

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together’ – A Movement of ‘Watershed Significance’?

Iain H Murray

*Iain Murray considers Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Towards a Common Mission Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus edd (Word Publishing: Dallas 1995) 236pp. This article appeared in The Banner of Truth Magazine (June 1996 No 393) and is reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.*

This book is an important extension of the widespread discussion and controversy which began in the United States in 1994 after a group of Evangelicals and Roman Catholics issued a statement entitled ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium’. The signatories of that original document (ECT) were described as ‘Participants’ and as those who ‘Endorsed’ it; among the latter was Dr J I Packer who has subsequently emerged as its most prominent defender from the evangelical side. The ECT statement is reprinted in the book (pp xv-xxxiii) and its thinking is expanded and defended in two chapters by the editors, along with chapters by George Weigel, Mark A Noll, Avery Dulles and J I Packer. Of these six men, Colson, Noll and Packer write as Evangelicals. Whereas they all support the ECT statement, the editors of the present volume point out, in a sentence easily missed, that here ‘The authors speak for themselves, but each speaks in a respectful awareness of the convictions of others’ (p xi).

## **The Case for Evangelical and Catholic Co-operation**

In Dr Packer’s words, the purpose of the 1994 ECT statement was to formulate a justification ‘at the level of principle’ (p 173) for a commitment of Evangelicals and believing Roman Catholics to one another. The purposes to be achieved by such commitment include friendship and, more important, ‘the common task of evangelizing the unbelieving world’ (p 36), ‘the aim is to proclaim Christ the Saviour together’ (p 167).

Before anyone dismisses this as but another ploy leading to re-union with Rome the authors and supporters of ECT merit a serious hearing. The Evangelicals among them are clear that this is *not* an effort at rapprochement with the Church of Rome. Packer writes: 'Co-operation with the Roman Catholic *Church* is not what ECT is about' (p 165); or again, 'I am not and could not become a Roman Catholic' (p 161). He sets down clearly the biblical issues over which evangelical Christianity has always opposed Rome and states that the unity which concerns him is 'with individual Roman Catholics who for whatever reason do not self-consciously assent to the precise definitions of the Roman Catholic magisterium<sup>1</sup>... but who think and speak evangelically about these things', and 'are indeed our brothers and sisters in Christ, despite Rome's official position' (p 159).<sup>2</sup> So the co-operation which ECT proposes is not one of *churches*; the model is rather that of individuals belonging to a parachurch agency for the accomplishment of specific purposes. Neither evangelical nor Catholic participants anticipate any present prospect of *church* unity, but their case is that Christians ought to go as far as they can to help one another, and to serve the cause of Christ together, provided that in doing so they are not required to suppress any conscientiously held truth. ECT is for co-operation 'up to the limit of what divergent convictions allow' (p 149).

The proviso in the last sentence appears to be taken seriously by the authors and the kind of ecumenical agenda which minimises truth for the sake of unity is repeatedly disclaimed: 'the deepening alliance between groups of Evangelicals and Catholics that is occurring today is wholly different, because it is a co-operation between Christians who take doctrine very seriously indeed' (p 34 etc). Packer, accordingly, does not hesitate to state his criticism of official Roman Catholic teaching, neither does Dr Neuhaus (Roman Catholic joint-editor and principal contributor) disguise how far he believes Evangelicals to be wrong on some cardinal issues.

It should further be said, by way of explanation, how historical circumstances prepared the way for the policy now advanced by ECT. Packer acknowledges that the understanding which they advance diverges from the one which has traditionally been taken by Protestants but he shares the view that changed circumstances warrant the adoption of a different stance. To that stance, he affirms, he is as conscientiously

1 'Magisterium' = the teaching office of the Roman Church. 'The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and the bishops in communion with him.' To this 'Supreme Magisterium' infallibility belongs. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [London: Geoffrey Chapman 1995] *imprimatur* Pope John Paul pp 28, 207 etc)

2 The words are probably not actually Packer's but they are part of another statement signed by him and thirty-four other Evangelicals in August 1994 and they are quoted by him in this book (p 159).

committed as Luther was to his stance at Worms (p 148). He believes that 'should the desired co-operative action prove to be practical politics, it would be an event of watershed significance' (p 166), and he concludes his chapter with the words, 'ECT is a good beginning. I stand with it (I cannot do otherwise) and for it I thank God. Now I wait to see what God will do with it' (p 173).

