Church.

### **1. The division between Catholics and Protestants**

In order to understand the context of this movement toward Ecumenism by the Catholic Church and Evangelical Christian leaders, we must remember the expansive divide that preceded this development. The Roman Catholic response to ideas of the Reformers was about as dramatic an opposition as possible. The Council of Trent was convened in 1545 to condemn many of the central Reformation doctrines in the strongest term possible -- "anathema." The openness to further discussion was thwarted by an unwillingness to include the Protestants in the council in any form other than as mere spectators.

Furthermore, tribunals were established under the Roman Inquisition to root out heresy and combat Protestantism. Its goal of ending the spread of the Reformation included arrests of so-called heretics, intimidation of the masses, the banning of literature in opposition to Rome, and an untold number of deaths and brutalities. Historians debate the number of Protestants killed, with accounts from centuries ago putting the number into the millions. More recently there is evidence to suggest a much smaller number but nevertheless, the killing of many thousands of people who opposed Roman Catholicism in favor of Protestant doctrine made any progress in understanding much more difficult.

While Martin Luther in 1517 meant his reform to move a "poorly informed pope to be a better informed pope," his attitude toward Catholicism by 1540 can be seen in his words, "If I had all the Franciscan friars in one house I would set fire to it." This antagonism by Protestants toward Catholicism is seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith that declared in 1646, "There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof, but is the Antichrist, the Man of Sin, that Son of Perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God" and referred to the Catholic Church as "the whore of Babylon."

The wars of religion between 1562 and 1598 and the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) reclaimed much of the population of Europe for Catholicism but the division was far more than doctrinal and it was so deep that it would endure for centuries.

## **2. The World Missionary Conference (1910)**

In 1910, a conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland to bring a range of Protestants together for the purpose of cooperation and unity in taking the gospel to the world. It was the first high profile successful attempt at Ecumenism and it led to the establishment of the International Missionary Council in 1921 and ultimately the World Council of Churches in 1948.

The significance of the historical context is important to note. Advances in technology greatly aided the ability for travel and communication to take place, fueling the Ecumenical Movement. Also, the Fundamental-Modernist Controversy was in full swing in the early twentieth century. As the growth of liberal theology spread among churches, the openness to uniting in spite of doctrinal differences grew as well. The most doctrinally conservative denominations refused to participate in the World Council of Churches.

The Roman Catholic Church was excluded from the World Missionary Conference and World Council of Churches. After the Second Vatican Council it began to participate only as an observer, not as a member. But the growth of the Ecumenical movement worldwide set the stage for the Second Vatican Council.

## **3. The Second Vatican Council (1964)**

Roman Catholicism began its participation as a Church with the Ecumenical Movement with the Second Vatican Council. Its principal objective was to promote the restoration of unity among Christian churches of every kind but with its own unique approach of holding to its own unchanging beliefs.

The degree to which this change in position can be seen by its contrast to the papal bull of Pope Boniface VIII in 1302, “Now, therefore, we declare, say, determine and pronounce that for every human creature it is necessary for salvation to be subject to the authority of the Roman pontiff.” Even the First Vatican Council referred to Protestants as schismatics and heretics.

Vatican II set forth three principles to guide it down the path of ecumenism:

- a. All Catholics should promote ecumenism

The means by which this promotion of ecumenism is to take place is by avoiding all unfair criticism of those from other churches. This is in order to promote understanding and cooperation, particularly by the experts in the Catholic clergy. This form of ecumenism was in the spirit of collegiality but struggled when it was put into practice. The pastoral approach of Pope John XXIII was kind and led to the belief that the promotion of ecumenism meant a change in beliefs. Yet it was largely a change in tone, and to a much lesser extent, a change in approach to ministry.

b. Non-Catholics were separated brethren

Vatican II taught that non-Catholics who were baptized are “separated brethren.” Note that this status still requires baptism, thus furthering the Catholic view that baptism infuses God’s grace for salvation. This still left Protestants short of the fullness of faith in the Catholic Church but declared them as brethren in the faith.

