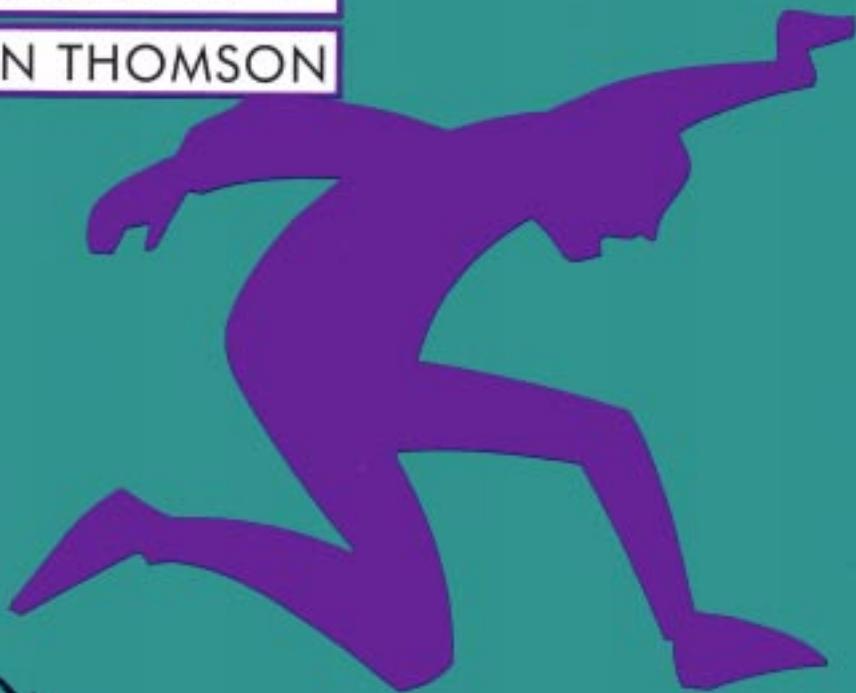


BEYOND FEAR, SUSPICION AND HOSTILITY

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ECONI

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ISBN 1 874324 751
Printed by Nelson & Knox (NI) Ltd.
Design by Spring Graphics

BEYOND FEAR, SUSPICION AND HOSTILITY

Evangelical – Roman Catholic Relationships

Alwyn Thomson

PREFACE

The purpose of this booklet is to describe some of the approaches to evangelical - Roman Catholic relationships advocated by mainstream evangelicals in Northern Ireland. Each view has its proponents among those who identify with Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland (ECONI) but none should be taken as the 'official' ECONI position.

On this issue evangelical Christians within ECONI hold differing views. Some may consider the views of others to be flawed, but all respect one another's integrity in holding their views. As evangelicals they recognise the authority of the Bible and, where there is disagreement, are committed to searching the Scriptures **together** to see where the full truth lies.

While they may differ in their understanding of evangelical - Roman Catholic relationships, they are agreed in their rejection of an attitude of hostility towards Roman Catholicism and, in particular, towards our Roman Catholic neighbours.

The purpose of the booklet is to describe those differing understandings, not to establish criteria by which to judge the validity of another's claim to be evangelical. We accept that there are others who do not share many of our convictions but who would, nonetheless, identify themselves as evangelicals.

INTRODUCTION

Ours is a divided society. Tragically, our divisions have created a society in conflict. Often, simplistic solutions are advocated by those who view this conflict in simplistic terms. 'Brits out' is one such proffered solution; 'rooting out the terrorists' is another. But neither of these supposed solutions is realistic, for the roots of the conflict are complex, often overwhelmingly so.

Equally unrealistic is the view that ours is solely or exclusively a 'religious conflict'. "If only we could grow out of our religious prejudices", the advocates of such a view claim, "all would be well." However, those who blame the chaos in our society purely on religion demonstrate both their naivety and their prejudice. Complex problems tend to be impervious to simplistic solutions.

Nevertheless, while the blame for the tragedy that has engulfed us cannot be laid exclusively at the door of religion, the conflict retains a significant religious dimension. True, the leaders of the main denominations may no longer criticise one another -indeed, they may often speak with one voice - but the same cannot be said for many of the members of the denominations they lead.

It remains the case that unionists tend to be Protestant while nationalists tend to be Catholic. Protestant clergy give voice to the fears and hurts of the unionist community; Catholic clergy, to those of the nationalist community. These distinctions bear witness to the role played by religion in the history of Ireland and the close connection between religious and political identity from the time of the Reformation. All of this has been well documented.¹

Because the conflict has this religious dimension those professing Christian faith need to examine their motives and attitudes. Within the main denominations there are those who have already reflected extensively on their role in the community and the nature of their relationships with one another - in particular, the relationship between Protestants and Roman Catholics. However, the same cannot always be said of evangelical Christians in Northern Ireland.

Yet the question of evangelical - Roman Catholic relationships is in many ways more important than questions of denominational unity. While evangelicals are to be found within the three main Protestant denominations, there are many more outside these traditional structures. They can be found in smaller associations of churches and in independent fellowships, small and large.

