

Hindrances of the Mind: The Scandal of Evangelical Thinking

Sometimes our presuppositions skew our understanding of Scripture and even how to use it. Rick Wade looks at some ideas and attitudes from our past that create hindrances to sound thinking.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

In our efforts to engage our society for Christ, we need to understand that people often don't see the world aright because of problems with the way they think. Their beliefs or attitudes—or even what they think about *thinking*—create stumbling blocks. But lest we get too puffed up, we need to recognize that we aren't immune to that ourselves; Christians don't always think well, either.

Before we can effectively engage our society on this level we need to engage ourselves. We wonder why, with so many people professing faith today, we aren't able to have a greater impact on our society. It's often said that we aren't *doing* enough. Another reason is that we aren't *thinking* enough.

Some time ago evangelicals lost significance in the intellectual centers of the country. Historian Mark Noll notes that “on any given Sunday in the United States and Canada, a majority of those who attend church hold evangelical beliefs and follow norms of evangelical practice, yet in neither country do these great numbers of practicing evangelicals appear to play significant roles in either nation's intellectual life.”^[1] Apart from concerns about Christians in academia, however, the rest of us should consider our own habits of thinking. I'm not speaking about the simple

attainment of knowledge; I'm talking about how certain attitudes and assumptions affect how we think.

This article is a brief examination of the evangelical mind today. What are some weaknesses in evangelical thinking that stunt our influence in society? How did we get to this place?

Noll names four characteristics of American evangelicals, our legacy from the nineteenth century: *populism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *intuitionism*. By *populism*, he means that evangelical Christians see the strength of the church (on the human level, of course) as residing in the people in the pews rather than those in the pulpits. By *activism*, he refers to the lack of patience for extended contemplation and the desire to be about the work of the Lord. *Biblicism* refers to the belief that truth is only found in Scripture. *Intuitionism* refers to the tendency to go with gut-level responses rather than studying matters with any thoroughness.

For all the possibilities this form of Christianity offers, insofar as this description is accurate, it leaves little room for the life of the mind. Yes, it's important that we *do* things for the Lord. But don't we need to *think* before we *do*? Could one of the things we need to *do* be to *think*? The Bible is indeed our final authority, but is knowledge obtainable elsewhere? And is intuition sufficient for understanding what the Bible writers meant given the fact that they wrote in another time and cultural context? Or for understanding the complex issues of our day—or even the perennial issues of the human experience?

Someone might still be wondering if this is really an important issue. As long as we're doing God's work, why do we need to waste time worrying over a lot of ivory tower speculation? Read what Noll says as he summarizes the importance of the life of the mind for the church:

Where Christian faith is securely rooted, where it penetrates

deeply into a culture to change individual lives and redirect institutions, where it continues for more than a generation as a living testimony to the grace of God—in these situations, we almost invariably find Christians ardently cultivating the intellect for the glory of God.

He continues: “The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church.” What results when serious thinking isn’t a characteristic of the church? “The path to danger is not always the same,” he says, “but the results of neglecting the mind are uniform: Christian faith degenerates, lapses into gross error, or simply passes out of existence.”[\[2\]](#)

Did you catch that? This is no minor issue. To say that what is eternal is all that’s important, that we needn’t waste a lot of time on the things of this world which is destined to burn up anyway, might seem to reflect biblical teaching, but it doesn’t. We aren’t here suggesting that the things of the earth in themselves are more important than the things of heaven. Neither are we saying everyone has to be a scholar. What we’re saying is that we need to think, we need to learn, we need to understand the world we live in if we want to be taken seriously and in turn more strongly influence the world around us. Some of us *should* be scholars, however, and scholars who can command the respect of peers both inside and outside the church. But all of us need to learn to think well on whatever level we live. We should learn *about* the world, and we should learn *from* the world. There is value in this world because it was created by God, because it is the arena in which redemption was accomplished, because it is where we live out our Christianity each day, and because it is where we meet unbelievers and seek to reach them for Christ. Our investment is in heaven, but it is here where we work out our salvation.

So, how did we get to our present state? Let's look at the development of this mentality in our nation's short history.

Pietism

Two factors from our past, which had and still have ramifications for the evangelical mind, were Pietism and populism.

Pietism had its roots in the late seventeenth century in Europe as a reaction to the cold, formalistic ritualism so prevalent in the church. Christianity seemed more a topic of philosophical speculation and argument than a living religion. Philipp Jakob Spener, a German pastor, sought reform in the lives of the people in the pews. He "instituted [pious assemblies] to meet on Wednesdays and Sundays to pray, to discuss the previous week's sermon, and to apply passages from Scripture and devotional writings to individual lives."[\[3\]](#) In 1675, Spener wrote *Pia Desideria* (or, *Pious Wishes*) in which he outlined his ideas for reform. They included a renewed emphasis on the Bible, the revival of the priesthood of the believer, an emphasis on Christian practice, and the preaching of understandable sermons.

Pietism spread in several directions as the years passed. The Moravians, who significantly influenced John Wesley, "carried the pietistic concern for personal spirituality almost literally around the world." Pietism was influential among Mennonites, Brethren, and Dutch Reformed Christians. Its ideas can be seen in the teachings of Cotton Mather and William Law, and in the preaching of the American Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century.

Pietism had the effect of shifting the locus of authority away from tradition and the established church leadership to the individual Christian. Not everyone was in favor of this. Some church leaders opposed the movement for selfish reasons, but some were genuinely concerned about the possibility of

“rampant subjectivity and anti-intellectualism.” Separationism was another problem. Although Spener never called for it, some people did separate from the established churches.

On the positive side, one finds in Pietism a strong commitment to Scripture, the rejection of cold orthodoxy, and an emphasis on authentic personal experience. Says Noll, “It was, in one sense, the Christian answer to what has been called the discovery of the individual’ by providing a Christian form to the individualism and practical-mindedness of a Europe in transition to modern times.” Pietism has been a source of renewal in cold churches, an encouragement to lay people to get involved in ministry, and an impulse for individuals to always be seeking after God.

On the negative side, however, Pietism led to subjectivism and emotionalism. It provided an excuse for anti-intellectualism and for the neglect of careful scholarship. Lessons learned by Christians in previous centuries no longer needed to be considered since one’s present experience with God was the most important thing. Lastly, it inclined some people to establish rather legalistic codes of morality as they sought evidence of spirituality in others’ lives.

A surprising result of Pietism—given its primary goal of bringing Christians more into the light of truth—was the way it led away from truth. Noll notes that

Unchecked Pietism . . . played a role in the development of theological liberalism with liberalism’s fascination for the forms of religious experience. It played a part in developing the humanistic romanticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where a vague nature mysticism replaced a more orthodox understanding of God and the world. And for more orthodox believers, Pietism sometimes led to a morbid fixation upon the Christian’s personal state at the expense of evangelism, study, or social outreach. . . . The Pietist attack on self-conscious Christian thinking . . . meant the

weakening of the faith toward sentimentality, its captivity by alien philosophies, or its decline to dangerous modernisms.{4}

While Pietism had (and has) its positive aspects, with respect to the life of the mind, it has had a detrimental effect. The emphasis on the individual makes the rest of the world less important, and it provides no incentive to be open to anything but the individual's own spirituality.

Populism

The second factor which continues to affect the way we think is America's populist mentality. *Populism* is a concern for "the perceived interests of ordinary people, as opposed to those of a privileged elite." {5} Although populism didn't form into a political movement until the late nineteenth century, it characterized the mentality of Americans from the early days of our country's history.

Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that, "In the original American populist dream, the omniscience of the common man was fundamental and indispensable." {6} Class differences were rejected; egalitarianism was the new order of things. Hofstadter says that early exponents of popular democracy "meant . . . to subordinate educated as well as propertied leadership. . . . [popular democracy] reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, oversophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and the well-to-do." {7} In fact, there developed a real bias against and a distrust of the elite, such as churchmen who were part of the hereditary structure of church leadership, and academicians.

Anti-Intellectualism

In the early days of America's founding, there was an attitude of sticking to the basic things of life. According to this way

of thinking, “there is a persistent preference of the ‘wisdom’ of intuition, which is deemed to be natural or God-given, over rationality, which is cultivated and artificial.”[\[8\]](#)

This confidence in the intuitive wisdom of the common man, together with the distrust of the educated elite, produced in America a distinct anti-intellectualism. “Anti-intellectualism,” in Hofstadter’s use, does not necessarily mean “unintelligent.” He defines it as “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life.”[\[9\]](#) Intelligence *per se* isn’t a problem . . . as long as it is being put to practical use. But the contemplation of ideas which have no immediately discernible practical use is thought to be a waste of time.

Still today, the word “intellectual” usually carries negative connotations. “Intellectual” and “ivory tower” are two terms often heard together, and they aren’t complimentary descriptions! Noll notes that the activist, pragmatic, and utilitarian “ethos” of America “allows little space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment.”[\[10\]](#) A problem with this mentality is that it demands the distilling of ideas into immediately usable information. Speaking of evangelicals specifically, Canadian scholar N. K. Clifford states the problem bluntly: “The Evangelical Protestant mind has never relished complexity. Indeed its crusading genius, whether in religion or politics, has always tended toward an oversimplification of issues and the substitution of inspiration and zeal for critical analysis and serious reflection. The limitations of such a mind-set were less apparent in the relative simplicity of a rural frontier society.” [\[11\]](#) Our world is much more complex today, and it requires more focused, deep, and sustained thinking.

Someone might object that evangelicals have done some serious thinking and writing in some areas of study, and that is

certainly true. Apologetics is one area in which that is the case. But as Noll says, "In our past we have much more eagerly leaped to defend the faith than to explore its implications for the intellectual life."[\[12\]](#) It is one thing to shore up one's own defenses (a worthy project in itself), but quite another to seek to understand the world for its own sake—or even for the sake of enlarging our understanding of God. For those who *are* out in the secular marketplace and in academia, are distinctively Christian beliefs informing their work? Or are they having to leave them at home to make life easier on the job (or to be able to stay in their positions at all)?

Antitraditionalism

In an article on the era of the Enlightenment, I wrote this:

Enlightenment philosophers taught us to see the world as a collection of scientific facts, to look forward instead of back to the wisdom of the past, and to see the individual as the final authority for what is true. The ideal is the individual who examines the raw data of experience with no prior value commitments, with a view to discovering something new. Unfortunately, knowledge was pursued at the expense of wisdom. The past now had little relevance. What could those who lived in the past tell us that would be relevant for today? Besides, people in the past were dominated by the church. Such superstition was no longer to be allowed to rule our lives.[\[13\]](#)

We were now able to look at the facts for ourselves; we had no need for anyone else to teach us anything. Change was in the air; what was new was what was important, not what happened in the past. Thus was formed the characteristic of *antitraditionalism*.

We assume that, since the world is so much different today, those who've gone on before us have little to say to us since they couldn't imagine a world like ours. We forget that human

nature hasn't changed, and that wisdom isn't bound by time or by technological advancement. Nor has God changed through time in keeping with our advancement! We can learn from those who've gone on before us about what the Scriptures mean, what God is like, how we can best live lives marked by wisdom, and more.

Evangelism and preaching

What significance did these ideas and attitudes have for the proclamation of the Gospel?

First, with respect to evangelism, the revivalism of the nineteenth century set the tone for popular evangelical thought. *Revivalism* was a movement in Christianity that emphasized the whole-hearted acceptance of the Gospel message *now*. It developed in the eighteenth century and came to full flower in the nineteenth. Revivalism was very populist in tone; the message of salvation was aimed at the broadest audience. Preaching was kept simple and "aimed at an emotional response."[\[14\]](#) The choice was plain: repent and believe the Gospel *today*. Don't wait until tomorrow. There was no need to give sustained thought to the matter, no need to look to others—either contemporaries or those who lived in the past—for insight and understanding about the faith. Salvation was individual and the call to decide was immediate.[\[15\]](#)

As revivalism moved into the South and West, "it became more primitive, more emotional, more given to ecstatic' manifestations."[\[16\]](#) Preachers often adopted the anti-intellectual prejudices of the populace. Adding to the already populist mentality was the fact that pioneers moved west much faster than institutions could follow (including schools). Missionaries "would have been ineffective in converting their moving flocks if they had not been able to develop a vernacular style in preaching, and if they had failed to share or to simulate in some degree the sensibilities and prejudices of their audiences—anti-authority, anti-aristocracy, anti-

Eastern, anti-learning.”[\[17\]](#)

This prejudice against learning began to harden among both laity and clergy. Hofstadter explains the characteristic understanding of the relation of faith and learning this way: “One begins with the hardly contestable proposition that religious faith is not, in the main, propagated by logic or learning. One moves on from this to the idea that it is best propagated . . . by men who have been [sic] unlearned and ignorant. It seems to follow from this that the kind of wisdom and truth possessed by such men is superior to what learned and cultivated minds have. In fact, learning and cultivation appear to be handicaps in the propagation of faith.”[\[18\]](#)

A New Way of Knowing Truth

Pietism and populism served to foster a mentality of subjectivism, antitraditionalism, and anti-intellectualism. To this was added a framework of thought drawing from science and philosophy which significantly affected the way evangelicals thought about their faith and the world.

Within the church, there was a need to find a way to prevent Christian doctrine from becoming a purely individualistic affair following the separation from the Roman Church. If there were ways to prove doctrine objectively true, Christians would have to give assent to it. With respect to society in general, now that science was the source of knowledge, evangelicals felt the need to show that Christianity could stand up to rigorous scientific verification so the church would remain a respected institution. The issue was how we know truth, and how this understanding was to be applied to the interpretation of the Bible.

Although romantic tendencies were becoming more visible in Protestantism during this period, the orientation of conservatives was primarily in the direction of fact rather than feeling. In the eighteenth century a new framework of

thought began developing which seemed to answer these needs, and which has strongly influenced the character of evangelical Christianity ever since. This framework had two primary elements: Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and Baconian science.

Scottish Common Sense philosophy

Although evangelicals rejected the skeptical aspects of the Enlightenment,^{19} they accepted with open arms one type of Enlightenment thought known as Scottish Common Sense Realism. Common Sense philosophers believed that everyone has mental faculties that produce beliefs which we rely upon in everyday life, such as the existence of the external world, the reality of other minds, the reliability of our senses, our abilities to reason, our memories, etc. These faculties enable everyone to “grasp the basic realities of nature and morality.”^{20} These beliefs weren’t considered culture-derived or culture-bound; they were the shared experience of all mankind, including the Bible writers.^{21}

Historian George Marsden notes that “Common Sense had a special appeal in America because it purported to be an anti-philosophy.”^{22} It pitted the common person against the speculative philosophers. Evangelicals took to it easily because of its populist appeal, because “it was so intuitive, so instinctual, so much a part of second nature.”^{23} In fact, this philosophy was so widely embraced in Protestantism that, as one man said, “by most persons [Protestantism and Common Sense] are considered as necessary parts of the same system.”^{24} “So basic did this reasoning become,” says Noll, “that even self-consciously orthodox evangelicals had no qualms about resting the entire edifice of the faith on the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment.”^{25}

Baconian science

The other component of the framework of thought was the

scientific method of Francis Bacon. Bacon advocated a rigorous empiricism, “an inductive method of discovering truth, founded upon empirical observation, analysis of observed data, inference resulting in hypotheses, and verification of hypotheses through continued observation and experiment.”[\[26\]](#) The goal was “objective, disinterested, unbiased, and neutral science.”[\[27\]](#) George Marsden says that Scottish Common Sense philosophy provided a basis for faith in this scientific method. On the foundation of common sense we can understand the laws of nature by employing the Baconian method of examining the evidences and classifying the facts.

