

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ROMAN CATHOLICS:
A MISSION FIELD?

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

General Survey of the Thesis 4

Thesis Statement 5

Literature Review 6

 The Roman Catholic Church’s Move to Ecumenicalism 7

 The Protestant Churches Move to Ecumenicalism 9

 The Charge of Proselytism 11

Theological Review 14

 The Mark of a Church 16

Biblical Review 21

 The Foundation of the Church 22

 “A Different Gospel” 25

Historical Review 35

 The Council of Trent 37

 The Second Vatican Council 40

Conclusion 44

Selected Bibliography 48

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the Church of Jesus Christ is marked with a very clear and aggressive missionary endeavor. This is clear from the outset with Peter as he first reaches to those in Jerusalem, then to those in Samaria, and then to Cornelius the Roman Centurion. Paul's three missionary journeys also demonstrate this clear and aggressive missionary endeavor as he traveled throughout the Roman Empire . Yet, it did not stop with these men or with this generation of Believers. All throughout the ages there has been, to some degree, an endeavor to reach out to others with the Gospel. This is no less true for the reformers, especially so for John Calvin, and those who followed after these men. The Pietists started the Danish-Halle mission sending out missionaries in 1705. The Moravian church that had by 1760 sent out 226 missionaries spread throughout ten foreign countries followed this. There was also a concerted effort in North America and David Brainerd is one example as he ministered to the Indians during the 1740s under the guidance of a board in Scotland.¹ This missionary effort, though consistent, was not a large or massive effort, in terms of number of people involved, until after William Carey.

William Carey is often called the Father of Modern Missions; however it might be more accurate to describe him “as the great popularizer of missions in the English-speaking world.”² Though he did not father the movement (as it has already been shown, there was already missions board sending people out during his day) his initiative in missions did spur the

¹ C. Gordon Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publisher, 1998), 119-124.

² *Ibid.*, 126.

nonconformist churches of the United Kingdom into the arena of missions.³ It was his desire, writing, and work as a missionary to India that stirred the hearts of many other men and women and lead them into the fields white for the harvest. All those who were stirred set sail and headed to exotic and unknown lands in the far eastern countries, the continent of Africa, and even into the islands of the South Seas. Carey entered India in the year 1793, and not long after, others entered into all the remaining non-European countries. The Baptist Mission first entered Sierra Leona, of the Sub-Saharan African continent, in 1795.⁴ In 1796 the Duff, a sailing vessel carrying 30 missionaries from the London Missionary Society, began work in the South-Sea Islands.⁵ Next, Canton, China was entered in 1807, thus signaling the beginning of the modern missions movement in the Far East.⁶ Even the North American continent was being evangelized, not so much by the European settlers but missions organizations from Europe, in particular Great Britain, who focused their energies upon the Indians of North America.

Therefore the modern Protestant missions movement, which was started in the 18th century, had by the Great Century of Missions, the 19th century, entered into practically every continent in the world. However, the Protestant church completely overlooked all of Latin America. Protestantism did not enter into Latin America until the 1850's. One reason for this late coming was the close guard that the Roman Catholic Church maintained over its "people". "The Roman Catholic Church intended to keep Latin America free from the 'poison' of the Reformation and the Inquisition backed up its intent."⁷ The second and even more important reason this occurred was that the Europeans felt "Latin America was . . . a Christian continent

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 255.

⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁷ W.R. Read, V.M. Monterroso, and H.A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth*, (1969), p. 38 quoted in C. Gordon Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publisher, 1998), 273.

whose spiritual needs were adequately cared for by the Roman Catholic Church.”⁸ Despite this attitude, the American Churches decided to evangelize their Southern neighbors sending about 10,536 missionaries to Latin America (as compared to 688 from Europe).

The question was who were to be the converts? Since very few of the people in Latin America were “pagan” (about 90% were Roman Catholic) the missionaries focused their energies upon the parishioners of the Roman Church and in particular the 80% nominal Roman Catholics of Latin America.⁹ It was in this context that the Roman Church reacted to the Protestant missionaries and their converts. “It is ironic that on a ‘Christian’ continent, Protestants experienced more actual martyrdom than on many ‘heathen’ fields.”¹⁰

It is this reaction from the Roman Catholic Church as well as that of the European Church that forces the Universal Church of Christ¹¹ to consider, or re-consider, its purpose - nay, right - to send missionaries into regions that are dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. The European Churches confirmed their belief that areas dominated by the Roman Church were not fields to be evangelized when, during the 1910 Edinburgh conference, a statement was issued stating, “The Europeans strongly objected to the consideration of Latin America as a mission field.”¹² Though this opinion was isolated to the European churches in 1910, it has in the last 30 years spread into the mainstream of American Evangelism under the guise of ecumenicalism. Under the mighty call of unity within the body of Christ, many mainstream Evangelical leaders have called for a uniting of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches and a ceasing of any attempt to evangelize each other’s respective members. This call has recently

⁸ J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission. A Panoramic View of Missions from Pentecost to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1978), 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰ Olson, 273.

¹¹ “Universal Church of Christ”, “Church of Christ”, or “church” with no denomination label is being defined generically. It would include any church or denomination that is recognized as part of the Protestant Tradition. No intent is made to separate the Protestant Church into denominations, unless specifically mentioned in the work.

been spread through the document titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT) which was signed by well-known evangelicals such as Charles Colson and Bill Bright and respected theologians such as James I. Packer. Yet despite the number of well-known signers, the Church of Christ must consider the weight of the matter and re-examine the claim of the Roman Catholic Church as a true Church of Christ.

General Survey of the Thesis

In the examination of the problem concerning Roman Catholic dominated regions as mission fields, this work will seek to examine whether the Roman Church is truly a Church of Christ, thus establishing whether we can embrace them as brothers or consider them as unsaved people. In the Literature Review current thought concerning the modern Ecumenical movement to unite both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Church’s will be presented. This will lay the foundation for the desire to unite, as well as consider the implications of Protestants continued evangelization of Roman Catholics. The Theological Review will then seek to determine the key doctrinal issue that determines one group to be considered a true Church of Christ and another to be rejected as such. The Biblical Review will then examine the scriptural definition of the Gospel, the doctrine which Scripture presents as the standard or base by which one can judge another’s veracity as part of the Church of Christ. The Historical Review will then examine the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrinal position concerning the Gospel as delineated by the Council of Trent. The purpose here will be to see if the Roman Catholic Church is teaching the Gospel in light of the standard of Scripture and see if it has changed its position throughout history. With this determination made, a conclusion can then be rendered concerning the Roman Catholic Church and the possibility of unity. However, the ramifications can and should also be extended to any group who claims to be part of the True Church of Jesus Christ.

¹² Ibid., 272.

Thesis Statement

This work will demonstrate two truths. The first truth, to demonstrate what the whole of Scripture determines to be the Gospel of Jesus Christ (the one doctrine necessary for entrance into the Church of Christ and necessary to be correctly preached by any group claiming to be a Church of Christ). The second truth, to reemphasize the work of the Church to evangelize all who have not heard or do not teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even if they proclaim to be part of the Church and hold to other important orthodox beliefs. The focus of this work is the Roman Catholic Church as an institution. As such the thrust will be to determine whether the Roman Church in particular, but any church in general, meets the definitional requirements of a Church who is teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It will also emphasize, though, what the correct response of all true Believers should be to individuals who are not teaching or do not fully understand the Gospel of Christ.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The move towards ecumenicalism does not simply influence the church as an institution or organization but more importantly affects the church in its missionary endeavor. Having begun in the early 20th Century, ecumenicalism is a modern movement rather than a longstanding historical philosophy within the church. The previous two millennia have actually displayed a church marked more by structural division than by unity. “The records show that since the earliest years of its existence, when the apostles divided over the issue of Jewish ritual and the Christians at Corinth preferred to belong to Paul or Apollos rather than to Christ, the Church has known only division and sub-division.”¹³ The church, then, as a whole has always experienced some form of division within itself. Often these divisions were the fathers of the many denominations that exist within the universal Church of Christ.

Often the impact of these divisions, when applied to the missionary endeavor, resulted in a crippled effort to evangelize sinners due to conflicts between missionaries from different groups. The result of this was that, as the nineteenth century came to a close, “forward looking people from the mission field began to seek means of commending Christ to the world through a united church. The concern led to the missionary meeting in Scotland (Edinburgh, 1910) from which the Protestant and now the inclusive ecumenical movement of modern times can date

¹³ J. Robert Nelson, *The Realm of Redemption* (London: The Epworth Press, 1963), 188.

itself.”¹⁴ The ecumenical movement of today, then, has its foundations in the various missions’ organizations of the Protestant Church attempting to unify in its effort to evangelize.

In its secular concept ecumenical simply means world-wide or universal, but as it has been applied to the Christian Church, it implies “the oneness of Christians in the faith, wherever they may be found.”¹⁵ This idea of ecumenicalism originally attempted to unite those of the same faith, which is faith in the Grace of God through Jesus Christ, and included solely those churches linked to the Protestant tradition which developed as a result of the Reformation during the 16th Century,¹⁶ specifically excluding the Roman Catholic Church. However, as we will see, at the close of Vatican II on December 8, 1965, the Roman Catholic Church had re-labeled Protestants and others who held to similar doctrines. This opened the door for a world wide ecumenical movement that has attempted to unite the Protestant, Roman Catholic, and the Orthodox traditions together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church’s Move Towards Ecumenicalism

In order for the Roman Catholic Church to consider movements towards ecumenicalism it had to alter its view of those outside the Church. “The traditional image of the Church of Rome, created largely by the Council of Trent, was an impregnable fortress under attack from the forces of secularism, modernism, and individualism.”¹⁷ Yet from the very beginning the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) worked to create a different image of itself and its relation to those outside the Roman Church. The Church acknowledged that from the beginning of the

¹⁴ Martin E. Marty, *Church Unity and Church Mission* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann, Publishing Company, 1964), 25-26.