If it is doubtful that the denominational representatives speak for evangelicals within their denominations, it is certain that they do not speak for those streams of evangelicalism flowing outside the denominational structures.

Furthermore, evangelicals constitute a very large proportion of those who are 'religiously' active. Even taking the population as a whole, evangelicals constitute a significant minority. An estimated 185,000 people in Northern Ireland identify themselves as evangelical - this constitutes some 12% of the total population.² Clearly, a community of this size cannot be ignored, for the views of these evangelical people are going to have a significant impact on the community.³ How, then, have evangelicals approached the question of relationships with Roman Catholicism?

It is often assumed that the dominant evangelical view of Roman Catholicism is that associated with conservative Protestant groups.⁴ In the perception of these groups the Roman Catholic system is evil, satanic and irredeemable. It is implacably hostile to Protestantism and seeks to destroy it, together with those who would defend it. While recognising that individual Roman Catholics may occasionally come to faith, they argue that those who do must leave Catholicism. To remain within it is, in their view, incompatible with true Christian faith. Furthermore, Roman Catholicism is not only to be rejected but actively denounced and opposed.

In Northern Ireland this extreme religious view often goes hand in hand with an extreme political view. Irish nationalism and the Irish state are simply instruments of Rome. The attack on Northern Ireland, whether pursued by constitutional means or through terrorism, is an attack on Protestantism and the true gospel.

Examples of this view can be found in the publications of groups such as the Free Presbyterian Church or the Evangelical Protestant Society.⁵

The assumption that this is what many or most evangelical Christians believe is hardly surprising given the fervour with which

these beliefs are proclaimed by their advocates. However, it is a false assumption. Many people within the large evangelical community in Northern Ireland reject this extreme interpretation. It needs to be stressed that evangelicalism is a very diverse religious movement.⁶

In addition to the points already mentioned, three other factors require that evangelicals assess their relationship with Roman Catholicism:

1. Despite claims to the contrary the Roman Catholic Church has changed. The question for some is whether these changes are significant enough to justify abandoning, or adapting, old attitudes and viewing Catholicism in a new light.
2. There are increasing numbers of men and women in the Roman Catholic church who have come to an evangelical understanding of the gospel. This is clear to everyone except those who will not see. If God is at work among Roman Catholic people it is not something that we can simply ignore. Those God has made his own are our brothers and sisters in Christ no matter how awkward that makes things for us.
3. The size of the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland, and Ireland as a whole, demands some assessment of our relationship to this community. We cannot simply ignore the existence of a community which constitutes 40% of the Northern population - 80% of the population of the whole of Ireland - and which claims at least a nominal allegiance to the same Lord as we do.

The following three chapters outline three approaches to the question of evangelical – Roman Catholic relationships. Each chapter contains three sections – the first looks at the theological convictions that lie behind each view; the second describes the understanding of the church held by each group; the third discusses the kinds of relationships that are acceptable to each group.

- ① **A New Era**, looks at what may be termed ‘pragmatic ecumenism’. Those who espouse this view see the changes that have taken place within Catholicism as providing opportunities for new relationships between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. It is pragmatic because there is a recognition that different situations will require different decisions and different reactions; it is ecumenical because there is an optimism about the possibility of developing these new relationships.
- ② **Common Concerns**, looks at the contrasting position of ‘pragmatic separatism’. In this case the conviction is that, despite the changes in Roman Catholicism, the areas still in dispute are of such significance that closer ties are not yet possible. However, there is a recognition that in certain areas it is possible for Roman Catholics and evangelicals to work together.
- ③ **Standing Together**, presents a model based on a different view of the nature of the church. This model calls into question the significance of much of the discussion over denominational relationships, formal confessions or concerns over structural unity or disunity. Instead, the focus is on the church as a community of believing people and the implications of this for relationships among God’s people everywhere.

The following chapters do not attempt to present a detailed or comprehensive argument. That is a task for another day. What is presented is a broad outline of the kinds of arguments used and the implications that are drawn. Consequently, it should not be assumed that those who promote any of the three positions described would do so in precisely these terms and with the same emphases.

In a final chapter a number of matters are raised that evangelicals, whatever their position on the debate, need to consider.

1 A NEW ERA

PRAGMATIC ECUMENISM

DETERMINING PRINCIPLES

Advocates of this first view might stress the following points:

The Authority of Scripture. Like all evangelicals they believe that God makes himself known in Scripture. The Bible alone speaks with authority.

The Unity of God. God reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Within the Trinity there is, therefore, both unity and diversity. There is thus a challenge to Christians to demonstrate that same unity while at the same time recognising and accepting the legitimacy of diversity. In the Bible, John 17 is the clearest statement of this position. The relationship between Jesus and the Father is a paradigm of the relationship among believers and between believers and God.