Evangelicals began to use this method to interpret Scripture. The Bible was seen as a collection of facts which could be understood by anyone of reasonable intelligence just by knowing what the words meant. Across the denominations, Marsden tells us, “there prevailed a faith in immutable truth seen clearly by inductive scientific reasoning in Scripture and nature alike.”[\[28\]](#)

Significance for Evangelicals

What was the significance of all this for evangelicals? “By and large, mid-nineteenth-century American theologians were champions of scientific reasoning and scientific advance,” says Marsden. “They had full confidence in the capacities of the scientific method for discovering truth exactly and objectively.” Conservative Christians took the scientific principles used for studying nature and applied them to the Bible. “To Protestants it seemed evident that the principle for knowing truth in one area of God’s revelation should parallel those of another area.” This broad acceptance was found across the spectrum of denominations, including Unitarians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists among others. Understanding the Bible became a matter of the commonsensical study of the facts of Scripture. The important question was, What do the words mean? Once that was determined, the Bible could be understood as clearly as could

nature.{29}

Here we must pause, however, and ask an important question. How was it that Christians who took seriously the negative effects of sin on the mind, who tended to emphasize human incapacities and a lack of confidence in human reason, could put so much confidence in a philosophy which depended so highly on reason? The answer is that American society outside the church was repudiating revelation, tradition, and social hierarchy. Baconian Common Sense thought provided a means of defending and promoting traditional values without appealing to such authorities.{30} The desire to make Christianity seem credible in such an environment made it easy to overlook the effects of sin on the mind.

Problems with Common Sense Thought

There were problems with Common Sense thought, however. First, Common Sense was dependent upon a belief in the commonness of our humanity, which, of course, would extend back to the Bible writers. Once the original meaning of the text was understood, the truth was settled. But this created a dilemma, for this understanding of truth as unchanging clashed with the new air of progress and change in the mid-nineteenth century. Shouldn't progress in knowledge affect our interpretation of the Bible, too? {31}

Second, it was supposed that philosophy and science were purely objective disciplines. As one writer notes, however, "The impediments to the use of this method are preconceptions and prejudices." {32} Marsden points out that "science and philosophy operate on various premises—often hidden premises. From a Christian perspective the crucial question is whether these premises reflect a strictly naturalistic outlook or one that may be shaped and guided by data derived from biblical revelation." {33}

It is now widely understood that the scientific method used to

study both nature and Scripture isn't neutral; its use doesn't lead everyone to the same conclusions. Why? Because we filter the data through beliefs already held. Regarding the Bible, we have to understand that it is not simply a book of facts. It is a body of inspired literature written in cultures quite different from ours. What did the authors intend us to understand? How are the various genre of Scripture to be properly interpreted? As already suggested, we have to consider also the preconceptions we bring to the text which influence and are influenced by our reading of it.

The adoption of Baconian Common Sense philosophy for the interpretation of Scripture began to cause evangelicals special problems, primarily in the area of science. The "plain, literal" reading of the text of Genesis 1 and 2 indicated a universe created in six, 24-hour days. It was easy to think, in a time when Christian beliefs were so prevalent, that an honest look at the scientific data would confirm this view. When the data seemed to show otherwise, however, evangelicals had a problem. Should they capitulate and say Genesis was myth? Should they hold fast to their interpretation regardless of the findings of scientists? Should they acknowledge a misinterpretation of the text?

The main point here isn't really the question of the age of the earth. I've used science as an example because it is often the focus of conflict between evangelicals and society. The main point is that evangelicals who based their understanding of the world on an uncritical use of a shaky method of interpretation found themselves at odds with their culture. Earlier I spoke of *biblicism*, the idea that we can only have any confidence in knowledge obtained from Scripture. Evangelicals effectively shut themselves off from any correction that might come from "the book of nature," as it has been called. They made themselves vulnerable by relying on a method which apparently failed them. Says George Marsden:

Christian apologists . . . were placing themselves in a

highly vulnerable position by endorsing the Baconian ideal that the sciences should be completely neutral and freed from religious review at their starting points. . . . Almost without warning one wall of their apologetic edifice was removed and within a generation the place of biblical authority in American intellectual life was in a complete shambles.{34}

Because of an unwillingness to allow their interpretation of Scripture to be informed from things learned from nature, evangelicals became separated from the intellectual life of the nation, and effectively removed an orthodox biblical perspective from learning in general.

Evangelicals and the “Book of Nature”

Because of the place of Scripture in the Protestant tradition, the “book of nature” typically takes a subordinate role among evangelicals. Although Scripture should remain supreme as far as our knowledge goes, some problems arise if we become too rigid in our thinking.

One problem is our response when presented with ideas we believe go against Scripture. In our desire to uphold the full truthfulness of the Bible, we reject any ideas outright which seem to contradict it. This determination creates tension in a variety of areas of learning. When people in any field of endeavor make claims we believe conflict with the Bible, we reject them. And rightly so . . . *if* such ideas really *do* conflict with Scripture. Is it Scripture they contradict, or our interpretation of it?

When ideas seem to conflict with the Bible, we need to be sure our interpretation is correct. Centuries ago Christians believed the Bible supported the view that the earth was at the center of the universe.{35} Scientific studies showed that their interpretation of Scripture was incorrect. This wasn’t a matter of choosing science over the Bible; it was a matter of

allowing the study of nature to correct their wrong interpretation of it.

We hold that the Bible is true in everything it affirms. We need to keep in mind, however, that the primary purpose of Scripture is to tell about God and His ways and will. There is truth the Bible *doesn't* tell; not truth of a redemptive sort, but truth about this world. In the Bible, one will find nothing about the cause and cure of cancer. When we prepare soldiers for duty, we give them more than what one can find in the Bible. These things are obvious, of course. But what about the possibility of learning more about God from studying the things of this earth? Even if we cannot go beyond Scriptural teaching about the nature of God (for most Protestants still reject the natural theology of the Roman Catholic Church), can we get a bigger and clearer picture of the truths of Scripture from learning about this world? From nature and from the brush of artists we can understand more fully what beauty is. From looking at a chart of the genetic structure of a DNA molecule we stand amazed at the wonder of the natural order. From the study of mankind in anthropology we see more clearly how people exhibit the knowledge of the law "written on our hearts," and how because of sin people come to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Another problem for the life of the mind with respect to the world is the view that the world really isn't very important. It's all going to burn up one day anyway, isn't it? This attitude overlooks some important facts. Scripture tells us that God created the natural order; Jesus accomplished His work of redemption within the natural order; and one day the natural order itself will be restored (cf. Gen. 1:1; Rom. 8:21; and 2 Pet. 3:13). It is God's handiwork, and it is wonderful in spite of its fallenness just for what it contains. It also is the setting within which we work out our salvation every day, and it is where we seek to reach people for Christ. The fact that the world is fallen doesn't mean

there is little value in knowing it.