¹⁵ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 462.

¹⁶ The purpose of this paper is not to differentiate between various denominations and groups within the Protestant Tradition, but mainly to focus upon the differences between the Protestant Tradition and the Roman Catholic Tradition. As such, when referring to churches related to the Protestant Tradition, a generic title of “Protestant Church” will be used.

¹⁷ Shelley, 471.

first century, divisions or separations occurred but that in later centuries a much greater division took place, causing large communities to separate from full communion with the Roman Church. “However,” as Vatican II states, “one cannot charge with the sin of separation those who at present are born into these communities and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers.”¹⁸ In short, the Protestant and Orthodox traditions were considered as members of the Church of Christ even though outside the organization or Church that, according to Rome, was established by Christ. This was achievable mainly due to the attitude put forth by the Second Vatican Council that, “even in spite of them [doctrinal differences] it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ, they therefore have a right to be called Christian, and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.”¹⁹ This was a major shift from the previous position that considered all outside the Roman Church, in particular the Protestants, as heretics and lost.

In making this dramatic shift the Roman Church opened up the door to initiate dialogue with the “separated” brethren, the Protestant and Orthodox communities. The reasoning, according to Catholic writer William H. Clearly, is “historically, the homeland of all Protestants is, after all, the Catholic Church.”²⁰ As such, Protestants are nothing more than liberation fighters who are in voluntary exile from their home and looking, one day, to return. And this return “must begin with the changed Protestant self-concept. They are Catholics, members perhaps of the Catholic Church of the future rather than the past.”²¹ It is apparent from this

¹⁸ Austin D. Flannery, Ed, “Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21 November, 1964,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 455.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ William H. Clearly, “Undocumented Protestants”, *Christian Century*, 102 14-21 August 1985, 736-738.

²¹ Ibid.

statement that Mr. Clearly expects for all those outside of the Catholic Church to eventually come to it as the one and only church of Christ. Mr. Clearly, in his statement, is simply echoing what Vatican II stated as the purpose of its ecumenical drive, that of drawing all the “separated brethren” back under its wings, “for it is through Christ’s Catholic Church *alone* (Italics mine), which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained.”²² Ecumenicalism for the Roman Church is the acknowledgement that those outside the Church may have the necessary light to be Believers in Christ yet lack the fullness of that light necessary to be fully saved. As such, by altering their view of outsiders, they have permitted dialogue to begin for the end purpose of drawing all other “Christian” traditions back to the Roman Church. This change was and is dramatic for the Roman Church. It acknowledged those outside as brothers and in doing so broke down the wall of separation that has existed for over four centuries.

The Protestant Churches Move Towards Ecumenicalism

The result of this shift has been a concerted effort by those within the Protestant, and even Orthodox, camp to begin a campaign of unity. Though this campaign had existed almost from the outset of the conclusion of Vatican II, it exploded within American Evangelicalism with the publishing of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission on the Third Millennium” (ECT) in 1994, which was signed by eight Protestant leaders and 7 Roman Catholics, plus endorsements by 25 others on both sides. Interesting enough, the impetus of this call to ecumenical unity with the Roman Church was based upon the mission of the Church of Christ. “The century now drawing to a close has been the greatest century of missionary expansion in Christian history. We pray and we believe that this expansion has prepared the way

²² Flannery, 456.

for yet greater missionary endeavor in the first century of the Third Millennium.”²³ This missionary endeavor, though, is not forthcoming solely from the Protestant Churches but as a joint effort between both the Protestant and Catholic communities. The ECT acknowledged that hostility does exist between these two groups, especially within Latin America. In this light, the rationale of ECT was to draw these two communities together for the purpose of joint evangelization. “The love of Christ compels us and we are therefore resolved to avoid such conflict between our communities and, where such conflict exists, to do what we can to reduce and eliminate it. Beyond that, we are called and we are therefore resolved to explore patterns of working and witnessing together in order to advance the one mission of Christ.”²⁴ And this joint mission is, “the necessary consequence of the faith that we affirm together.”²⁵

This document rocked the Evangelical community throughout the United States. It was a document that was both hailed as a mark of great success as well as an indication of blindness and theological naivety. It represented a dramatic change in the Evangelical community equal to that of Vatican II for the Catholic Church. And though the signers of the ECT acknowledged that they acted not as official representatives,²⁶ it was the first public announcement of agreement theologically between Protestant and Catholic leaders. These leaders, in their drafting of the ECT, clearly acknowledged many of the differences that have and do exist between these two groups. They readily admitted also that, “in at least some instances, they [the differences] reflect authentic disagreements that have been in the past and are at present barriers to full communion.”²⁷ Despite these differences, the signers come to the same opinion that, “all who

²³ *Evangelical and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*, March 29, 1994.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Timothy George, “Evangelical and Catholics Together: A New Initiative. And Evangelical Assessment by Timothy George” *Christianity Today*, 41 8 December 1997, 34.