What then are the changed circumstances upon which the authors place such weight? From the Roman Catholic side has come the official endorsement of Vatican II that true Christian life may be found in communions which possess no formal connection with the papacy and the Roman Church. The Catholic contributors, Father Dulles and Dr Neuhaus, make a good deal of this latter-day acknowledgement of the Christian status of non-Catholics. Such persons are said to be 'truly but imperfectly' in communion with the Church even although they do not know it (p 204). No barrier therefore now exists on the Roman side for individual, informal association with Christians outside the Church of Rome.

From the evangelical side the major change, it is said, has come through personal experience rather than from any enlarged belief. For a number of years Evangelicals have worked with Catholics to uphold Christian values in an increasingly secular society, most notably, perhaps, in their common opposition to abortion. In this 'co-belligerence' against a humanist agenda there has come a deepening realization that the beliefs they held in common went beyond those of ethics and conduct: they believed in God as Creator and Judge, in Christ as the divine Redeemer, and in the Holy Spirit. The magnitude of the present cultural crisis then led these participants to the conviction that for real moral change there has to be the re-awakening of conscience and that cannot be without the re-establishment of Christian truth and doctrine. This is the theme of Colson's impressive first chapter and Packer strikes the same note when he writes, 'Adherents to the key truths of classical Christianity... should link up for the vast and pressing task of re-educating our secularized communities on these matters... domestic differences... should not hinder us from joint action in seeking to re-Christianize the North American milieu' (p 172). Such co-operation, Packer is at pains to repeat, is not with theological liberals but with those 'who honour the Christ of the Bible and the historic creeds and confessions' (p 171).<sup>3</sup> This is feasible today, he judges, because the Church of Rome now contains 'many such believers' (p 159). 'Despite the shortcomings of Rome's official teaching, there are many Roman Catholic Christians' (p 163). Whether the evangelical participants in ECT think this has always been the case, or whether the

3 'Historic creeds and confessions': presumably a reference only to the credal statements of the early centuries of the Christian era.

perceived phenomenon belongs only to more recent times, they do not say. What is clear is that their 'discovery' of many Christians within the Church of Rome is a key factor in the policy now advanced. The Bible speaks clearly of the duties which fellow Christians have towards one another and why should the fact that such Catholics and Evangelicals cannot agree on everything hinder them from 'standing and working together to uphold Christian values and spread the good news of Jesus Christ' (p 164)?

We have tried to state the ECT case fairly and we do not think it is one to be lightly dismissed. Has any sound-minded believer ever doubted that real Christians exist within the Roman communion? Those who know nothing of such men as Pascal, Fenelon and Martin Boos should not engage in this controversy. Packer is surely correct in saying that if the ability to formulate precisely the Pauline doctrine of imputed righteousness is essential to being a Christian, then many eminent church leaders of the past, including Athanasius and Augustine, 'were not real believers' (p 170). It should also be said that the priority which the supporters of ECT want to give to evangelism and to purifying society commands respect. To spend our days engaged in infighting with professing Christians, with a heart and mind unmoved by the plight of lost men and women on our door-steps, can scarcely resemble the spirit of Christ. We can also believe that more real good is sometimes done by genuine friendships with believing Catholics than can be done by merely delivering anti-Romanist literature at arm's length to those from whom we mean to remain isolated. So, to repeat the case for ECT, it is that believers across the formal church divide witness together for Christ and the gospel while retaining freedom to differ on other issues.