Secular Influences

Evangelicals not only have been influenced by the history of thought in the church over the last couple of centuries, but we're also influenced by secular thought.[{36}](#) Major secularizing social forces of the modern era such as social pluralization and the practical demands of industry significantly altered the way we think. With the rise of industry, America developed into a mobile, uprooted society, where production (and therefore efficiency) was of utmost importance. God became less relevant; to many, belief in God was a hindrance. What counted was what worked. A result of this was the privatization of belief. We either lost the nerve or simply lost interest in letting our beliefs significantly influence our daily lives.

I will forego discussion of these matters, however,[{37}](#) and briefly mention two significant philosophical influences of the twentieth century, pragmatism and existentialism.

Pragmatism

I've spoken already about the orientation of evangelicalism toward the practical. That attitude, so prevalent among most Americans, developed as a school of philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called *pragmatism*, a philosophy which exerted great influence through our schools.

Pragmatism is concerned with how an idea works out in real life. Knowing the practical consequences of an idea tells us what the concept really *means*. And verifying it in concrete ways shows its *truth*. Pragmatism is concerned with the "cash value" of an idea.[{38}](#)

Pragmatism is seen in the evangelical church when Christians see the practical application of a doctrine as the measure of its importance, and when we look with scorn on intellectualism

because it's practical usefulness isn't readily apparent.

Existentialism

Another secular influence on evangelicals is the philosophy of *existentialism*.^{39} The search for truth was turned inward in the Romantic era, and, as we noted previously, subjectivism was one of the negative results of Pietism. This subjectivity is a core belief of existentialism.

The existentialist chooses for himself what his values will be and hence what he will be. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself," said Jean-Paul Sartre. "That is the first principle of existentialism."^{40} Values are not imposed from the outside; they are chosen by the individual. To live by others' values is to live in bad faith.

The influence of existentialism is seen among evangelicals when we become the final authority for our values, when we insist that we are responsible for what we are to become, or when we make our own experiences determine the meaning of Scripture. The individual's experience overrides scriptural understanding and becomes authoritative over the teaching of the church past and present.

Reviving the Evangelical Mind

For all its good qualities, evangelicalism since the eighteenth century in America has not made notable contributions to the world of learning. Distinctly evangelical thinking plays little if any role in the intellectual life of our nation, and our knowledge of our own faith sometimes suffers from incorrect thinking about how to know what is true and what the Bible means.

The experiential subjectivism characteristic of extreme Pietism and of secular philosophies such as existentialism separates the individual from the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the church through the ages. It is foolish to set

all that aside in favor of what each individual feels or can figure out himself. "I feel that such-and-such" is how we often begin stating our understanding of a passage of Scripture or of a doctrine. When pressed for reasons for holding that belief, Christians will often just say, "Well, that's just what I feel it means." This kind of subjectivism makes the individual his own final authority for truth. The resulting individualism^{41} leads to a fragmentation of the church which limits it in presenting a united front in its interaction with the secular world.

Regarding the pragmatic attitude so prevalent in the church, a constant emphasis on workability inclines us away from consideration of deeper matters of the faith which can result in a grade-school level faith. Two problems come to mind. First, a pragmatic approach will never move us into a deep understanding of God. Frankly, there are things about God and His ways that may seem to have no direct practical bearing on us whatsoever. Imagine if my wife begins to tell me some story about her past, something that seems rather inconsequential, and I say, "I'm sorry, but I don't see the practical significance of that for me or for us. Let's stick to telling those things about ourselves that have practical application." That's no way to build a relationship! Someone might respond that with a little digging I might very well find a practical significance. Maybe I will, and maybe I won't. Even if I do, the effort will take me further than one will typically go who has a pragmatic attitude. Pragmatism doesn't incline one to search for meaning; mere instrumentality is usually all that is desired.

Second (building upon the first point), the issues of life are too complex for an elementary understanding of God and His ways and of this world. Hebrews 5:12 and 6:1 advise us to move on from the elementary things. This, of course, refers to biblical/theological truth. With a deeper understanding of God we can gain a better perspective on the world in which we

live, and develop a greater wisdom to know how to live in it. But we also have to understand our world well in order to be able to apply God's wisdom to it. For example, there should be expert Christian economists. Such people would understand God's view of the value of human life and productivity; they would have wisdom gained from reflection on biblical truths about such things as caring for each other, about personal responsibility, about national responsibilities, for that matter. They also would understand the way societies work and the social and political ramifications of particular ways of handing money. Clearly, workability is important here, but so are bigger issues such as the meaning of work, the responsibility of one person for another, and the care of the resources God has made available for us to make a living. A deep knowledge of God *and* of the world He created are necessary to do this.

Evangelicals can and should make significant contributions to the life of the mind in America. How can we expect to be taken seriously if the faith we confess is seen as "privately engaging, but publicly irrelevant"? Recall what Noll said: "The links between deep Christian life, long-lasting Christian influence, and dedicated Christian thought characterize virtually all of the high moments in the history of the church." Some Christians would insist that evangelism is our most important work. But even upon that view, why should we expect anyone to take the message we preach seriously if we come across as backwards in our thinking? Our emphasis on the practical, and our aversion to intellectual pursuits will continue to stunt our influence in academia and in society in general.

It's possible to be both "too earthly minded to be any heavenly good," and "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good." We need to be tuned in to both. In my emphasis on understanding our world, and on being aware that knowledge gained from this world can in some instances correct our

interpretation of Scripture, I'm not advocating a capitulation to the deliverances of intellectuals in any given field even if they contradict Scripture. I'm advocating a responsible use of the minds we've been given. We can engage the life of the mind, or we can continue to sink into obscurity. The first option is the more God-honoring one.

Notes

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10.

2. Noll, 43,44.

3. Walter, A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), s.v. "Pietism," by M.A. Noll. Unless noted otherwise, quotations in the next few paragraphs are all from this article.

4. Noll, *Scandal*, 49.

5. Encarta Online Dictionary, <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryHome.aspx>.

6. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 34.

7. Hofstadter, 154.

8. Hofstadter, 48.

9. Hofstadter, 7. For an overview of the subject of anti-intellectualism from an evangelical view, see J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in The Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 19-40.

10. Noll, *Scandal*, 12.

11. N.K. Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis,"

- Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* 2 (1973): 323; quoted in Noll, *Scandal*, 12-13.
12. Noll, *Scandal*, 5.
13. Rick Wade, "[Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church](#)," Probe Ministries, 2001.
14. Noll, *Scandal*, 61.
15. Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 63.
16. Hofstadter, 74.
17. Hofstadter, 80.
18. Hofstadter, note 8, 48-49.
19. For an introduction to the Enlightenment, see Rick Wade, "[The Enlightenment and Belief in God](#)," Probe Ministries, 2002.
20. Noll, *Scandal*, 85.
21. George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 83.
22. Marsden, 82.
23. Noll, *Scandal*, 88.
24. James Marsh, in his introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (London, 1840), 40; quoted in Marsden, 82.
25. Noll, *Scandal*, 93.
26. Dagobert Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v., "Bacon, Francis."