²⁷ *Evangelical and Catholics Together: the Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.*

accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ.”²⁸

This oneness, despite four centuries of hostility, is based upon the belief that both the Evangelical Community and that of the Roman Catholic are both working to achieve the same purpose, which is “to proclaim [the] Gospel [Good News] and to sustain the community of faith, worship, and discipleship that is gathered by this Gospel.”²⁹ This Gospel that is proclaimed is “the Good News that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation’. (2 Cor 5)”³⁰ Therefore, since both these communities are embarked upon the same mission of teaching the same Good News, according to the signers of the ECT, and then working to sustain those who accept this Good News through worship and discipleship, it must be acknowledged that they, despite the differences, are truly united in effort, though separated in their methods of accomplishing this task.

The Charge of Proselytism

This greatly affects the missions effort of the Protestant Church in Roman Catholic dominated areas, particularly within Latin America. The Roman Church, since it considers Protestants as “brothers”, looks at any effort made by Protestant missionaries to convert Catholics to Protestantism as proselytism. This was especially of concern for the Roman Church within Latin America who felt that, “it [the Roman Church] has established the Christian Church in that [Latin American] continent.”³¹ Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy goes on to comment that

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Edward I. Cassidy, Cardinal, “The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium: Evangelizing and Re-evangelizing Latin America With-Not Against-One Another” *First Things*, 79 (Ja, 1998), 25.

even though great efforts have been made towards unity between Catholics and Protestants, “this does not mean that our search has come to an end. Latin America,..., is certainly not free of such tension....The Catholic Bishops see the situation as one in which their faithful are being stolen.”³² If the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches are “brothers” in Christ simply separated for four centuries due to a misunderstanding, the hurt conveyed in Cardinal Cassidy’s comments above would be justified and such evangelistic activities by Protestants would be condemnable. Roman Catholic leaders would be right in considering this “sheep stealing” and they would be just in their view of proselytism as “an unethical activity that can take many forms, including willful misrepresentation of the beliefs and practices of others, or the use of force, coercion, compulsion, mockery, or intimidation to press for conversions.”³³

However, to fully understand the impact behind the term, we must keep in focus the definition of proselytism. The American Heritage Dictionary defines proselytize as, “To convert from one belief or faith to another.” According to the dictionary, then, to proselytize is not a matter of convincing a person of changing from one group to another like-minded group. On the contrary it is a matter of convincing a person to change from one faith (or type of group) to one that is completely different. As such, G.R. Evans correctly observes that the charge of proselytism is an indication that the sense of sharing a common belief does not exist. Evans argues, “If I think you are already in Christ in His Church where you are, I shall not want to win you for my Church. But,” he further states, “...situations [exist] in which this basic assumption is not shared, and evangelistic or missionary activity continues unabated. As a result, sincere

³² Ibid.

³³ Steve Rabey, “Conversation or Competition? Pentecostal, Roman Catholics in Long-standing Talks To Resolve Conflicts, Discover Some Commonalities”. *Christianity Today*, 42 7 Sept 1998, 23.

efforts of Christian witness may be seen as proselytism.”³⁴ The very presence of proselytism indicates that those who are proselytizing believe a difference does exist between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. However, those who believe there exists a common faith between these two groups readily agree with Cardinal Cassidy, that it is simply a matter of “sheep” stealing, and consider all those “sincere” Christians as gravely mistaken and even hindering the mission of the Church.

This difference of opinion, that of accepting members of the Roman Catholic Church as fellow brothers in Christ versus that of considering them outside of Christ, presents a great dilemma for the Protestant Church today. This dilemma heightens in light of the considerable amount of evangelization that is occurring in Catholic dominated countries like those in Latin America. If the Roman Catholic Church is preaching the Gospel then its members would be fellow brothers and it would be wrong to “proselytize” them. Yet if the Roman Catholic Church is not, then it would be the duty of the Protestant Church to bring Catholics to evangelical convictions through the teaching of the Gospel.

³⁴ Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Mission and the Issue of Proselytism,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 20 (Ja, 1996): 2.

THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

The question must be asked in light of the call for Ecumenicalism between these two communities, why does proselytizing still exist in Roman Catholic dominated regions? The answer to this, as already noted, is that many still see and feel there is a difference between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Yet is this difference enough to prompt others to evangelize that community? Has not the church in its history existed in disunity? The answer to the second question is an unequivocal yes. As was noted previously, the Church of Christ has from its foundation existed in a state of organizational disunity while being spiritually united. The unity of the Church is not found in any organizational or institutional uniformity by the members. Instead, unity of the Church has always been spiritual; “a spiritual union of all persons who belong to God through Christ.”³⁵ Unity of Spirit, however, has not always meant unity in thought and action. This is evidenced through the many differing denominations that have existed from the beginning and have increased in number since the Reformation.

The reality is that the denominations have played a very important role in the growth and formation of the Church of Christ, permitting growth without alienation and, worse yet, self-inflicted injury or death between people of differing groups. “Denominations permitted the churches to express differing interpretations of doctrine and practices without denying essential unity in Christ.”³⁶ Despite the appearance of differences and disunity there is usually an element

³⁵ Bill J. Leonard, *The Nature of the Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

of unity that exists.³⁷ When a denomination splits and a new one is formed, the split occurs due to a theological disagreement. Yet the newly formed denomination could be considered part of the Church of Christ due to theological unity, that being at its minimum Christ, “our one Lord who is the source of all unity,”³⁸ and ultimately the unity of the Church of Christ was preserved. Therefore, the ground of disunity is theology; however, the ground of unity is also theology.

Beyond the divisions, then, there must be a fundamental oneness in Christ for there to be true unity. This is so because Christ is the head of the Church and all ecclesiology, or teachings and beliefs of the church, must rest upon Him and Him alone. “Thus the community of faith, like the individual believer, understands its salvation in light of the saving work of Christ, His life, crucifixion, and resurrection (Eph 1:19).”³⁹ The legitimacy of the Church, or any organization claiming to be a church, rests upon Christ and their teaching of Christ, and more specifically their teaching of the work of Christ. This is reflected clearly from David Smith’s comments about membership in the universal church of Christ. He states, “No one can be a member of the universal church who is not a regenerated (born-again) person. Such a person is one who has believed the Gospel, repented of sin, and committed to Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord.”⁴⁰ If this applies to an individual, we must also conclude that it applies to any organization of which such individuals are said to be associated. This is the principle used by J.I. Packer in an attempt to identify the genuine church. In his dealing with the marks of a local church he states that a genuine church must teach from Scripture essential doctrines, which

³⁷ Immediately after the Reformation, there was a long period of conflict between denominations (such as Lutherans, the Calvinist Churches, and the Anabaptists, to name the larger groups). These conflicts were often bloody. However, these groups eventually came to terms with their problems and began accepting each other as united in the body of Christ.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰ David L. Smith, *All God’s People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton: Victor Books/ SP Publications, 1996), 392.

include, “the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the sin-bearing atonement, and justification by faith.”⁴¹

Two of the mentioned essential doctrines (the sin-bearing atonement and justification by faith) directly under gird the Gospel. Such an organization, whether a local group or international, must hold to and teach the Gospel of Christ, or else it forfeits its right to be considered part of the universal church of Christ.

The Mark of the Church

The emphasis of unity of Spirit has its roots in the reformers of the 16th Century. Since the outset of the division between the Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, the Reformation of the 16th Century, the issue concerning what marks a true church has been of importance. This would seem logical since the reformers - men such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, Menno Simmons and many others - were calling for people to separate from what was and had been recognized as the only Church of Christ up to that time. This call to separate from such an institution required these men to formulate a doctrine that clearly detailed what a true Church of Christ consisted. However, they were facing not only a long established organization, one who claimed it was founded upon the disciples of Christ himself but also many other splinter groups who were arising, claiming to be true Churches of Christ. Realizing this danger, these reformers were forced to develop a doctrine of the Church, called ecclesiology, as a means not simply of explaining liturgical elements or formalities of the church but more importantly for the purpose of defining exactly what is a true Church of Christ. In doing so they felt they were not only justifying their own move away from the Catholic Church but also providing the people a weapon against cultic groups, wolves disguised in sheep’s clothing. As such the doctrine of the Church, or ecclesiology, took on great importance as the reformers

⁴¹ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), 205.

separated from the recognized Church and attempted to ward off other cultic groups trying to deceive the people.

Martin Luther, being one of the earliest and an extremely vocal reformer, took the lead in laying the groundwork in identifying the characteristics of the true Church of Christ. His re-discovery of the Gospel laid the foundation for his view of the true Church in contrast to all other groups using the name “church”. As such, he insisted that the Gospel was an imperative to the church and was actually that which created the Church of Christ. “The Church does not constitute the Word of God, but is constituted by the Word.”⁴² The Gospel was the sole mark of the true Church, but he insisted that it was the Gospel manifested in the Word and correctly taught that constituted a church as the true Church of Christ. Luther stated:

“The sure mark by which the Christian congregation can be recognized is that the pure gospel is preached there,..., likewise, where the gospel is absent and human teachings rule, there no Christians live but only pagans, no matter how numerous they are and how holy and upright their life may be.”⁴³

Luther, though, was not the only outspoken supporter of the eminence and importance of the Gospel as a mark of the Church. Luther laid the foundation of the doctrine, but it was left to John Calvin to develop the full theory of this doctrine. He fully acknowledged, following Luther, that the Church was invisible, meaning it included all people who were “children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit,”⁴⁴ stretching from the present back to Adam. Yet, like Luther and others, he also recognized that the Church was visible, consisting of all men around the globe who profess to worship God. As

⁴² Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1988), 88.