### **The Chief Objection: the Meaning of 'Christian' Is Blurred**

In our view this case is flawed, and flawed at the very point where it wants to affirm its strength. Certainly an individual may belong to Christ while possessing only a weak understanding of how salvation has come to him, and how many or how few of the billion Roman Catholics in the world may be in that position it is not man's position to determine. But the New Testament presents a gospel which is to be believed *in order to* receive salvation, and it requires those who would teach that good news to others, and who would exercise leadership in the churches, to be clear and definite about how a person becomes a Christian. Now Dr Packer acknowledges that a real difference exists between evangelical Christians and the Church of Rome on the question of how men come into the possession of salvation and a personal relationship with God. He repeats the Protestant conviction that 'Roman teaching obscures the gospel and indeed distorts it in a

tragically antipiritual and unpastoral manner' (p 153). He speaks further of 'Roman Catholic mis-statings of the gospel' (p 164) and concludes: 'Rome's official doctrinal disorders, particularly on justification, merit, and the Mass-sacrifice, so obscure the gospel that were I, as a gesture of unity, invited to Mass... I would not feel free to accept' (pp 162-3).

The Roman Catholic contributors to this volume also make no secret of the fact that they think differently from Evangelicals on how an individual *becomes* a Christian. In this connection a very significant difference in the language of the evangelical and Catholic contributors to the book is noticeable. While Colson and Packer speak of ECT as representing a unity with 'believing Catholics', the Catholic contributors never use that qualifying word 'believing' in speaking of any belonging to their communion. And they do not do so because the whole weight of official Roman Catholic teaching enforces the conclusion that all who belong to the 'Church' (ie the Church of Rome), and are partakers of her sacraments, are in the process of becoming Christians. Thus a sentence in the ECT statement reads: 'for Catholics, all who are validly baptized are born again and are truly, however imperfectly, in communion with Christ' (p xxx). Any valid baptism, Father Dulles tells us (quoting *Unitas Redintegratio* 22), 'causes the baptized to be "truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, and reborn to a sharing of the divine life.... Thus baptism establishes a sacramental bond of unity existing among all who have been reborn by it"' (p 131). To speak of a non-Christian or an unbelieving Roman Catholic is therefore a contradiction in terms. True to this teaching, Neuhaus insists that communion with the Church (the Roman Church) and communion with Christ are one and the same thing (pp 214-20). So the Catholic contributors to this book want to speak of 'different ways of being Christian' (pp 180, 219 etc) rather than of 'believers' and 'unbelievers'.<sup>4</sup> In so doing they are repeating the language agreed in the original ECT statement - 'there are different ways of being Christian' (p xxix). The qualification of 'believing' before Catholic does not appear in the original document.

ECT is thus necessarily committed to a vaguer meaning of 'Christian' than has ever previously been acceptable to Evangelicals in debate with members of the Church of Rome. The form of words chosen by the ECT statement *hides* the real difference between biblical Christianity and the Church of Rome in this crucial area. Under the heading 'We Affirm Together', we read: 'We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ... All who accept Christ as Lord and

4 It is true that Dulles says 'Vatican II declared also that external membership is not sufficient for salvation' (p 123), but Rome's sacramental view of salvation is hopelessly at variance with the biblical implications of that statement.

Saviour are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ' (p xviii). Packer argues that this language is not a 'sell-out' and that 'ECT shows skill' (p 167) at arriving at an accommodation which will permit co-operation in evangelistic mission; 'domestic differences about salvation and the church', he writes, 'should not hinder us from joint action' (p 172). But how can there be unity in evangelism if there is no agreement over *who needs to be converted*? On that question no part of the original ECT statement has given more concern to evangelical critics than the seeming commitment to discourage evangelistic endeavour in each other's territory (see pp xxviii–xxx). Those pages include such words as, 'our commitment to full religious freedom compels us to defend the legal freedom to proselytize even as we call upon Christians to refrain from such activity'. If Roman Catholics are already Christians then any attempt to 'convert' them has to be 'proselytizing', and as the evangelical supporters of ECT are committed to the affirmation that 'opportunity and means for growth in Christian discipleship' exist in the Church of Rome, then any advising converts to turn to other churches has to be unwarranted – 'his decision regarding communal allegiance and participation must be assiduously respected' (p xxxi). Packer puts the best meaning possible on these much debated pages of the original statement, but the fact remains that their meaning is, to say the least, ambiguous and how can it be otherwise when the whole idea of conversion is so different for the Catholic contributors? Thus Neuhaus seeks to counter the charge 'that ECT condemns the practice of Evangelicals witnessing to Catholics, and vice versa' with this statement: 'To take one another seriously as brothers and sisters in Christ means constantly calling one another to a deeper conversion to Christ' (p 197). Dulles, with the confusion characteristic of Roman teaching, affirms that all 'justified by faith through baptism are incorporated in Christ' and then proceeds to say: 'To enter into a saving relationship with God in Christ is the principal and all-embracing goal of the Christian life' (p 124 italics added).<sup>5</sup>