The Purpose of Jesus. Jesus' goal was not the creation of denominations and a multiplicity of competing and conflicting bodies. Jesus came to establish one new community, marked by unity and fellowship in the truth. Where the truth is known and proclaimed Christians have an obligation to be at one. Again John 17 illustrates this: Jesus himself prays for unity in truth among his followers on the pattern of his own unity with the Father since such unity will be a sign to the world. And throughout the New Testament there is an emphasis on the importance of unity (Ephesians 4.3-5; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Romans 12.5), together with a corresponding censure of those who divide the body (Romans 16.17; Galatians 5.20-21; Titus 3-9-10).

The implications of this biblical teaching are threefold: unity is more important than separation, a divided church undermines its own witness to Christ, and the proclamation of reconciliation is a sham if Christians remain unreconciled with one another.

The Gift of the Spirit. The unity Christians have in Christ is created by the Holy Spirit. This unity is a fact whether we recognise it or not, for all Christians share in one Spirit. However, as Christians we are not to be satisfied with paying lip service to this unity or simply maintaining that we have a ‘spiritual unity’ that transcends our divisions. For, as Paul exhorts his readers, Christians are to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4.3).

The Centrality of Love. One of the defining marks of the Christian life is love. The bible repeatedly commands Christians to show love - love for God, love for our fellow Christians, love for our neighbours. Authentic Christian living has love at its heart. Indeed, John’s first letter makes clear that love for other Christians is a crucial test of the genuineness of our discipleship (1 John 2.10; 3.10-24; 4.7-21).

Each of these key principles is clearly taught in Scripture. Any truly evangelical commitment to the truth revealed in Scripture requires that the implications of these principles must be taken seriously.

UNDERSTANDING CHURCHES

The Nature of the Church. Of course this raises an important question –what is the nature of this community Jesus established? What is the church? Many of the advocates of this first view come from mixed denominations where there is an acceptance of the view that the visible church contains both believers and unbelievers; both truth and error. Historically, the visible church has never been perfect. Its purity is a matter of degrees, not absolutes. Thus it is possible to think of the denominations as ‘Christian churches’, each a manifestation of the wider church which is greater than any denomination.

This understanding of the nature of the church leads inevitably to the question of the status of Roman Catholicism. Is it to be considered a Christian church? Proponents of this view argue that Catholicism is a mixed denomination – some are believers, some

are not. They see in Catholicism the presence of error, but also of truth. It is neither perfectly pure nor totally corrupt.

However, they also note that in the pre-Reformation era Christ was still building his church, and that his church existed in the midst of early and medieval Catholicism. Even though there was error, even though there was corruption, even though faith was not expressed in a recognisably evangelical way, God was working in and through those structures. The role of God's people within the structures of the visible church has always been to bear witness to the apostolic gospel and thus to call the whole church to faith in Christ.

So, from this point of view it is legitimate to speak of the Roman Catholic church as a 'Christian Church'. The implication of this is that other Christian churches must decide how they are to relate to Roman Catholicism.

Freedom to Change. This raises the question of the extent to which Roman Catholicism is a church in error. Here, the exponents of this view point to the radical change in Catholicism initiated by Vatican II. They argue that the Roman Catholic church today is not the same as the church opposed by the Reformers; not even the same church as thirty years ago. The transformation of Catholicism requires a fresh approach. New questions must be asked. Old answers must be reassessed.

Roman Catholicism is certainly a mainstream Christian church in its adherence to the historic orthodox doctrines of the Trinity, of the person of Christ, of the Incarnation and so on.

Moreover, in the light of Vatican II some argue that the Roman Catholic church now clearly proclaims the authority and importance of Scripture⁷, stresses the need for personal commitment⁸ and recognises the integrity of non-Roman churches.⁹ Roman Catholic historians no longer excoriate Luther but recognise the legitimacy of many of his criticisms of medieval Catholicism.¹⁰ Roman Catholic theologians and biblical scholars display a new willingness to enter into theological dialogue on matters of concern to evangelicals - most notably the question of justification by faith.¹¹

These evangelicals also point to the new freedom given to Roman Catholics to express their faith and the increasing diversity of belief that has resulted: Catholics who emphasise the importance of personal renewal and the gifts of the Holy Spirit,¹² Catholics who emphasise the social implications of the gospel for the poor and oppressed - whose guide is the Bible and whose sphere of action is the Base Ecclesial Community,¹³ Catholics who openly proclaim themselves to be evangelical - emphasising the centrality of the cross, the importance of personal salvation and the authority of Scripture.¹⁴

These significant and sweeping changes mean that the assumptions of previous generations are no longer adequate. There are new questions and these require new thinking and new answers. One result of this new thinking is that these evangelicals feel more than ever that there is scope for establishing new, positive, relationships with Roman Catholics.

However, it needs to be stressed that those who hold this position do not aspire to the goal of a formal union of denominations, or one world church. They are not advocating any kind of structural unity for its own sake. Instead, they are trying to take seriously the goal of unity - to see where opportunities for co-operation in practical and social matters, in fellowship, in worship and in mission exist and to grasp those opportunities.