⁴³ Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, Inc. 1997), 190.

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1021.

such, this visible Church consists of many hypocrites who are not of Christ except by name or outward appearance.

Due to this fact (that the visible Church consisted of true Believers and hypocrites) Calvin argued that the Lord gave certain marks and tokens by which we can know the true Church and its true members. Confession of faith, example of life, partaking of the sacraments, and professing the same God and Christ as the rest of the Church are recognizable marks of true members. It is from these marks of the members that Calvin developed the marks of the true Church. “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the true Church is known from its pure preaching of God’s Word and the sacraments being correctly administered. Again, this falls in line with Luther’s understanding of the church and, as Calvin further stated, provides “sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist.”⁴⁶ Even though some fault may exist, or a multitude of faults, if the church holds to these two marks, it can not be stripped of its right to be considered part of the true Church of Christ.

Calvin was the key formulator of current ecclesiology, yet we must also recognize one other leading reformer, Menno Simmons. He is a man that is often ignored, especially in Reformed circles, due to the animosity between the Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Calvinistic Churches of the day and Menno; nevertheless he has played an important part in Protestant history. Most modern denominations have roots extending, in some form, back to Menno Simmons, and even modern Lutheranism and Calvinism were influenced to some degree by his teachings. Despite the differences in many other areas, there was at least one area upon which

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1023.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1025.

Menno and the other reformers agreed. Menno was adamant that the title or boast of being a church was no indication of being the Church. As such, he laid down six characteristics of the true church, and the first one is “an unadulterated, pure doctrine.”⁴⁷ Therefore, in the first century of the reformation, all leading reformers agreed that the right preaching of the Word of God and the Gospel was a necessary mark of the true Church of God.

The agreement of those leading reformers and present day theologians is of utmost significance as we tackle the issue of how we determine what group belongs to the true Church of Christ. Yet it is also profound when we consider that all three of the reformers mentioned above represent distinct traditions within the Protestant community. This is significant because we are looking at three distinct traditions which at times were not friendly, were even outright hostile to each other, yet they all agreed upon the importance of the Word of God and the Gospel as a mark in which we recognize the Church of Christ. This demonstrates to us that disunity of form, or even in some theological issues, can exist amidst a unity of Spirit if, and only if, that unity of Spirit is founded upon Christ and His Work, or in other words upon the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

The Reformers recognized the need to develop the doctrine of the Church. In the process they define as one of the marks of the Church the right preaching of the Word of God and the Gospel. Without such right teaching, no organization can rightfully consider itself part of the Church of Christ. It is this point that has caused the greatest division, the foundational division, between the Protestant and Roman Catholic Traditions. These two traditions have failed to agree

⁴⁷ George, 287. His other five marks are “scriptural use of the sacramental signs; obedience to the Word; unfeigned, brotherly love; a bold confession of God and Christ; oppression and tribulation for the sake of the Lord’s Word.”

on what is the “right teaching of the Gospel.” Since the Gospel is a mark of a true Church and this is the crux of the division, we must now search Scripture to determine what is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

BIBLICAL REVIEW

The Theological Review demonstrated what key doctrine was foundational or pivotal for the existence of a Church. It was shown, through the work of modern theologians and those of old, that there is one key doctrine from which all groups who claim to be part of the true Church of Christ must hold. Even though there are various other important and vital doctrines to Christianity, failing to hold to this one foundation would immediately negate ones claim to the Church of Christ.

Theologically, these testimonies may be fine and dandy, but we must not forget the importance of the Word of God itself. We move to Scripture because, in the end, it must be our authority. Even though the Protestant and Roman traditions disagree on exactly which books constitute the totality of the Bible (the Protestants not accepting the Apocrypha) they do at least agree on sixty-six of them. In addition, both traditions consider these sixty-six books as authoritative, though it must be noted that the Roman Catholic Church also gives equal authority to human tradition. With this as a basis then, we will now show that the Word of God does offer, as part of the definition of a Church, one key element. From this foundation, it will then be determined what the whole of Scripture declares as the one teaching upon which all others must rest and upon which a Church either has its existence or is marked as a fraud.