Let us return then to the question of how many Catholics may be Christians. It is not enough to say that we do not know. Packer states that evangelical critics of ECT argue that 'Roman Catholics are not ordinarily Christians' (p 154), an opinion to which he gives no direct response. But that opinion is surely based on the fact that where the gospel is denied or obscured the souls of men and women are necessarily imperilled. It is one thing to say that *some* out of the world's billion Catholics are Christians, in spite of the delusions to which they are exposed. It is quite another to hope that the vast majority, who have never heard the gospel clearly stated, enjoy a living relationship with Christ. We know that all denominations contain nominal Christians but the Roman system – as the Reformers protested –

5 According to Roman teaching no one can be sure he is a Christian until he is dead.

is calculated to mislead souls by the encouragement it gives them to trust in outward means which God never appointed. The inevitable tendency of official Roman Catholic teaching is to make the externals the main things. The nominal Christian thus very easily becomes the norm. Colson goes some way to recognise this in reflecting on the low morals of American Catholics (p 18) and in noting that 'the Catholic Church in America seems to many observers to be characterized by a merely nominal faith' (p 32). In his own autobiography of twenty years ago Colson told us that, at the time of his conversion to Christ, all that he had ever heard from his Roman Catholic wife after ten years of marriage was what she 'felt about confession and Communion, the significance of the Mass'.<sup>6</sup> Christianity as a living relationship with Christ was new to her. Precisely the same has been true of countless numbers of others raised in the Roman Church when they first heard the gospel.

### **Are the Catholic Participants in ECT 'Authentic Catholics'?**

We have noted that the object of ECT is co-operative evangelistic action on the part of Evangelicals and Catholics at 'grass-roots' level. But here is a book which, for its most vital part, depends on the contribution of theological experts and heavy-weights (Dulles, Packer and Neuhaus). If these men, presumably the best advocates for ECT, are at cross purposes on fundamental truths, what are the untrained, less articulate rank-and-file enthusiasts for ECT to make of it when it comes to their corporate evangelistic mission? Have they been given the preparation which Scripture requires leaders to give those who would serve Christ in public work?

Connected with this is another point: I can no more know the spiritual position of Dulles and Neuhaus than they can know mine, but one thing they do make abundantly clear and that is that they do not fall into the category of those with whom Dr Packer affirms unity is possible, namely, those who 'do not self-consciously assent to the precise definitions of the Roman Catholic magisterium regarding justification, the sole mediation of Christ, the relation between faith and the sacraments' etc (p 159). On the contrary, both Dulles and Neuhaus are well-taught and efficient advocates for official Roman Catholic teaching. Both find no justification for any separation from Rome in the teaching of their Church, and they would disdain the idea that a Roman Catholic can be a faithful Christian only if he or she does 'not self-consciously assent' to all the Church holds.<sup>7</sup> How

6 Charles W Colson *Born Again* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1976) p 135

7 Neuhaus explicitly criticises 'Protestant theologians' of the past who thought Catholics could be Christians only if, by 'felicitous inconsistency', they did not actually believe what they professed to believe, ie, the official teaching of their Church (pp 194-5). Speaking of ECT, he writes: 'For Evangelicals, there would be little point in engaging in evangelical-Catholic conversation with Catholics who are not authentically Catholic' (p 179).

can Packer possibly regard Dulles and Neuhaus as legitimate participants in ECT if he takes the requirement of 'no self-conscious assent' seriously? Where would the Pope himself stand in terms of this requirement? His office proclaims the error which lies at foundation of the Church of Rome, namely, that submission to the papacy is of equal moment as submission to Christ.<sup>8</sup> But is it possible that the Pope too could become a participant in ECT on the supposition that he also lacks 'self-conscious assent'? Packer describes him as 'a wonderful man who has done a wonderful job as a world Christian ambassador' (p 162).