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Clearly, this view leaves great scope for active co-operation between evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

Joint Worship. While there are continuing differences concerning the eucharist and the legitimacy of Protestant ordination, these are not insurmountable barriers to joint worship if the service contains nothing contrary to evangelical conviction. Catholics and Protestants can join together to worship God; Catholic and Protestant clergy can minister in each other's churches.

Moreover, the distinctive evangelical emphasis on the role of Scripture can enrich worship among people of different traditions.

Joint Witness. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics can witness together to the gospel of Jesus Christ provided there is agreement on the content of what is proclaimed. They can also support and encourage one another in denominational missions aimed at 'nominal Christians' affiliated to that denomination. Thus they are not interested in 'sheep stealing' but are instead concerned that the 'sheep' should find a living faith within their existing denomination.

Evangelism can also take place within inter-church structures. Evangelicals are well placed to call the whole church to renewal of life and faith.

Special times of the year - Easter or Christmas - can provide particular opportunities for both joint worship and joint evangelism.

Creating Community. The unity of the church can be given particular expression in the creation of Christian communities where people from different denominational backgrounds come together in a common commitment to worship and service.

Evangelicals who advocate this position do so because they are Christians who believe in the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ, who take seriously God's desire for unity and his hostility to division, and who yearn to see God's people united in their commitment to mission, their proclamation of the gospel and their worship of God.

COMMON CONCERNS

PRAGMATIC SEPARATISM

DETERMINING PRINCIPLES

Among the theological presuppositions which shape the views of those who hold to this position are the following:

The Authority of Scripture. At the heart of the gospel is God's revelation of himself. Without this revelation we are incapable of knowing anything of God. This revelation comes through the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit and is focused in Jesus Christ. Consequently, at the heart of evangelical belief is the conviction that supreme authority resides in the Scriptures, which reveal Jesus. It follows from this that any view which suggests that there are other vehicles of God's revelation or that the Scriptures only incompletely or inadequately reveal God is incompatible with the evangelical understanding of the Christian faith.

A Commitment to Truth. The work of Christ and the presence of the Spirit have brought into being a new community - the church. The church is a believing community made up of those who have come to faith in Christ. God's desire is for unity among his people. However, as John 17 makes clear, unity must be based on a shared commitment to truth (v16) and a common belief in Jesus (v20). The unity God desires is unity among the people of God. Denominational unity, however construed, is a different matter.

The Authenticity of the Church. Many of the advocates of this position, like those noted in the previous section, belong to mixed denominations. Thus, while they understand the church as a community of believing people, they also think of this community existing in and through a plurality of churches. Given this, it becomes important for evangelicals within the mixed denominations to be able to assess the validity of any claim to be an authentic church - especially the claim of the Roman Catholic church. This

assessment is usually based on a consideration of whether the body under discussion displays the ‘marks’ of a church.

UNDERSTANDING CHURCHES

These theological convictions give rise to two key questions for the proponent of this view. First, what are the marks of a true church; secondly, how does the Roman Catholic church fare when assessed by these criteria?

The Marks of a True Church. For evangelicals who hold to this view the most important mark of an authentic church is ‘the preaching of the word’. Does the church believe and teach the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith? This in turn raises another question – what are these fundamental doctrines?

The form of the question itself points to the truth that there is a distinction to be made between what is fundamental and what is not; between what is primary and what is secondary. However, it is not acceptable to these evangelicals that the fundamentals of the faith be reduced to a formal belief in the Trinity and a formal confession that Jesus is Lord. They point to the body of biblical teaching which sets out many more ‘fundamentals’.

For example, 1 Corinthians 15.3 refers to the authority of Scripture, Christ’s vicarious atonement and his resurrection as “of first importance” (compare 1 Corinthians 15.14). Galatians 1.7-8 claims that purveyors of any false gospel are accursed. Clearly, from the teaching of the book of Galatians, Paul understands any gospel that does not have the proclamation of justification by faith at its heart to be false. 2 Timothy 2.17-18 teaches that the doctrine of the resurrection of believers is a fundamental truth. False teaching, writes Paul, spreads like “gangrene” and destroys faith.

Many of these key aspects of Christian truth are brought into focus in the creeds. The apostles creed, for example, stresses the fatherhood of God and his role as creator; Christ’s divine sonship, his virgin birth, his crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and future coming; the unity, holiness and catholicity of the church; the resurrection of the body and everlasting life.

Undoubtedly many splits and divisions among and between churches have little to do with the question of sound doctrine. Often, they owe more to prejudice, personality conflicts, differences of opinion over the minutiae of church order and worship, and misunderstandings.

However, this is not to say that every division is so superficial. Despite the biblical stress on the importance of unity this can never be at the expense of the truth of the gospel. In such situations separation is a necessary consequence of faithfulness to God.

Assessing a True Church. How, then, does this approach impinge on attitudes to evangelical – Roman Catholic relationships among those who advance this view?