27. Noll, 127.
28. Marsden, 82.
29. Marsden, 80-84.
30. Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 87.
31. Cf. Marsden, 91-92.
32. Runes, ed., *Dictionary*, s.v., "Bacon, Francis."
33. Marsden, 94.
34. Ibid.
35. For a brief review of this conflict, see Rick Wade, "[Modern Myths](#)," Probe Ministries, 2001. For a longer treatment online, see George Sim Johnston, "The Galileo Affair," available on the Web at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0005.html>.
36. That these two are so closely intertwined doesn't prevent us from separating them for purposes of understanding the way we think today.
37. Cf. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
38. William James, *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), 160.
39. For a brief introduction to existentialism, see Rick Wade, [Worldviews, Pt. 2](#), Probe Ministries, 2000, and Todd Kappelman, [The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge](#), Probe Ministries, 1998. Note that here I am speaking of atheistic existentialism.
40. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York:

Meridian Books, 1972), 291.

41. For a discussion of individualism, see James W. Sire, *Chris Chrisman Goes to College* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 75-88.

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That They May Be One: Evangelicals and Catholics in Dialogue

What began as a coming together to fight abortion has become a serious dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics. Rick Wade introduces the conversation.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

The Cultural Crisis and the Plea of Jesus

Sometime in 1983 I began working with the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Chicago. A few times I participated in sidewalk protests in front of abortion clinics. I soon realized that many of those I stood with on the sidewalks were Roman Catholics! I even had the opportunity to speak before a group of Catholics once. As I soon learned, Catholics had been fighting abortion for some time before such people as Francis Schaeffer made evangelical Protestants aware of the situation.

Roman Catholicism was a bit of a mystery to me then. There weren't many Catholics in southeast Virginia where I grew up. All I knew was that they had a Pope and they prayed to Mary

and they sometimes had little statues in their front yards. The lines were pretty clearly drawn between them and us. Now I was being forced to think about these people and their beliefs, for here we were standing side by side ministering together in the name of Jesus.

Cultural/Moral Decline

At the grassroots level, Christians of varying stripes have found themselves working to stem the tide of immorality together with those they never thought they'd be working with. In the 1980s, abortion was perhaps *the* most visible example of a gulf that was widening in America. Not only abortion, but illegitimacy, sexual license in its various forms, a skyrocketing divorce rate and other social ills divided those who accepted traditional, Judeo-Christian morality from those who didn't. People began talking about the "culture war." Because our influence has waned, we have found that we no longer have the luxury of casting stones at "those Catholics over there," for we are being forced by our cultural circumstances to work at protecting a mutually held set of values.

In the book *Evangelicals and Catholics: Toward a Common Mission*, Chuck Colson reviews the social/ethical shift in America.^{2} With the loss of confidence in our ability to know universal, objective truth, we have turned to the subjective and practical. Getting things done is what counts. Power has replaced reason as the primary tool for change. Liberal politics determines the readings offered in literature courses in colleges. Radical multiculturalism has skewed representations of the West to make us *the* source of oppression for the rest of the world. "Just as the loss of truth leads to the loss of cultural integrity," says Colson, "so the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of common moral order and its expression in political consensus."^{3} Individual choice trumps the common good; each has his or her own rules. Abortion is a choice. The

practice of homosexuality is a choice. Self-expression is the essence of freedom, regardless of how it affects others. And on it goes.

One of the ironic consequences of this potentially is the loss of the freedom we so desperately seek. This is because there must be some order in society. If everyone goes in different directions, the government will have to step in to establish order. What are Christians to do? Evangelicals are strong in the area of evangelism. Is there more that can be done on the cultural level?

The Grassroots Response

Back to the sidewalks of Chicago. "In front of abortion clinics," says Colson, "Catholics join hands with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians to pray and sing hymns. Side by side they pass out pamphlets and urge incoming women to spare their babies." This new coming together extends to other areas as well. Colson continues:

Both evangelicals and Catholics are offended by the blasphemy, violence, and sexual promiscuity endorsed by both the artistic elite and the popular culture in America today. On university campuses, evangelical students whose Christian faith comes under frequent assault often find Catholic professors to be their only allies. Evangelicals cheer as a Catholic nun, having devoted her life to serving the poor in the name of Christ, boldly confronts the president of the United States over his pro-abortion policies. Thousands of Catholic young people join the True Love Waits movement, in which teenagers pledge to save sex for marriage, a program that originated with Baptists.[\[4\]](#)

This has provided the groundwork for what is being called the "new ecumenism," a recent upsurge in interest in finding common cause with others who believe in Jesus Christ as the divine Son of God. Having seen this new grassroots unity in

the cause of Christian morality, scholars and pastors are meeting together to see where the different traditions of Christians agree and disagree with each other, with a view to presenting a united front in the culture war.

Jesus' Prayer

Speaking of His church, Jesus asked the Father, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:21-23 ESV) In addition to the culture war, Christians have as a motive for unity the prayer of Jesus. Division in the Church is like a body divided: how will it work as a unit to accomplish its tasks? Jesus was not talking about unity at any price, but we can't let that idea prevent us from seeking it where it is legitimate in *God's* eyes.

The New Ecumenism

The cultural shift and the prayer of Jesus have led thinkers in the different Christian traditions to come together to see what can be done to promote the cause of unity. A conversation which began in earnest with the participants of Evangelicals and Catholics Together in the mid-'90s has branched out resulting in magazines, books and conferences devoted to this issue. In fact, in November 2001, I attended a conference called "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," which included Evangelicals, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.[\[5\]](#)

Participants in these discussions refer to themselves as "traditional" Christians. By "traditional" they mean those who "are freely bound by a normative tradition that is the bearer of truth," in the words of Richard John Neuhaus.[\[6\]](#)

Traditional Christians trace their heritage back to the apostles, rather than adopting as ultimately authoritative the ideas of modern scholarship. They accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the great creeds of the early centuries as summaries of authentic apostolic teaching. They agree on such things as the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and salvation through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. Because of their acceptance of such fundamental truths, it is often noted that a traditional Evangelical has more in common with a traditional Catholic than with a liberal Protestant who denies the deity of Christ and other fundamental Christian truths.

20th Century Ecumenical Movement

For some of our older readers the word *ecumenical* probably brings to mind the movement of the 20th century spearheaded by the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, which took a decidedly unbiblical turn in the mid 1960s. I can remember hearing people in my church speak of it in very disparaging tones. Is this new ecumenism like the old one?

Participants take great pains to distinguish the new ecumenism from the old one. The latter began in 1910 in Edinburgh for the purpose of bringing Protestants together, primarily for missions.^[7] At first its aims were admirable. After World War II, however, the focus shifted to the social and political. In 1966 at the World Conference on Church and Society the shift became public. "Thereafter the ideological radicals increased," says theologian Tom Oden. The movement took a turn "toward revolutionary rhetoric, social engineering, and regulatory politics."^[8] It tried to form alliances around the "edges" of Christian life and belief, so to speak. In other words, it was interested in what the Church's role was in the world on the social and political level. Orthodox doctrine became expendable when inconvenient. Today that movement is floundering, and some predict it won't last much longer.

The New/Old Ecumenism

The new ecumenism, on the other hand, rejects the demands of modernity, which seeks to supplant ancient apostolic truth with its own wisdom, and instead allows apostolic truth to become modernity's critic. Oden says that, "We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without re-grounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process, when heresies were rejected and the ancient orthodox consensus defined."[\[9\]](#)

The new ecumenists look to Scripture and to the early ecumenical creeds like the Apostles Creed as definitive of Christian doctrine. With all their differences they look to a core of beliefs held historically upon which they all agree. From this basis they then discuss their differences and consider what they together might do to influence their society with the Christian worldview.