It seems to us that the qualifications which the evangelical defenders of ECT want to introduce to limit the extent of the unity they support – only 'believing Catholics' who do not 'self-consciously assent' to official Roman errors – are meaningless. Given such a subjective and uncertain test, almost any Roman Catholic who is not an avowed liberal could be included, and such broad inclusion is precisely what the Catholic participants in ECT themselves appear to approve. As already noted, the original ECT statement contained no qualification about 'believing Catholics'. Rather we read such words as: 'our mission includes many other Christians, notably the Eastern Orthodox and those Protestants not commonly identified as Evangelical... Our present statement attends to the specific problems and opportunities in the relationship between Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants' (p xvi).

Yet although ECT and Catholics generally use the word 'Christian' so broadly, the fact is that according to the authorised teaching of the Church of Rome such a well-informed Protestant teacher as Dr Packer should not himself be regarded as a Christian! 'They could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter, or to remain in it. This affirmation is not aimed at those who, *through no fault of their own*, do not know Christ and his Church.'<sup>9</sup>

## ECT Is Not New Enough

The only explanation which we are able to give for ECT is that it is not what it professes to be. It professes to be a *new* initiative while it displays

8 Nothing has changed here since John Owen wrote: 'The church of Rome lays claim to the very same authority over and conduct of the consciences of men in religion as were committed unto Jesus Christ and his apostles. It is as safe, as they pretend, for a man to cast off the authority and institutions of Christ himself as to dissent from those of the pope' (*Works of Owen* vol 14 [London: Banner of Truth 1967] p 499).

9 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* pp 196–7 italics added. It is only the ignorant 'through no fault of their own' whose lack of submission to the Church may not be damning. Dr Packer is also under an 'anathema' according to Canon V, and other Canons, of the Council of Trent.

many of the very weaknesses which have long been present in the religious scene. Despite the repeated disclaimers of sympathy for ecumenism, the ecumenical influence is here.<sup>10</sup> It appears in the participants' willingness to accept the broadest definition of the word 'Christian' (p xvi); it is present in the contrived ambiguity over crucial doctrine. Packer's statement that what brings salvation 'is not any theory about faith and justification, but trusting Jesus himself as Lord' (p 168) has long been heard from many who, unlike him, want to urge that *experience* is more important than truth. The ecumenical clichés are also here – 'we have found one another'; 'trust and respect one another'; 'be radically open to the surprises the Holy Spirit may have in store'; and so on. Ecumenism has always wanted to emphasise that professing Christian teachers and leaders should be judged by their 'Christian' lives rather than by their doctrine and that priority is here also. Could John Paul II be called a 'Christian ambassador' if we gave primary attention to his *teaching*? More than thirty years ago David du Plessis, catalyst for the charismatic movement, was advocating that the way to unity with Roman Catholics was to be found in shared experience rather than in any common understanding of biblical truths.<sup>11</sup> The ECT authors frankly recognise how the way was prepared for them by the charismatic movement (pp xi, 97–8, 173).

One of the most serious failures of Evangelicalism, and especially of the new Evangelicalism promoted in the States from the 1950s, has been the degree to which expediency has been justified in terms of 'promoting the gospel'. This showed itself in Dr Billy Graham's willingness to seek Roman Catholic support for his evangelistic crusades, subsequently leading him even to decline proposals for crusades if Catholic co-operation could not be ensured. There was no attempt to defend the Graham practice (and the new departure which it represented) in terms of principle. Everyone knew that it rested on sincere, if ill-judged, expediency. Now, however, we find 'Billy Graham's co-operative evangelism' referred to with approval by Dr Packer (pp 172–3, and see p 99). With Colson, he appears to believe that the concessions made by ECT are warranted (as Graham's policy was warranted) by the enlarged influence for the gospel which co-operation with Catholics must afford.

10 This is recognised by contributors in various places. There has been little criticism of ECT from the Catholic side, says Neuhaus, because 'Catholics are accustomed to ecumenical engagement' (p 179). 'ECT is born from a long gestation of evangelical/ecumenical involvement' (p 184).