Those who hold to this position do not wish to deny that the Roman Catholic church has maintained and defended many key Christian doctrines that others have denied.¹⁵ The Roman Catholic church holds firmly to the Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed, the Creed of Constantinople and the Formula of Chalcedon, all of which express the heart of the Christian understanding of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Donald Macleod notes, “in the whole range of Christological dogmas, Rome has stood firm”.¹⁶

Nor do those who hold this view deny the many changes taking place within Catholicism, both formally and informally. They are not fighting battles from another century. They welcome the new focus on Scripture, the new emphasis on personal commitment among many individuals and groups within Catholicism, the recognition that many of the Reformers’ concerns were legitimate and so on.

However, the key question is whether the Roman Catholic church has sufficiently addressed those critical matters which gave rise to the Reformation in the first place. Is it now the case that the fundamental truths of the word of God are clearly proclaimed by the Roman Catholic church? For only if this is the case can inter-church co-operation between evangelicals and Roman Catholics be encouraged.

In answer to this key question these evangelicals argue that there is not sufficient evidence of change where change is most

needed. Don Carson expresses this position most succinctly: “We do not agree with Roman Catholics about the locus of revelation, the definition of the church, the means of grace, the source of contemporary ecclesiastical authority, the significance of Mary, the finality of Christ’s cross-work, and more. Though we recognise the immense diversity of contemporary Catholicism, we do not find that official pronouncements since Vatican II have bridged the chasm that remains.”¹⁷

While many of the documents of Vatican II point to changes within the nature of Catholicism, many others reassert the same doctrines that evangelicals cannot accept as true to the biblical message. • •

So, for example, while *Dei verbum* recognises the inspiration and authority of Scripture it does not recognise its supreme authority.¹⁸ *Unitatis redintegratio* asserts that the Roman Catholic church alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation.¹⁹ *Lumen Gentium* insists that authority in the church is exercised by the Pope together with the bishops, and restates the role of Mary within the Catholic faith.²⁰ A series of documents from the time of the council and other more recent pronouncements assert the fundamental significance of baptism and the eucharist within Catholicism. It is clear from the documents in question that the traditional Catholic understanding of these sacraments has not changed.²¹

In the light of this, these evangelical Christians feel that the essentials of the Christian faith are not being proclaimed in the Roman Catholic church. Consequently the Catholic church cannot be seen in the same light as Protestant churches. Protestant churches in which the gospel is proclaimed are being true to their foundational creeds - it is those in which it is not proclaimed that have deviated. In Roman Catholicism this is not the case, for too many of its doctrines are at odds with the gospel.

It follows from this that all talk of denominational unity, common worship or common evangelism is pointless. Evangelism presupposes a shared proclamation of the truth (Galatians 1.7-8); worship presupposes a shared understanding of the truth (John 4,23-24); unity presupposes a shared commitment to the truth (John 17.17, 20-21).

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Given this perspective, what should be the nature of the relationship between Roman Catholics and evangelicals?

Encouraging Believers. Those whom God has called within the Roman Catholic church are united with all other Christians. Evangelicals should rejoice in this and do all in their power to encourage believers. Opportunities may arise for prayer, worship and Bible study. However, this would be on a personal and informal basis, for these evangelicals would not feel it right to become involved within a formal, inter-church, framework.

Shared Agendas. There is scope for co-operation with Roman Catholic people on issues of common concern. There may be times when this co-operation could be at a more formal level. However, the basis for any formal co-operation is not a shared Christian commitment, but a willingness to join forces with any group or organisation in society which, for whatever reason, pursues the same goal.

Honest Discussion. Evangelicals in this group can engage in a dialogue with Roman Catholics. Their desire is to express their concerns in a principled and God-glorifying way. Thus there is no desire to conduct a debate by shouting abuse from a distance. Instead, there is scope for giving expression to convictions about the nature of the gospel and concerns about the nature of some Roman Catholic teaching within a framework of open and honest discussion.

It needs to be stressed that evangelicals holding to this view are neither sectarians nor bigots since that is often the assumption made. Like those discussed in the previous section they are sincere in their convictions. Their goals are the maintenance of the integrity of the gospel, the faithfulness of the church to God's word, and the glory of God.

STANDING TOGETHER

A CHURCH OF BELIEVING PEOPLE

Both of the previous positions tend to focus on inter-church relationships and, consequently, are often concerned with questions of denominational identity - what are the formal, doctrinal positions of the different groups under discussion? Are they sufficiently compatible to facilitate co-operation? While the answers may differ, the basic approach is the same.

However, both groups acknowledge that there is a distinction between affiliation to a denomination and genuine Christian commitment - not everyone who is a member of a church is a Christian. It is this distinction that lies at the heart of the third view.

Exponents of this position argue that the focus of any discussion of relationships between evangelicals and Roman Catholics requires a different starting point from those considered thus far. As Andrew Green notes: "It is possible to have... 'true marks' of the church and proper structures of authority - but still have no people of saving faith."²²

DETERMINING PRINCIPLES

What, then, are the theological presuppositions that shape this perspective. A number of them have already been mentioned.