The Foundation of the Church

A Church

In the English speaking world, the word “church” is most often understood to mean the building or location where people, especially Christians, gather. This is confirmed by *The American Heritage Dictionary*, which defines “church” as “a building for public, especially Christian, worship.”⁴⁸ “Church”, used according to this definition, is derived from the Greek adjective *kyriakos*. This word, accompanied with other proper words, would mean ‘the Lord’s house’ or a place of Christian worship.⁴⁹ However, as the *New Bible Dictionary* notes, “Church in the NT (New Testament), however, renders Gk (Greek) *ekklesia*, which mostly designates a local congregation of Christians and never a building.”⁵⁰ The Bible, when discussing the church, does not use *kyriakos*, instead it uses *ekklesia*. As can be determined from the *New Bible Dictionary*, Scripture clearly identifies church not as a building or location but, more directly, a congregation of Christians or followers of God.

Understanding that the Greek word *ekklesia* was used to identify the church of God, it will be helpful to define this word. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* defines it as “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly.”⁵¹ This definition would apply to any and every gathering of citizens, inside and outside the parameters of worship of God. In the non-religious sense we see the use of this word in Acts 19:32,39, and 41 in connection to the Ephesians who assembled (*ekklesia*) against Paul and his traveling companions as a result of the preaching of the Gospel. In these verses we see the Greek *ekklesia* used to indicate a gathering or assembly of people called out to some public place.

⁴⁸ Margery S. Berube, ED., *New American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 273.

⁴⁹ D.R.W. Wood, ED., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996.), 199.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

In the Christian sense, though, *ekklesia* is defined as “an assembly of Christians gathered for worship.”⁵² We see the Greek word *ekklesia* used in this sense in 1 Corinthians 11:18 where we read, “when you come together as a church (*ekklesia*),...”⁵³ The use here signifies the assembling of Christians for worship. *Ekklesia*, then, is not linked to the location but to the action of gathering by those who are Believers for the corporate worship of God.

A Church, then, in its simplest form is an assembly of those who believe in Christ and come together to worship God. In addition this same group, which is affiliated in its worship of God, can contain some form of organization through regulations governing the conduct of its religious rites and meetings and help it manage its own affairs, as seen in Acts 5:11. However, within the above definition there is one element that has not yet been discussed which holds the key to truly understanding what is a true Church of God, an assembly of people gathered for the worship of God. This one element defines whether a group of people who are gathered to worship God is truly worshipping God and can be considered a true Church of God. This key element is the foundation upon which a church is established.

The Foundation.

We have seen the definition, or framework, of what a Church is (a gathering of people often governed by rules) but we now must consider the foundation upon from which the church is framed. A house may look strong and sturdy. It may seem to have a strong standing structure, one that will resist any and all tests that nature or man can bring upon it. It may also look inviting and lovely to live within, with a wonderfully decorated and warm interior, but unless it has a strong, firm foundation, it will, in the end, be of little or no use to the owners. Lacking a

⁵¹ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the NT* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.1999.), 195.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵³ *The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update* (La Habra: The Lockman Foundation) 1996. Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations will be from this same version of the Bible.

foundation properly prepared and laid, the house that looked safe and secure, warm and inviting, will, in fact, become a danger; a hazard sure not to bring life but death in the time of its testing.

In the same sense a church, an organization of people assembled, may have all the trappings of being a true church. It may have ordained leaders, lay leaders, and members; it may have a time for classes and even a time for group worship; it may have rules and regulations by which the conduct of such people and events are guided; it may even hold to most of the commonly understood orthodox doctrines that are present within the Word of God and claimed by other Churches of God. However, all of these external appearances are of no use and give no valid evidence of the group's nature, until the foundation of the church is examined. If the church, any particular organized church, does not uphold the one key element which unites it with Christ and stands as the foundation, it cannot be considered a Church of God. If the foundation of the church is neither firm nor stable, it is more dangerous than a house without a foundation. It is more dangerous because the death it leads to is not physical but a spiritual death that is eternal.

What is that foundation? What is the element that helps us determine if an assembly of people is truly a church? The foundation is none other than the one key doctrine that was determined to be crucial for a Church. The foundation upon which any and all Churches must be laid upon is none other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Joseph H. Thayer defines the Greek work *ekklesia*, the word used in the New Testament to designate a Church, as “a company of Christians, or of those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs according to regulations prescribe for the body for order's sake.”⁵⁴ The

⁵⁴ Thayer, 196.

key element is seen in the beginning of this definition. A true Church, a Church of God, is composed of people who are Christians or, as the definition clarifies, “those who, hoping for eternal salvation *through* Jesus Christ,....”(my emphasis) The important element to the definition is not that the group worships God nor that it has some sort of organization, nor that it holds to what seems to be all the orthodox doctrines from within the Bible. No, the key element is what that group *believes* concerning the means of salvation, and according to the definition, the group must hope for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. This definition, though, is not simply a creation of Joseph H. Thayer, or of any other man at that. Looking to the Word of God, the same litmus test is laid out by Paul throughout his letters, especially in Gal 1:1-4; by both of Peter's letters, especially in 1 Peter 1:3-5; and in John's letters, especially in 1 John 2:1-2.