This declaration left unchanged the doctrines that divided Catholics and Protestants in the first place. Vatican II affirmed the decrees on the doctrine of justification by faith and works in the Council of Trent. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, written three decades later by Pope John Paul II affirmed the doctrines of the Council of Trent, with all the weight as an infallible Ecumenical Council.

How can Protestants be both “separated brethren” and “heretics?” Protestants are accepted as brethren by Catholicism if they are baptized by a Christian church (which was left undefined) but are still heretical in that they have departed from the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

c. Christ established the Roman Catholic Church

This remained the foremost barrier to complete acceptance of the ecumenical movement by the Catholic Church. Christ gave the Roman Catholic Church the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit, and the bishops with the Pope as the head of the Church. The purpose of this was for the very sake of the unity that ecumenism sought.

In particular, the Catholic view of the Lord’s Supper caused it to be unable to fully embrace other churches. The Eucharist is uniquely Catholic as the body and blood. All Catholic bishops trace their office back to the apostles and no Protestant church minister is apostolically commissioned. In the eyes of the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church also traces itself back apostolically and therefore offers the real Eucharist, but it is separated by the Great Schism. Since Catholics can’t take communion at a Protestant Church and since Protestants cannot take communion at a Catholic Church, true unity can only be achieved by Protestants returning to the Catholic Church.

The words of the Second Vatican Council explain exactly what the desired outcome of their newfound openness to ecumenism ought to be: “The results will be that, little by little, as the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion are overcome, all Christians will be gathered, in common celebration of the Eucharist, into the unity of the one and only Church, which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time.”

Overlooked in the proclamation that baptized Protestants were separated brethren was the desire for the separated brethren to return to the fold. Being Protestant might not mean one is condemned but it certainly was second rate. The Catholic doctrine leads to viewing those not participating in the Catholic sacraments as spiritually deficient.

#### **4. Evangelicals and Catholics Together (1994)**

In 1994, several respected Catholic and Evangelical church leaders signed a high profile document entitled, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” known as ECT. The two main leaders, Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, and Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest who was formerly a Lutheran minister, laid a foundation for what they saw was an opportunity to build a common working context for ministry into the twenty-first century. Their approach was to emphasize the agreements between Catholics and Evangelicals to create a “spirit of Ecumenism” and to intentionally avoid the many areas of doctrinal disagreement by postponing discussion into the future. They sought to “explore patterns of working and witnessing together in order to advance the one mission of Christ.”

A variety of signatories and endorsements were from all corners of Evangelicalism. The motivation for such an alliance was the perceived degradation of morality in society, particularly with regard to the rights of the unborn, regarding medical ethics. As a general rule, the more committed you are to combatting the moral and social problems in society, the more likely you are to endorse working with those of different faiths. The prevalent Evangelical view saw Catholics as allies in the political arena and in social action.

What has been the unfortunate outcome of these ecumenical advancements by Protestants is the undermining of the commitment of many Christians to the evangelization of Catholics. If we are to be working with Catholics, this presupposes that we are fine with them remaining in the Catholic Church. By statements of these evangelical leaders that “evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ,” the inevitable conclusion drawn was that Catholics are able to come to faith through the teaching of their church.

When we consider the issue of ministering to Catholics, it is clear to see what the perspective the ECT statement held concerning the desire to reach Catholics for Christ:

“Three observations are in order in connection with proselytizing. First, as much as we might believe one community is more fully in accord with the Gospel than another, we as Evangelicals and Catholics affirm that opportunity and means for growth in Christian discipleship are available in our several communities. Second, the decision of the committed Christian with respect to his communal allegiance and participation must be assiduously respected. Third, in view of the large number of non-Christians in the world and the enormous challenge of our common evangelistic task, it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among active adherents of another Christian community.”

Given the vast difference between the numbers of Catholics moving to evangelical churches versus evangelicals moving to Catholicism, it is obvious to whom this statement was primarily directed. Catholicism was largely validated by this view that resources ought to be moved elsewhere in the gospel mission. ECT dampened the eagerness of Evangelicals to evangelize Catholics.

This statement caused far more reaction among the evangelical community than it did among Catholicism. The Catholic signatories were American, and American Catholics have hardly been a leading voice for the Vatican. Indeed, among American Catholics it was far less controversial since they already accepted Protestants as separated brethren by virtue of their baptism.

