

Changing American Evangelical Attitudes towards Roman Catholics: 1960-2000

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Introduction

salvation.⁸

Such changes and claims are extraordinary when we consider the tortured history between these two groups over the centuries, as well as the hostile climate that existed just four decades ago. There is a remarkable new openness between many Catholics and evangelicals. The

attitude? There are at least ten that I would like to identify. Looking at them will help us better understand ourselves and the context in which we do ministry in the first decade of a new century.

The 1960 election of John F. Kennedy

In 1960, anti-Catholicism was not merely an evangelical phenomenon. It was an American phenomenon. Both secularists and Christians, both evangelicals and non-evangelical Protestants, worried about the universal claims of Rome. The prospect of having a Roman Catholic president frightened many. For this reason John F. Kennedy's candidacy in the 1960 presidential election caused a major controversy.

Evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike shared the belief that the Roman Catholic Church could never change. It would not embrace religious freedom, and it would

Vatican II

If the first nail in the coffin of political anti-Catholicism was the 1960 Kennedy election, the second nail was Vatican II (1962-1965). The Vatican council was convened under Pope John XXIII for the purpose of aggiornamento or “up dating” the church so it would be more relevant to the present age. Whereas the last two Catholic Councils, Trent (1545-63) and Vatican I (1869-1870), took a defensive and antagonistic stance toward Protestantism, Vatican II had a different spirit. Among other things, the council called for a

“pope,” not only because he has preached the gospel to more people than anyone else in history, but also because, more than anyone else, he has been a spokesman for the evangelical movement.

Part of Graham’s appeal, and we could say part of the strength of the entire evangelical movement, has been the simple proclamation of the gospel. To his credit, Graham has been committed to reaching people from all kinds of backgrounds—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and unchurched. In so doing, Graham, as well as the evangelical movement, has not only appealed to Catholics, but brought many crossovers from Catholicism into evangelical churches.

Graham has often admitted that early in his life he spoke against and did not cooperate with Roman Catholics. Coming out of a Fundamentalist background that took him from Bob Jones University to the Florida Bible Institute to ordination in the Southern Baptist Convention to Wheaton College, he was not shy about speaking out against Modernism, Romanism and Communism. Not only did Graham take a negative view of Catholics, they also took a negative view of him!

By the late 1940’s Graham began to moderate his tone. He began to seek a broader sponsorship for his meetings. He adopted a policy of not criticizing other religious groups. All this took place while his associates were denying that any changes were taking place. Jerry Beven, Graham’s executive secretary wrote to Fundamentalist critics saying:

You asked if Billy Graham had invited Roman Catholics and Jews to cooperate in the evangelistic meetings. Such a thought, even if the reporter did suggest it as having come from Mr. Graham, seems ridiculous to me. Surely you must

know that it is not true. . . further, that you should give any credence to the idea that Mr. Graham would ever turn over any decision card to the Roman Catholic Church seems inconceivable.¹⁶

Over time, the inconceivable took place. While he did not modify his basic message, he did modify his strategy. Kennedy’s election prompted him not to speak critically of Catholics. Cooperation seemed to be a matter of evangelistic necessity when he visited Latin American nations where there was a small Protestant base. He was ready to work with whomever was willing. The same could be said of his ministry in Communist nations.

Billy Graham’s Catholic strategy evolved over time. Early on he called the Catholic bishop in an area to acquaint him with his ministry and invite him to the meetings. In his 1964 New England Crusade, he received an unprecedented endorsement by Cardinal Cushing. Then came invitations to sit on the platform. In 1977 at his University of Notre Dame Crusade he made an effort to tailor the invitation to his audience. Catholics were invited to make “commitments to Christ” or to “reconfirm their confirmation” as opposed to his more typical appeal to make a “decision for Christ.”¹⁷ In 1978 he had the opportunity to preach a full evangelistic sermon in a Roman Catholic church in Poland. In 1981 he met with the newly elected pope, John Paul II. Early in the Reagan administration he recommended the President appoint a full U.S.

lism and ecumenical outreach attempted to exploit the common ground of "mere Christianity" with all denominational groups. When Crusades were set up in American cities, an entire strategy to win Catholic cooperation was set in motion. He believed that blessing and sponsorship by an archdiocese meant wide Catholic participation. After a crusade, the archdiocese was provided with names and addresses of Catholics who responded. By the late 1980s, Roman Catholics made up the largest single religious group attending his citywide crusades.