In this day of postmodern relativism and constructivism, it would be easy to see this discussion as another example of picking and choosing one's truths; or putting together beliefs we find suited to our tastes with no regard for whether they're really *true*. This isn't the attitude being brought to this subject; the new ecumenism insists on the primacy of truth. This means that discussions can be rather intense, for the participants don't feel the freedom to manipulate doctrine in order to reach consensus. At the "Christian Unity" conference speakers stated boldly where they believed their tradition was correct and others incorrect, and they expected the same boldness from others. There was no rancor, but neither was there any waffling. I overheard one Catholic congratulate Al Mohler, a Baptist, on his talk in which Mohler made it clear that, according to evangelical theology, Rome was simply wrong. "May your tribe increase!" the Catholic priest said. Not because he himself didn't care about theological distinctions or was trying to work out some kind

of postmodern mixing and matching of beliefs. No, it was because he appreciated the fact that Mohler was willing to stand firm on what he believes to be true. This attitude is necessary not only to maintain theological integrity within the Church but is essential if we wish to give our culture something it doesn't already have.

This is the spirit, says Tom Oden, a Methodist theologian, of the earliest ecumenism—that of the early Church—which produced the great creeds of the faith. Oden provides a nice summary of the differences between the two ecumenisms. Whereas the old ecumenism of the 20th C. distrusted the ancient ecumenism, the new one embraces it. The old one accommodated modernism uncritically, whereas the new is critical of the failed ideas of modernism. The former was utopian, the latter realistic. The former sought negotiated unity, whereas the latter is based on truth. The former was politics-driven the latter is Spirit-led.[{10}](#)

Meetings and Documents

How did this movement shift from abortion mill sidewalks to the conference rooms of Christian scholars? In the early '90s, Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus began leading a series of discussions between Evangelical and Catholic scholars which produced in 1994 a document titled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium."[{11}](#) In the introductory section one finds this statement summarizing their fundamental conviction:

As Christ is one, so the Christian mission is one. That one mission can be and should be advanced in diverse ways. Legitimate diversity, however, should not be confused with existing divisions between Christians that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission. There is a necessary connection between the visible unity of Christians and the mission of the one Christ. We together pray for the fulfillment of the prayer of Our lord: "May they all be one;

as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 17)

Based upon this conviction they go on to discuss agreements, disagreements, and hopes for the future. Participants in the discussion included such Evangelicals as Kent Hill, Richard Land, and John White. Such notables as J.I. Packer,[{12}](#) Nathan Hatch, Thomas Oden, Pat Robertson, Richard Mouw, and Os Guinness endorsed the document.

This document was followed in 1998 by one titled “The Gift of Salvation,” which discusses the issues of justification and baptism and others related to salvation. The level of agreement indicated drew some strong criticisms from some Evangelical scholars,[{13}](#) the main source of contention being the doctrine of justification, a central issue in the Reformation. Critics didn’t find the line as clearly drawn as they would like. Is justification purely *forensic*? In other words, is it simply a matter of God declaring us righteous apart from anything whatsoever we do (the Protestant view)? Or is it *intrinsic*, in other words, a matter of God working something *in* us which becomes part of our justification (the Catholic view)? To put it another way, is it purely external or internal? Or is it both?[{14}](#)

In May, 1995, the Fellowship of St. James and Rose Hill College sponsored a series of talks between evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics with a view to doing much the same as Evangelicals and Catholics Together except that Orthodox Christians were involved.[{15}](#) Participants included Richard John Neuhaus, Harold O.J. Brown, Patrick Henry Reardon, Peter Kreeft, J.I. Packer, and Kallistos Ware. As James Cutsinger writes, the purpose was “to test whether an ecumenical orthodoxy, solidly based on the classic Christian faith as expressed in the Scripture and ecumenical councils, could become the foundation for a unified and transformative witness to the present age.”[{16}](#) An

important theme of this conference, as with ECT, was truth. Says Neuhaus: "The new ecumenism, as reflected also in ECT, is adamant that truth and unity must not be pitted against one another, that the only unity we seek is unity in the truth, and the only truth we acknowledge is the truth by which we are united." [\[17\]](#)

Two Projects

There are two projects guiding this discussion which sometimes overlap but often don't. The first is the culture war. Some are convinced that there cannot be full communion between the traditions because our doctrinal differences are too significant, so we should stick to doing battle with our culture over the moral issues of the day. After all, this is where the conversation began. Here, it is the broader Christian worldview which is important, not so much detailed questions about justification and baptism and so on. What these scholars hope to do is make us aware of our commonalities so we feel free to minister together in certain arenas, and then to rally each other to the cause of presenting a Christian view in matters of social and cultural importance today

The second project is shaped by Jesus' prayer that we be united. Having seen that we *do* believe some things in common, as evidenced by the fight against abortion, the next step is to dig more deeply and see if we can find a more fundamental unity. The focus here is on theological agreements and disagreements. The beliefs of all involved come under scrutiny. Some scholars will be satisfied with discovering and clarifying beliefs held in common. Others state boldly that the goal can be none other than full communion between traditions if not the joining of all into one.

Impulse of the Holy Spirit

Participants are convinced that this is a move of the Holy

Spirit. How else could those who have battled for so long and who are so convinced of the truth of their own tradition be willing to discuss these matters with the real hope of being drawn closer together? Theologian Tom Oden says this: "What is happening? God is awakening in grass roots Christianity a ground swell of longing for classic ecumenical teaching in all communions. There are innumerable lay embodiments of this unity."[\[18\]](#) There is a new longing to go back to our roots to rediscover our historical identity in the face of a world that leaves identity up for grabs. Could it be that the Spirit is indeed working to bring the church closer together in our day?

Theological Agreements and Disagreements

As noted previously, those who participate in the new ecumenism refer to themselves as "traditional Christians." They look to the early church to rediscover their roots. They hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and others of the early ecumenical creeds.

J.I. Packer provides a helpful summary of the doctrines traditional Christians hold. They are:

- The canonical Scriptures as the repository and channel of Christ-centered divine revelation.
- The triune God as sovereign in creation , providence and grace.
- Faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the one mediator between God and man.
- Seeing Christians as a family of forgiven sinners . . . empowered for godliness by the Holy Spirit.
- Seeing the church as a single supernatural society.
- The sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion "as necessities of obedience, gestures of worship and means of communion with God in Christ."
- The practice of prayer, obedience, love and service.
- Dealing appropriately with the personal reality of evil.
- Expecting death and final judgment to lead into the

endless joy of heaven.”{19}

Because Roman Catholicism is such an unknown to many evangelicals, it is just assumed by many that its teachings are all radically different from our own. The list of doctrines just given, however, proves how close we are on central issues. In fact, the well-respected Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said this in the context of his battles with liberalism:

How great is the common heritage that unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own church.{20}

With all this in common, however, we must recognize our differences as well since they are significant. Roman Catholics believe the church magisterium is the ultimately authoritative voice for the church since it is the church that has been made the pillar and ground of the truth. At the very head, of course, is the Pope who is believed to be the successor of Peter. Protestants emphasize the priesthood of the believer for whom Scripture is the final authority. Catholics believe the grace of God unto salvation is mediated through baptism while Protestants see baptism more as symbolic than as efficacious. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her and the saints. Evangelicals see Mary as a woman born in sin who committed sin herself, but who was specially blessed by God.{21}

Probably the most important difference between Catholics and Protestants is over the matter of how a person is accepted before God. What does it *mean* to be justified? *How* is one justified? This was the whole issue of the Reformation for

Martin Luther, according to Michael Horton.[{22}](#) If one's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is deficient, does it matter what else one believes? The answer to this will be determined by what one's goals are in seeking unity. Are we working on the project of ecclesial unity? Or are we concerned mostly with the culture war? Our disagreements are more significant for the former than for the latter.