Evangelicals were divided in their support for the ECT statement. The most common response was a mixture of acknowledging the need for cooperation for societal change while recognizing the doctrinal differences that exist. The most significant result of the ECT statement was how few the number was of Evangelicals leaders who came out opposed to it. It became common for evangelicals to view Catholics as partners for the faith more than a mission field to reach.

As we reflect upon the legacy of ECT two decades later, we find the society has made only negative social progress. Sin is more accepted in our society than ever. The equivocation on the doctrinal principles of the Reformation brought none of the hoped for outcomes. We can conclude that setting aside doctrinal differences for the sake of political expediency does not deliver the desired end. What has changed is a diminished enthusiasm for ministering to Catholics among evangelicals.

## **5. Evaluation of ecumenism**

Generally speaking, those with the biggest appetite for working together with various types of churches within Christendom are those with the lightest emphasis on Bible doctrine. The more important doctrinal truth is to you, the less willing you are to compromise those convictions for the sake of unity.

In order to understand true Christian unity, we must look at it from the perspective of the Bible rather than the practice of churches. Disunity existed in the early church as we find division between leaders such as Paul and Barnabas, and between church attenders (1 John 2:19). The biblical cases of division are not addressed in Scripture as a matter of ecclesiastical failure.

The hallmark Bible verse of the ecumenical movement is John 17:21, “that they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.” This prayer of Jesus is not just a hoped for eventuality but is reality. Jesus’ words are prefaced by “that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word.” In other words, the prayer of Jesus was for those who believe in Him through the Scripture.

Those who are true believers in Jesus are united in Him. We are truly brothers and sisters in Christ. This is not the case with those who attend the same church, or those who join together inter-denominationally. Our unity in Christ is the truth and the means by which our unity is expressed through the truth of God’s Word.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:10, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and the same judgment.” This is why he wrote his epistles, so that we may be of the same mind and the same judgment. The common source of understanding leads us to be of the same mind and the same judgment in the Scripture and only the Scripture.

Any form of unity that is not completely based upon the Word of God is only a façade. The reason these ecumenical events are short-lived is because they are a mile wide and an inch deep. Lack of doctrinal depth allows no solid foundation for ministry. There is no ability to avoid conflict and when conflict occurs there is no common source for truth.

With regard to Catholicism, the ecumenical movement faces the same obstacles because the ultimate authority for the Catholic Church is the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. There cannot be true unity unless we join under the same source of authority and by doing so we become Catholic. Otherwise, conflict is inevitable.

## **6. Conclusion**

The general interest by the Catholic Church in ecumenism is not to unify the Catholic Church with Protestant Churches. Rather it serves to stem the tide of conversion from Catholicism and to secondarily bring Protestants back to communion with Catholicism since in the words of Vatican II, “unity subsists in the Catholic Church.” Every attempt to join together will face strict limits due to the Catholic view of sacramentalism.

To join together with the Roman Catholic Church undermines the gospel. It is impossible to speak clearly and boldly regarding the true Christian faith by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone for our efforts will only be viewed as “proselytizing.” We cannot have functional unity until the authority of Scripture triumphs over any church. This perspective was the view of the Reformers and the Protestant churches for centuries even *before* the declaration of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council on July 18, 1870. This perspective was also their view at a time when the Catholic emphasis on devotion to Mary was still in its early stages.

Nevertheless, we can eagerly join with individual Catholics apart from the Catholic Church. We should pursue friendship with them for Christ’s sake. The Lord can use our genuine faith and eagerness for His truth to draw them to the realization that the Catholic religion is only a form of godliness without the power to bring changed lives. We do not need to validate Catholicism as a whole or emphasize areas of agreement over disagreement in order to have a fruitful ministry relationship with Catholics. Indeed, when we fail to discuss important areas of difference we lose the power of the gospel that brings life change to those who are lost in the practice of religion.

Be resolved to seek out opportunities to help Catholics you may know to learn of Christ through faith alone apart from works. Help them to see the Bible is the sole source of spiritual truth of God, not the Church and through that to trust Jesus alone for salvation.