11 Du Plessis (1905–1987) became the first non-Catholic to receive the pope's 'Good Merit' medal for 'service to all Christianity'.

## What Evangelicals Are to Concede

'The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium' is to be a *joint* mission and, in the words of Bill Bright, carried as a cover blurb on the book we are reviewing, the ECT statement 'has enhanced our efforts to reach the masses of the world with the gospel. I have no doubt that the population of heaven will be greatly increased because of this statement'.<sup>12</sup> What this really means is that evangelical workers who support ECT will get access to populations in Roman Catholic areas of the world in a manner previously impossible. That expectation is not unrealistic, as the ministries of Graham and du Plessis would indicate. But the question is, what price is being paid by Evangelicals to secure the opening and the hoped-for gains? Is there a *quid pro quo*? We believe there is. It is that Evangelicals are now to treat the Church of Rome and its members as Christians. That is clearly implied in the original ECT statement, with the corollary that Evangelicals no longer view departure from the Church of Rome as a matter of principle. So Evangelicals are to acknowledge that the differences of belief between Catholics and Protestants are no longer to be regarded as of a fundamental kind. Dr Packer appears to concede this, despite what he says on the gospel being 'obscured' and 'mis-stated' by Rome.<sup>13</sup>

In turn, this means that another major admission is to be accepted by Evangelicals: the Protestant Reformers were wrong to think, in Calvin's words, that 'the whole substance of the Christian religion is brought into question' by the errors of Rome.<sup>14</sup> As Rome's fundamental teaching has not changed since the sixteenth century, what other conclusion can be reached other than that the Reformers all made a mistake? I say 'all' because here Calvin cannot be isolated from the other Reformers. The Church of England's 'Homily of Justification', for instance, which is singled out in the Thirty-nine Articles for special commendation, says of that doctrine, 'this whosoever denieth is not to be counted for a true Christian man, nor for a setter forth of Christ's glory, but for an adversary of Christ and His Gospel'. But the Council of Trent specifically denies that doctrine and the denial cannot be questioned, writes Neuhaus, because 'the Church is not authorized to repudiate retrospectively a

12 Bright himself this year received the 'Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion' and was scheduled to give 'a 30-minute address to the worldwide media' in the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, on 9 May.

13 See the Packer quotation on p 109, taken from his foreword to George Carey's book favouring re-union with Rome, *A Tale of Two Churches: Can Protestants and Catholics Get Together?* (Downers Grove Ill: IVP 1985) p ii.

14 John Calvin 'The Necessity of Reforming the Church' *Tracts Relating to the Reformation* H Beveridge ed (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society 1844) vol 1 p 187

conciliar decree' (p 209);<sup>15</sup> in other words, the Roman Church can never question the infallibility of her official teaching. So, to help Evangelicals swallow the admission involved in their new standpoint, Neuhaus offers another solution. 'Most scholars', he informs us, now agree that the council fathers at Trent 'did not understand the Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, adequately' (p 209). There was simply a misunderstanding on both sides! And, he further tells us, that to make 'the formula "justification by faith alone"' an essential part of the gospel, would be to say 'the Good News is to be judged by a theological formula devised sixteen centuries after that reality came into existence' (p 207)!

One last gain for Roman Catholicism from ECT has still to be mentioned. Able and astute advocates for official Catholic beliefs are given in this book a world-wide platform by an evangelical publishing house, with their errors appearing alongside such well-known Evangelicals as Colson and Packer. Have our notions of charity now come to such a point that Evangelicals count this as no great loss to the cause of truth? From the evangelical side, theologically speaking, this book is definitely weighted on the Catholic side. It is no disrespect to Mr Colson to say that, as far as theological controversy is concerned, he is not in the same league as Dr Neuhaus. It is true Dr Packer gives the definite criticisms of Rome which we have quoted above but that is done in passing while the great majority of his space is taken up with responding to the criticism of fellow Evangelicals. Dulles and Neuhaus (who takes twice as many pages as Packer), however, are far more directly concerned with presenting the great attraction which their Church *ought* to have for all Christians. Evangelicals, they believe, have no real doctrine of the church, whereas 'the Roman Catholic Church, as it has developed since the patristic times, is grounded in the order of the apostolic Church as attested by the New Testament' (p 130). 'Since these councils (up to and including Vatican I) have assembled under the invocation of the Holy Spirit, their decisions are attributed to the Holy Spirit acting through the bishops... The only serious