In pursuing "an ecumenism of the gospel" Graham had many critics. Some, like Bob Jones, Sr., said he was "selling our

of the Holy Spirit”—a unity born out of experience. Some of the Catholic Charismatics even referred to themselves as “evangelical Catholics.” They spoke the language of evangelicals, saying that salvation cannot be earned but is a free gift, that there is only one mediator between God and man—Jesus Christ, that the Eucharist is not a repetition of Calvary since Jesus died once for all. Some Catholic Charismatics were even boasting of their ability to affirm all the tenets of the evangelical Lausanne Covenant of 1974.¹⁸

Of course, not all Catholic Charismatics were this evangelical. In fact, Catholic evangelicals remain a small minority. Many Catholic Charismatics continue to adhere to Catholic doctrine, sacramental theology, and devotion to Mary. Ongoing talks in the International Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue have also pointed out these disagreements (e.g., disagreements about the Bible, baptism, the Holy Spirit, the church, and Mary).

Political Ecumenism of the 1980s and 1990s

Yet another factor that contributed to the changing of American evangelical attitudes was their re-entry into the political arena. One consequence of the neo-evangelical call to forsake Fundamentalist isolationism and to “penetrate the world for Christ” was the contact evangelicals have with others in the political arena—including Catholics. The practicalities of local political involvement brought evangelicals on the Right and the Left to discover “an ecumenism of the trenches.”

On the Right, the discovery was prompted by the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which liberalized abortion laws. When the court made its ruling, evangelicals were divided. The

strongest condemnation came from the Catholic church. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, passed a resolution in 1971, affirming a woman’s right to have an abortion if giving birth posed any physical or emotional dangers.¹⁹ *Christianity Today*, on the other hand, came out immediately and condemned the *Roe v. Wade* decision. The majority of evangelicals were not ready to act on this issue. Through the efforts of the Christian Action Council and especially the influence of Francis Schaeffer, things began to change.

Schaeffer’s books and films highlighted the issue and argued for an evangelical co-belligerency. Co-belligerency for the cause of social justice is good. Schaeffer made a distinction between a co-belligerent and an ally. Co-belligerency is temporary and focused at specific points. Schaeffer warned against allying with groups that have a non-Christian base. But he encouraged co-belligerency and criticized evangelicals for leaving the battle for human life to the Catholics.²⁰ Schaeffer’s influence on evangelical and Fundamentalist leaders was immense. He had a major role in Jerry Falwell’s political awakening, which in turn prepared Falwell for his 1979 encounter with Catholic activist Paul Weyrich. That meeting laid the foundations for the Moral Majority. Schaeffer’s co-belligerency arguments also influenced the leaders of Operation Rescue. Moreover, religious freedom battles brought together Catholic and evangelical activists. In the mid-1970s the IRS and other government agencies had a series of run-ins with the Christian School movement. Catholics and evangelicals joined together to fight them. Then came a similar collaboration on religious freedom in broadcasting in 1979.

publishing, media influence, community service, emergency relief, development, justice issues, marriage, and family. In the area of common worship, ERCDOM

of our changing attitudes as well as an influencing factor themselves.

ECT I put a name on what was already happening. In many ways it was a continuation of an existing dialogue. ERCDOM said that “every possible opportunity for common witness should be taken except where conscience forbids.”²⁶ In this sense, ECT was simply taking up the mandate that ERCDOM handed them.

Both ECT documents seek to persuade evangelicals and Catholics to “contend together.” While ECT I includes some loaded theological statements that are left intentionally vague, its burden seems to be a call for a common Christian witness in the public square. It emphasizes the

not an official accord but rather a good faith effort between some Roman Catholics and some evangelicals. Like ECT I, it did not claim to be a complete agreement but a significant first step.