The Authority of Scripture. Scripture is the means by which God reveals himself and is the source of supreme authority in the church.

The Work of the Gospel. The work of Christ and the presence of the Spirit create and sustain the new community of God's people.

A Church of Believers. The key difference lies in the understanding of the nature of the church. Instead of starting from an assumption of the legitimacy of the present situation with the existence of a plurality of denominations calling themselves Christian churches,

and then attempting to establish criteria by which the legitimacy of these claims can be judged, these evangelicals approach the question of the identity of the church from a very different and, they would argue, biblical perspective.

They see the churches established by the first Christian evangelists as local gatherings of those who had come to faith in Jesus Christ.

UNDERSTANDING CHURCHES

Acceptance in Christ. In Acts 2.38-47 initiation into the Christian faith is linked to repentance and baptism and results in the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit (v 38). Those who accepted the message are described as believers (v 44). And it is this shared belief in Jesus that creates the unity among them which works itself out in study of the word, fellowship, mutual caring and worship (v 42-47).

In Acts 11.19-30 the community of Christians at Antioch came into being when men and women believed and turned to the Lord in response to the proclamation of the gospel (v 19-21). For the believers at Jerusalem the evidence of the grace of God at work was the only proof they required before they became involved in supporting and encouraging the new group (v 22-24).

This pattern is repeated throughout the book of Acts. Moreover, this understanding of the nature of the church as local communities of believing people is presupposed throughout the many New Testament letters. Thus the fundamental biblical focus is on a 'believing' church.

However, the emphasis on believing leads on to the point that belief is in something. In the bible men and women are called to belief in Jesus (John 3.36; 5.24; Acts 16.31). Yet the person of Jesus is not to be separated from the work of Jesus - faith is personal but faith also has a content. These evangelicals would emphasise just as strongly as others the importance of the body of truth revealed in Scripture.

Having said this it is important to note that in the churches of the New Testament there was a willingness to take people's professions of faith at face value. The Ethiopian (Acts 8.37), Lydia (Acts 16.15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16.33), Cornelius and his family (Acts 10.48) were all accepted into the Christian community on the basis of a limited confession.

However, the first Christian communities also enforced discipline on those whose lives subsequently did not measure up. The letters of John set out the tests of faith: one is moral, another social and the third doctrinal (1 John 1.8-10; 3.16-20; 4.1-3).

Where such discipline failed the results were usually disastrous (for example, in Corinth and in some of the churches of Asia mentioned in Revelation 2-3). The goal was the creation of a community whose profession of faith in Jesus was demonstrated by a changed lifestyle and a commitment to the truth of God.

So these evangelicals argue that the church should be viewed as a local gathering of those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ. Each church should be marked by a commitment to the truth that God has revealed and a commitment to holiness of life.

Unity of faith. The implication for ecumenical discussion is clear. Denominations are not churches. The key concern is not about formal confessions or the way in which the sacraments are administered; it is instead whether personal commitment to Christ lies at the heart of any understanding of what it means to be the church. Among believers, whatever denominational banner they march under, there can be fellowship, mission, worship and so on. Given this perspective many of the concerns of those involved in ecumenical debate, including debate on relationships between evangelicals and Roman Catholics are simply irrelevant.

Any meaningful relationships must be judged in the light of this biblical picture.

There must, firstly, be a common understanding of what a Christian actually is. Without this there is no basis for fellowship in worship or mission; there is no basis for unity.

Secondly, the understanding of the church must be based on this prior understanding of what a Christian is. If the church is

understood to consist of believing people then denominational structures cannot be considered churches. Denominational unity is irrelevant to the question of church unity.

Thirdly, this perspective also shapes our understanding of what Christian unity will actually involve. Returning to the New Testament again, it appears that the primary focus of the church is the local fellowship of believing people. What united them was their common faith in Jesus Christ. That unity expressed itself in very practical ways: mutual caring (Acts 11.29; 2 Corinthians 8.1-2), co-operation in evangelism (Philippians 1.5), mutual consultation (Acts 15.1-35), respect for universal practice (1 Corinthians 11.16), love for other Christians (Colossians 1.4).

Christian unity was not a matter of creating structures or uniting separate groups, but neither was it a pious expression of a 'spiritual' reality that had no real impact on either the Christian communities or the world. Jesus' prayer in John 17 was a prayer for a visible unity that would bear witness to the world, and that would show forth the unity in truth of those who believe.

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

For relationships between evangelicals and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland there are two important implications:

Developing Understanding. At a denominational level there are no grounds for entering into a process which has some kind of formal, denominational or structural unity as its ultimate goal. However, there is scope for discussion and dialogue with representatives of these groups.