15 He says further on justification by faith alone: 'to declare it to be the article by which the Church stands or falls in a manner that excludes other ways of saying the gospel is to turn it into a sectarian doctrine' (p 207). The very facts of Reformation history, such as Tyndale's prolonged examination on justification before his burning for heresy in 1536, make the very idea of misunderstanding fatuous. The violence of the opposition to the Reformers was rather because their opponents understood only too well how the fundamental teaching of 'the Church', and their own Christian status, were being challenged. 'There is no other reason why the pontiffs rage with such madness against the reviving doctrine of the gospel, and stretch every nerve to suppress it; why they incite all kings and princes to persecute it – except that they see that their whole kingdom will fall and crumble as soon as Christ's gospel gains sway... since they cannot be safe until they have put Christ to flight, they strive in this cause just as if they were fighting for altar, hearth, and their very lives.' (John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* F L Battles ed [Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1960] vol 2 p 1144)

contender for the position of successor to Peter among the bishops was, and is, the bishop of Rome' (pp 133–4). True unity, then, as distinct from the kind of 'interim unity' proposed by ECT, has to mean unity under the pope.

These Catholic contributors are at pains to tell us that both sides, evangelical and Catholic, must be ready 'in God's good time' to 'welcome what the other has to offer' (p 139). What the Catholic side has to 'welcome' is not, of course, the gospel (for it is already agreed that they have the gospel)<sup>16</sup> but certain evangelical practices. What Evangelicals will have to welcome is patently clear, namely, 'that the Catholic Church is the fully and rightfully ordered expression of Christ's Church through time... the authoritative teacher of Christian truth' (pp 196–7).

These, and similar claims (including rejection of *sola scriptura*), are persuasively set out by Dulles and Neuhaus and *left entirely unanswered from the evangelical side*. When it is recalled how uninformed many Evangelicals are on theological issues, and how complex and devious the debate with Rome has ever been, it is hard to know how Evangelicals can escape the charge of serious irresponsibility in handing protagonists for Rome the platform which this book affords them. It is one thing for Dr Packer and others to be able to meet profitably in private with individual Catholics whom he can regard as Christians, and quite another to publish a book which must inevitably lead other Evangelicals to believe that the issues which divided Europe at the time of the Reformation are comparatively trivial compared with what we now 'hold in partnership with Roman Catholics'.

## Conclusion

ECT speaks of the present moral and spiritual crisis in the English-speaking world and it wants us to accept a policy which its participants believe presents the best way to address this situation. We do not question the sincerity of their viewpoint, nor doubt that positive and new policies are needed. Our criticism is that this policy is not new or radical enough. It carries over too many of the very weaknesses which have led to the very decline which is deplored. The fact that Colson and Packer appear to see more hope of changing 'the North American milieu' through parachurch organizations than through any church movement is

16 On the assumption that this is agreed, Neuhaus lays down the following proposition: 'If at the end of the twentieth century, separation for the sake of the gospel is not necessary, it is not justified' (p 199). If ECT Evangelicals believe that separation is still justified 'for the sake of the gospel' how can they possibly say they have a real basis for co-operative evangelism?

itself a part of the problem. What we need today is something as radical as the Reformation itself (disruptive though that would be in Protestantism as well as Roman Catholicism). We need a heaven-born movement in which faithfulness to Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit are the leading characteristics. Yes, to love all men and to avoid hurtful animosities is ever a Christian duty, but this is not a time for lowering testimony to the whole counsel of God. What is needed everywhere is a recovery of the distinctiveness of the gospel and penitence before God and his Word for our failures, our unbelief and our compromise. A policy which lowers standards in order to achieve the greater good fails to understand that our real hope must lie in 'the sword of the Spirit' owned by God himself. ECT may give temporary encouragement to some Christians who are still Roman Catholics; it ought to give none to those who believe that the Church of Rome remains a serious opponent of biblical Christianity.

**IAIN MURRAY** is Editorial Director of the Banner of Truth Trust.