Did this step indicate that Rome was moving away from its historic understanding of justification? Some think so. They point to the renaissance in Catholic theology over the last three decades, which seems to be moving towards a Reformation understanding of certain issues. That is, there is a shift away from scholasticism and toward a more theocentric outlook. They also point to the increased recognition among Catholic Biblical scholars of the forensic character and centrality of justification.²⁸ They point out that some of the Catholic ECT II signers have been influenced by the Charismatic renewal and are more driven by Scripture than tradition. They also point to the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church.²⁹ Since we cannot expect everything to change at once, ECT defenders tell us, we ought to be patient and encourage any movement we see.

Others, however, think that Catholic leaders who signed these statements may be influenced more by contemporary models of doctrinal development. John Henry Newman in the 19th century tried to merge Protestant and Catholic ideas on justification to include both imputation and infusion. Avery Dulles, a signer of both ECT I and ECT II, believes that a theological concept can be illustrated by the use of multiple models that are to be kept in tension with each other. Joseph Ratzinger developed the idea of a hermeneutics of unity which involves reading past dogma and historical statements in

the context of the entire tradition and with a deeper understanding of the Bible. Time will tell if the ECT discussions signal a Catholic shift or not. What ultimately matters is whether the official teaching voice of Rome will make the same remarkable affirmations.

Despite the shortcomings of ECT I and by faith alone thing on the Catholic side, evangelicals talking about the very heart of the gospel. It was the first such dialogue going on between evangelicals and Catholics on American soil. This is a development that has not been noted.

ECT also prompted a serious discussion among evangelicals themselves. For the truth is, many evangelical organizations had been downplaying the significance of justification by faith alone. ECT raised the profile of this very critical doctrine. Evangelicalism tends to be minimalistic in its doctrinal affirmation. Evangelicals have not been explicit enough about justification. While it may be an assumed belief, numerous evangelical parachurch organizations do not even mention justification in

and revealed that evangelicals have von a problem articulating a doctrinal statement of justification by faith

evangelical and Catholic attitudes is the influence of Americanization, which conditions us to adapt to plurality. American life can have a “homogenizing” effect on evangelicals and Catholics. The more distanced we are from old European contexts, the more Americans of all theological persuasions share in the values of our own common culture. This shapes us in many ways. It shapes us by its separation of religion and state. It shapes us through

lic church unambiguously affirms the very heart of the gospel message, and bows before the supreme authority of the Scriptures.

ENDNOTES

¹¹Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President* (New York: Atheneum House, 1961) 271.

²²Evangelicalism is a post-Fundamentalist renewal movement that includes but is not confined to denominations among Protestant churches. It attempted to avoid the weaknesses of both modernism and Fundamentalism. Theologically, evangelicalism has emphasized the good news of God's grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, it holds to all of the most basic doctrines of the Bible as summarized in its historic confessions, and it recognizes the Bible as the final authoritative source for all doctrine. Yet in saying this, the wide diversity of the evangelical movement must be kept in mind (varieties include: Fundamentalist, Dispensational, Independent, Reformed, Anabaptist, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Radical, African American, and Mainline evangelicals). Estimates for evangelicals in the United States range from 30-66 million.

³³George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 84.

⁴⁴Harold Lindsell, *A Christian Philosophy of Missions* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1949) 54, 77, 223.

⁵⁵Joel Carpenter, ed., *A New Coalition: Early Documents of the National Association of Evangelicals* (New York: Garland, 1988) 38; United We Stand, May 3-6, 1943, "A Report of the Constitutional Convention of the National Association of Evan-

gelicals," 17, 38, 61. Also see "Evangelical Action: A Report of the Organization of the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action," 26.

⁶⁶American Roman Catholicism is part of a worldwide religious body representing all churches in union with the Bishop of Rome. It asserts equal devotion to Scripture and tradition. There are some 60 million Roman Catholics in the United States, making it the largest religious denomination in the nation. While it is united by a clear structural unity, it is also a complex, diverse body. Its diversity is seen in the ethnic make up