What is the significance of our differences? The significance will relate to our goals for coming together. The big question in the new ecumenism is in what areas can we come together? In theology and then in cultural involvement? Or just in cultural involvement? Some are working hard to see where we agree and disagree theologically, even to the point of examining their own tradition to be certain they have it correct (at least, as they see it). Others believe that while we share many fundamental doctrinal beliefs, the divisions can't be overcome without actually becoming one visible church. Cultural involvement—cultural cobelligerency it has been called—becomes the focus of our unity.

Some readers might have a question nagging at them about now. That is this: If Catholics have a deficient understanding of the process of salvation, as we think they do, can they even be Christians? Shouldn't we be evangelizing them rather than working with them?

Surely there are individuals in the Catholic Church who have no reason to hope for heaven. But the same is true in Evangelical churches. Although of course we want to understand correctly and teach accurately the truth about justification, we must remember that we come to Christ through faith in Him, not on the basis of the correctness of our detailed doctrine of justification. How many new (genuine) converts in *any* tradition can explain justification? J.I. Packer chastises those who believe the mercy of God "rests on persons who are notionally correct."[{23}](#) Having read some Catholic expositions

of Scripture and devotional writing—even by the Pope himself—it is hard to believe I’m reading the words of the anti-Christ (something Protestants have been known to call the Pope) or that these writers aren’t Christians at all. Again, this isn’t to diminish the rightful significance of the doctrine of justification, but to seek a proper understanding of the importance of one’s understanding of the doctrine before one can be saved.

There is no doubt that there are Christians in the Roman Catholic Church as assuredly as there are *non*-Christians in Evangelical churches. We should be about the task of evangelism everywhere. As with everyone our testimony should be clear to Catholics around us. If they indicate that they don’t know Christ then we tell them how they can know him. What we dare not do is have the attitude, “Well, he’s Catholic so he can’t be saved.”

Options for Unity

I see three possible frameworks for unity. One is unity on the social/cultural/political level. In these areas we can bring conservative religious thinking to bear on the issues of the day. I think this is what Peter Kreeft is calling for in an article titled “Ecumenical Jihad,” in which he broadens the circle enough to include Jews and Muslims.[\[24\]](#)

The second option is full, ecclesial unity. The focus here is on Jesus’ prayer for unity. As Christ is one, we are to be one. This goes beyond cooperation in the public square; this is a call for one Church—one visible institution. Neuhaus says we *are* one church, we just aren’t acting like it. One writer points out that this kind of unity “is a ‘costly act’ involving the death and rebirth of existing confessional churches.”[\[25\]](#) Catholic theologian Avery Dulles believes that such full unity might be legitimate between groups that have a common heritage, such as Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. “But that goal is neither realistic nor desirable for communities

as widely separated as evangelicals and Catholics. For the present and the foreseeable future the two will continue to constitute distinct religious families.”[\[26\]](#) The stresses such a union would create would be too much.

A third possibility is a middle way between the first two. It involves the recognition of a mutually held Christian worldview with an acknowledgement and acceptance of our differences, and with a view to peace between traditions and teamwork in the culture war. Here, theology is important; evangelicals share something with Catholics that they don’t with, say, Muslims who are morally conservative. These could stand with Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of Holland in the late 19th century who said,

Now, in this conflict [against liberalism] Rome is not an antagonist, but stands on our side, inasmuch as she recognizes and maintains the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Cross as an atoning sacrifice, the scriptures as the Word of God, and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, let me ask if Romish theologians take up the sword to do valiant and skillful battle against the same tendency that we ourselves mean to fight to death, is it not the part of wisdom to accept the valuable help of their elucidation?[\[27\]](#)

Kuyper here was dealing with liberal theology. But the principle holds for the present context. If Kuyper could look to the Catholic Church for support in theological matters to some extent against liberal Protestants, surely we can join with them in speaking to and standing against a culture of practical atheism.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proposed a two-prong strategy for achieving church unity. The first task is complete, visible unity as called for in the “Decree on Ecumenism.” Full unity, however, can only come about by a special work of the Holy Spirit. “The second task . . . is to pursue intermediate goals.” He says:

It should be clear that we do not create unity, no more than we bring about righteousness by means of our works, but that on the other hand we should not sit around twiddling our thumbs. Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.{28}

Avery Dulles says that the heterogeneous community of Catholics and evangelicals still has much to do together. "They can join in their fundamental witness to Christ and the gospel. They can affirm together their acceptance of the apostolic faith enshrined in the creeds and dogmas of the early Church. . . . They can jointly protest against the false and debilitating creeds of militant secularism. In all these ways they can savor and deepen the unity that is already theirs in Christ."{29}

Dulles offers some advice on what to do in this interim period.{30} I'll let them stand without comment:

- Seek to correct misunderstandings about the other tradition.
- Be surprised at the graciousness of God, who continues to bestow his favors even upon those whose faith comes to expression in ways that we may consider faulty.
- Respect each other's freedom and integrity.
- Instead of following the path of reduction to some common denominator, the parties should pursue an ecumenism of mutual enrichment, asking how much they can give to, and receive from, one another.
- Rejoice at the very significant bonds of faith and practice that already unite us, notwithstanding our differences. (Reading the same Scriptures, confessing the same Triune God and Jesus as true God and true man, etc.)
- We can engage in joint witness in our social action.
- Pray for the work of the Spirit in restoring unity, and rest in knowing it has to be His work and not ours.

Protesting Voices

Not all Evangelical scholars and church leaders are in favor of the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue, at least with the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." Such well-known representatives as R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, and D. James Kennedy have taken issue with important parts of this document.

The basis of the *ECT* dialogue was the conviction that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ."[\[31\]](#) It was upon this foundation that the two groups came together to consider a Christian response to current social issues. But some question whether such a sweeping statement is correct. Are we really "brothers and sisters in Christ"?

MacArthur presents the central concerns in an article in the journal of The Master's Seminary, of which he is president. He believes "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was so concerned about social issues that it downplayed and compromised key doctrines.

The fundamental issue is the matter of justification. Are we saved by faith plus works, or by faith alone? Is justification *imputed* or *infused* (Are we *declared* righteous or are we *made* righteous)? The Council of Trent, convened by the Roman Church in the late 16th century, anathematized those who believe "that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace" (*Trent*, sess. 7, canon 8)."[\[32\]](#) *Trent* also made plain that justification is obtained through the sacrament of baptism (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 7).[\[33\]](#) Furthermore, the Roman Church holds that justification is an ongoing process by which we are *made* righteous, not a declaration that we *are* righteous. MacArthur contends that this constitutes a different gospel.