Such dialogue might be conducted with a view to aiding relationships between Protestant and Catholic communities in a particular area. It could provide a framework for the discussion of biblical or theological matters away from the glare of publicity and with the opportunity for clarification where there is misunderstanding. None of this presupposes the existence of an agenda geared to church unity or inter-church activity.

Standing Together. Evangelicals need to recognise that believers within the Roman Catholic church are as much their brothers and sisters in Christ as believers within the Protestant denominations. They are one, not because of common belief or common church order, but because they are all Christians.

At this level, therefore, there can be no objection to sharing fellowship with Roman Catholic Christians. Circumstances will often dictate the degree to which shared worship, shared mission and so on are possible. But in principle, since God has made all believers one, they should seek every opportunity to live out that oneness and so fulfil the prayer of Jesus (John 17.20-21).

CONCLUSION

As Donald McCleod notes, “Because of history, the reaction of evangelicals to Roman Catholicism is often irrational and sometimes even hysterical”.²³

Today, many Protestants, particularly those who consider themselves evangelical, still respond in this manner. Many are locked in a sixteenth century timewarp, oblivious to the changes within Roman Catholicism, within evangelicalism and in the world in which we all live.

Evangelical Christians are rightly committed to the authority of the Bible in all of life. However, it is all too easy to assume that our understanding of Scripture is such that we have little to learn. The word of God flows through well worn channels known to us and entirely predictable. Instead of allowing ourselves to be mastered by Scripture we become masters of Scripture. Instead of being humbled by Scripture we become self-confident and sure of ourselves.

Yet the writer of Hebrews tells us that Scripture is like a two edged sword cutting into us (Hebrews 4.12). Through Scripture the Spirit of God speaks to us still (Ephesians 3.4-6). We are to listen for the voice of the Spirit speaking in Scripture and take heed of what is said: “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5.25); “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire” (1 Thessalonians 5.19).

Evangelicals need to be open to what God may be doing in his world. Evangelicals need to be willing to think biblically about what is happening around them. It is not sufficient to force present experience into the paradigms of the past. The possibility that we may, in doing so, be turning our backs on the work of God should weigh heavily with us.

In the light of this how should evangelical Christians respond?

It should be noted, firstly, that a great deal of activity takes place between evangelicals and Roman Catholics already. Examples of this might be:

Dialogue. The Evangelical – Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (**ERCDOM**). This dialogue was described in the **ERCDOM** report

as “a search for such common ground as might be discovered between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics as they each try to be more faithful in their obedience to mission”.²⁴ The report’s conclusion was that “every possible opportunity for common witness should be taken, except where conscience forbids”.²⁵

Social Witness. Roman Catholics and evangelicals often share common convictions on matters of morality and social justice. Roman Catholics have been active in opposing moves to undermine family life, in defending Christian standards of sexual morality, and in opposing the exploitation and manipulation of human life. Agencies such as LIFE, SPUC and CARE bring together people of many different backgrounds around a mutual concern for the state of our society. Roman Catholics and evangelicals are actively committed to relief and development in the third world. Aid agencies of many different complexions work together all over the world for the well being of men and women.

Christian Orthodoxy. The C.S.Lewis Centre has brought together people of Orthodox, evangelical and Roman Catholic persuasion around a common concern for the defence of Christian orthodoxy and a rejection of the theological pluralism that is so dominant, not least within many Protestant denominations.

Evangelism. During Billy Graham’s missions all the churches in a particular area are invited to become involved irrespective of their denominational allegiance. Often, both Roman Catholic and evangelical churches work side by side in bringing men and women to Billy Graham’s rallies; often, the co-operation continues after the mission has ended. Where there is a common acceptance of the message being preached there are no grounds for division.

Many other examples could be given but these give some indication of the range of possibilities open for co-operation.

It should also be noted that, whatever position they may hold, all evangelicals associated with ECONI, and many others, would gladly co-operate with Roman Catholics in at least some of the areas listed.

However, as evangelical Christians continue to confront these matters there are a number of points which need to be kept in mind and a number of dangers which need to be avoided:

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

We should recognise the many positive changes within Catholicism, not least the new emphasis on Scripture, and pray that this process will continue.

We should rejoice that many Roman Catholic people are coming to a clearly evangelical understanding of faith and pray that many more will do so.

We should clearly recognise the reality of the unity that God has created between all believers irrespective of their denominational background.

SPECIFIC DANGERS

Each of the positions outlined in this booklet has its own particular dangers. Those who advocate each need to be aware of these and respond accordingly.

- 1 Those advocating closer ties between evangelicals and Roman Catholics constantly need to ensure that they are not pursuing such ties to the extent that the distinctives of the gospel are blurred or obscured.
In their own minds they may have no difficulty living with any tension their position gives rise to. However, many other Christians do not find it so easy. The sensitivities of their fellow believers need to be taken into account. For the good of the body of Christ as a whole it may be wiser at times to temper enthusiasm with restraint.
- 2 Those who oppose closer ties also need to constantly examine their position. While they may believe that it is not right to pursue such relationships now it does not follow that it will never be right to do so.
They also need to ensure that the manner in which they present their case does not come across as hostile, arrogant

or belligerent. Sadly, attitudes such as these are prevalent enough in this community.

Furthermore, they need to ensure that in rejecting formal or structural relationships they do not end up rejecting relationships with those within Roman Catholicism who are Christians. This may be a 'tidy' position, since it renders matters quite straightforward, but it is not a defensible position biblically.

- 3 Those whose understanding of the church leads them to bypass many of the debates that surround ecumenical issues need to ensure that their vision of what the church should be is heard in those circles where such a understanding is not common. They also need to ensure that they do not 'spiritualise' the notion of Christian unity to the point where it becomes invisible in practical terms.

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

In closing, two other points need to be made.

Concerning our relationships with Roman Catholics:

Whatever our point of view evangelical Christians must behave with courtesy, dignity and integrity towards our Roman Catholic neighbours, both in our words and our actions. Our differences and concerns must be expressed in a manner in keeping with our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. When we give an account of ourselves we should do so with "gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience" (1 Peter 3.15-16).

Concerning our relationships with one another as evangelicals: As brothers and sisters in Christ holding different views we must share our concerns and convictions so that we can better understand one another. Furthermore, any debate among us, whether on this subject or on some other, must be conducted in a Christlike manner. It is vital that we accept one another's Christian integrity even when we differ. It is a tragedy that so often we fail to do so.

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NOTES

1. For example Bruce, *God Save Ulster*; Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*; Hempton & Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*
2. Statistics compiled from *Irish Christian Handbook* (MARC Europe, London 1992)
3. A fact increasingly recognised by many within the mainstream of ecumenism: 'The evangelical tradition is in many ways the key to the whole Protestant community.' *Living The Kingdom* 5
4. The relationship between these groups and evangelicals within ECONI will be dealt with in a separate publication available in late 1994.
5. *The Revivalist*: Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster
The Ulster Bulwark: Published by The Evangelical Protestant Society
6. Boal, Campbell & Livingstone, 'Protestant Mosaic'
7. *Dei verbum* (Chs III-V) 750-765 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*
The new emphasis on Scripture can be clearly seen in the wealth of excellent work coming from Catholic biblical scholars: Schnackenburg and Brown on John; Johnston on Luke etc.
8. *Sacrosanctum concilium* (Ch I.I) *Lumen Gentium* (Chs II, IV, V) 1-36, 350-426 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*; *Evangelii nuntiandi* 711-761 in Flannery, *Vatican II*
9. *Unitatis redintegratio, Ad totam ecclesiam* 452-470, 483-581 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*
10. See for example Lortz, *Reformation*; Todd, Martin Luther
11. See for example ARCIC, *Salvation and the Church*; Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consultation, *Justification by Faith*
12. See Suenens, *Ecumenism*; *Pentecost*
13. See Boff & Boff, *Liberation Theology*; Gutierrez, *Theology*; Nunez C., *Liberation Theology*
Transformation 3.3 (July/September 1986) Focus on Base Communities
14. See, for example, the leaflet *What is an Evangelical Catholic?* produced by a number of Roman Catholic lay leaders and clergy as a 'straightforward and clear statement of Catholic

Christianity, with an Evangelical emphasis' (page 5). See also the materials available from Evangelical Catholic Initiative.

What is an Evangelical Catholic?

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Fournier, *Evangelical Catholics*; David McMillan, 'Evangelical Catholicism'

15. See, for example, *Solemni hac Liturgia, Mysterium filii Dei* 387-396, 423-427 in Flannery, *Vatican II*
16. Macleod, 'Christian Unity' 6
17. Carson, 'Evangelicals' 379
18. *Dei verbum* (Ch II) 750-765 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*
19. *Unitatis redintegratio* (Ch I) 452-570 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*
20. *Lumen Gentium* (CH III, VIII) 350-426 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*
21. See, for example, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (Chs III-IV), *Eucharisticum mysterium* (Introduction) 1-40, 100-136 in Flannery, *Vatican Council*; *Paenitemini*; *Per initiationis Christianae, Dominicae cenae* 1-12, 22-28, 64-92 in Flannery, *Vatican II*
22. Green, 'Towards' 3
23. Macleod, 'Christian Unity' 6
24. Meeking & Stott *Dialogue* 10
25. Meeking & Stott, *Dialogue* 91. See also 81-91 'The Possibilities of Common Witness'

BEYOND FEAR, SUSPICION AND HOSTILITY

ALWYN THOMSON

How should evangelicals relate to Roman Catholics?

In this booklet, the first in the PATHWAYS series published by ECONI, we look at some of the answers to this question coming from the evangelical community in Northern Ireland.

The conflict in Northern Ireland raises many difficult, sometimes controversial, issues for Christians. Often we choose to ignore or avoid them. PATHWAYS is an attempt to address them biblically. Our goal is to find God's path, the good way, and to walk in it.

This is what the Lord says:

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."

Jeremiah 6.16



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