R.C. Sproul says this: "The question in the sixteenth century

remains in dispute. Is justification by faith alone a necessary and essential element of the gospel? Must a church confess *sola fide* in order to be a true church? Or can a church reject or condemn justification by faith alone and still be a true church? The Reformers certainly did not think so. Apparently the framers and signers of ECT think otherwise.”[\[34\]](#)

MacArthur insists that, even though we might all be able to recite the Apostles’ Creed together, if we differ on the core matter of the Gospel we’re talking about different religions altogether. If Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are different religions, how can we claim to be “brothers and sisters in Christ”?[\[35\]](#)

Thus, there are some who believe the dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to be a misbegotten venture. However, even among those who take a strong position on the Reformation view of justification, there are some who still see some value in finding common cause with Catholics on social matters. For example, a statement signed by John Armstrong, the late James Montgomery Boice, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul among others—who also signed “An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals,” a strong statement against the Roman view of justification—says this: “The extent of the creedal consensus that binds orthodox Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together warrants the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals have every reason to join minds, hearts, and hands when Christian values and behavioral patterns are at stake.” This doesn’t preclude, however, the priority of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.[\[36\]](#)

The Importance of the Issue

There are several reasons why the current conversations between Evangelicals and Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox as well) are important. First is simply the reaffirmation of what

we believe. In this day of skepticism about the possibility of knowing what is true at all, and the practice of many of picking and choosing beliefs according to their practical functionality, it is good to think carefully through what we believe and why. A woman I know told me she doesn't concern herself with all those denominational differences. "I just love Jesus," she said. "Just give me Jesus." One gets the sense from all that is taught us in Scripture that *Jesus* wants us to have more, meaning a more fleshed-out understanding of God and His ways. As we review our likenesses and differences with Roman Catholics we're forced to come to a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

We also have Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays fervently for unity in his body. Was he serious? Is it good enough to simply say "Well, the Roman Church differs in its doctrine of justification so they can't be Christians," and turn away from them? Or to keep a distance from them because they believe differently on some things? While not giving up our own convictions, isn't it worthwhile taking the time to be sure about our own beliefs and those of others before saying Jesus' prayer doesn't apply?

J.I. Packer says this: "However much historic splits may have been justified as the only way to preserve faith, wisdom and spiritual life intact at a particular time, continuing them in complacency and without unease is unwarrantable."[\[37\]](#) A simple recognition of the common ground upon which we stand would be a step forward in answering Jesus' prayer. The debates which will follow as our differences are once again made clear can further us in our theological understanding and our kingdom connectedness.

Of course, the culture war which brought about this discussion in the first place is another good reason for coming together. Discovering our similarities in moral understanding will open doors of cooperative ministry and witness in society. Chuck Colson believes that the only solution to the current cultural

crisis “is a recultivation of conscience.”^{38} How can the conscience be recultivated? “At root, every issue that divides the American people,” Colson says, “is religious in essence.”^{39} It will take a recultivation of the knowledge of God to bring about change. Sharing the same basic worldview, we can speak together in the public square on the issues of the day.

Finally, consider what we can learn from one another. Evangelicals can profit from the deep theological and philosophical study of Catholic scholars, while Catholics can learn from Evangelicals about in-depth Bible study. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics what it is to be a community of believers since, for them, the Church has the emphasis over the individual. Catholics, on the other hand, can learn from Evangelicals what it means to have a personal walk with Christ.

In sum, there are important, legitimate discussions or debates which must be held in the Church over theological issues. But such discussions can only be held if we are talking to each other. We are obligated to our Lord to seek the unity for which He prayed. This isn't a unity of convenience, but a unity based upon truth. If one studies the issues closely and determines that our differences are too great to permit any coming together on the ecclesial level, at least one should see the value of joining together on the cultural level—of speaking the truth about the one true God who sent his only Son to redeem mankind, and who has revealed his moral standard in nature and Scripture, a standard which will be ignored to our destruction.

Notes

1. The Evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue is a serious matter. Although this article isn't presented as a critique, it was thought that the lack of a protesting voice in the original article might imply this writer's (and Probe's) full

endorsement of the dialogue, or even an implicit endorsement of ecclesial unity. A conversation that brings into question the central issue of the Reformation, justification by faith, deserves close scrutiny. Thus, a revision was made to the original article to include a few protesting voices.

2. Charles Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective," in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), 7ff.

3. Ibid., 10.

4. Ibid., 2.

5. Although this movement now includes the Eastern Orthodox Church, in this article I'll focus on Evangelical/Catholic relations.

6. Richard John Neuhaus, "A New Thing: Ecumenism at the Threshold of the Third Millennium," in James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in*

Dialogue (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 54-55.

7. Richard John Neuhaus, "That They May Be One: Prospects for Unity in the 21st Century," a paper delivered at the conference "Christian Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain," Nov. 9, 2001. Tom Oden puts the starting date for the old ecumenism as 1948.

8. Tom Oden, "The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society," Pt. 1, a revision of an address delivered Oct. 1, 2001 on the 20th anniversary of the founding of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. Downloaded from www.ird-renew.org/news/NewsPrint.cfm?ID=214&c=4 on December 3, 2001.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things* 43 (May 1994) 15-22.

12. Packer defended his decision to sign the document in "Why

I Signed It," *Christianity Today*. December 12, 1994, 34-37.

13. For example, R.C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

14. For a different twist on the doctrine from an evangelical Protestant, see S. M. Hutchens, "Getting Justification Right," *Touchstone*, July/August 2000, 41-46.

15. Rose Hill College is closely tied to the Orthodox tradition.

16. James S. Cutsinger, "Introduction: Finding the Center, in Cutsinger, ed. *Reclaiming*, 10.

17. Neuhaus, "A New Thing," 57.

18. Oden, "The New Ecumenism."

19. J.I. Packer, "On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism and Incarnational Ontology," in Cutsinger, 156.

20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 52; quoted in Colson, 39-40.

21. From discussions with former Catholics I have gotten the impression that there is a difference between authoritative Catholic theology and the beliefs of lay Catholics. We cannot take up this matter here. I'll just note that I am looking to the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, to the Catholic catechism for the teachings of the Church.

22. Michael S. Horton, "What Still Keeps Us Apart?" in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 251.

23. Packer, "On from Orr," 174.

24. Peter Kreeft, "Ecumenical Jihad," Cutsinger, ed., chap. 1.

25. Avery Dulles, "The Unity for Which We Hope," in Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 116-17. Dulles here provides a more detailed description of this kind of unity. Dulles discusses six different kinds of unity.

26. Ibid., 143.

27. Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism and the Future* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1898), 183-84; quoted in Colson, 39.

28. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 98, quoted in Dulles, "The Unity for Which We Hope," 137-38.
29. Dulles, "Unity," 144.
30. Ibid., 138-140. He gives ten; I've included seven.
31. Colson, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, xviii.
32. John F. MacArthur, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 6/1 (Spring 1995): 30. See also R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
33. MacArthur, 28.
34. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 30.
35. It should be noted that, because of protests such as those of MacArthur, Sproul and others, key signers of the document later issued a statement in which they affirmed their commitment to the doctrines of "substitutionary atonement and [the] imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to a full assurance of eternal salvation; . . ." and to "the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone." See "Statement By Protestant Signers to ECT," available at www.leaderu.com/ect/ect2.html. This writer also commends for your reading the statement, "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue," drafted by Michael Horton and revised by J.I. Packer, and issued by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994, available at <http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.ECTresolutions.html>.
36. "Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue." See also "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," a strong statement against the Roman view of justification available at www.alliancenet.org/month/98.08.appeal.html.
37. In another vein, Donald Bloesch believes that R.C. Sproul, in his criticism of ECT, has not "kept abreast of the noteworthy attempts in the ongoing ecumenical discussion to bridge the chasm between Trent and evangelical Protestantism." He believes that "Sola fide still constitutes a formidable barrier in Catholic-Protestant relations, but contra Sproul,

it must not be deemed insurmountable." See his comments in "Betraying the Reformation? An Evangelical Response," in *Christianity Today*, Oct. 7, 1996.

38. Packer, "On from Orr," 157.

39. Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 13.

40. Ibid., 14.

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