“A Different Gospel”

Seeing that both Scripture and theology place the Gospel, or “hope for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ”, as the one key doctrine or mark, as Calvin called it, to recognize a church, we will move to Scripture to define the Gospel of Christ. The book of Galatians is an extremely important book to interact with as we face the issue at hand. Neither desiring nor needing to delve into a great deal of introductory work on this book, it is clear that Paul, as the author, was writing this letter to the Galatian Christians. It quickly becomes very clear that Paul is working to defend himself, but more than that, he is defending what he has taught the Galatians while he was with them. Paul states:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Galatians 1:6-9)

The teaching that Paul is working to defend is clearly determined from these verses. Matthew Poole, in the introductory comments to his commentary on Galatians states, “The occasion of writing it (Galatians), was partly to reprove the members of this church, for their apostasy from the doctrine of the gospel, as to justification; [and] partly to set them right again in it,.....”⁵⁵ The purpose of Galatians was to defend the doctrine of justification or, in other words, to defend the doctrine of the Gospel as Paul had taught them. Though it is clear that Paul defends his legitimacy as an apostle through-out chapter one and part of chapter two, the majority of this book focuses upon defining what the Gospel is and how that applies to us.

What does Paul so clearly state in these verses? Two important points are ascertained from these four verses. The first point is gathered from verses 6-7; there exists only one Gospel of Christ. Paul expresses his astonishment that they are deserting the Gospel he preached for another Gospel, but he then quickly states, “which is really not another.” This statement, found in verse 7, clearly indicates that this other gospel was not a true gospel but instead, a distortion of the truth. The second point, which is ascertained from verses 8-9, clearly declares a judgment upon those who distort the true Gospel. These two points will be examined in order.

The Gospel of Christ

It is clearly determined from verses 6-7 that there is only one, true Gospel and all others are false. The question is, though, what is this Gospel? The answer to this question can be found, among many places, in Romans 5:8-9 which reads, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath *of God* through Him.” The Gospel, according to the book of Romans, is the truth that Christ, as an act of love by God, died

⁵⁵ Matthew H. Poole, *Matthew Poole's Commentary on the Holy Bible, Vol III* (McLean: MacDonald Publishing Co.), 639.

for sinners. In so doing Christ, through His blood, justified man and saved him from the wrath of God. The justifying of man is the act of God declaring man just or righteous. As Romans 5 declares, this is accomplished through the blood of Christ. That leads to the next question that needs examining; how man partakes of this justification. It is one thing to consider the work of Christ in our justification but quite another to consider man's involvement in justification. These two issues, though seemingly unrelated, greatly impact one another; the level of man's involvement greatly affects the effectiveness, or completeness, of Christ's work

Let us, then, examine man's involvement in his own justification. We first turn to Romans 5:1 which reads, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This verse shows us that justification is a product of faith. It is faith that justifies and saves us from the wrath of God through the blood of Christ (Rom 5:9), thus giving us eternal life. We must further consider, though, whether it is faith, and faith alone (or *sola fide* as the Reformers stated) that causes a man to be justified. Is man not to apply any of his own works or deeds of righteousness? Is not having faith in Christ itself a work of man? These are crucial questions that must be examined. Martin Luther, the man God used as the catalyst for the Reformation, stated that Justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) was "the article by which the Church stands or falls."⁵⁶ With such a strong statement being placed on the table (that a church is a church only if it holds to *sola fide*) we must turn again in Scripture and evaluate its importance. Does Scripture tell us that our salvation comes by faith alone, apart from any work?

Justification Through Faith Without Works

Two pivotal texts exist concerning our justification and its importance to the Gospel and to a church. The first one we will consider can be found in Galatians. Remember that Paul was battling a problem within the Galatian churches, a teaching of a distorted or false gospel. This

false Gospel was “the necessity of circumcision, and other works of the Law, as well as faith in Christ, in order for the justification of the sinner before God.”⁵⁷ Paul, like any good warrior, understands his enemy and sets his sights upon that enemy in order to disembowel the accursed intruder.

The clear teaching of Paul comes in Galatians 2:15-16. Even though a majority of theologians feel that these verses can be associated with the preceding section as part of Paul’s defense of himself, I tend to disagree and would, at the least, consider them an introduction to his doctrinal argument that is laid out in Galatians 3:1-5:1. As such, they act as the opening explanation of justification by faith alone from which point Paul moves into a deeper explanation in later sections. These verses, however, are sufficient to make the point. Galatians 2:15-16 reads:

We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

The thesis is clearly stated in the final portion of verse 16, “Since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.” Scripture could not be much clearer. No man will be justified by the works of the Law. In all fairness we must acknowledge that the Law spoken of here is the Law God gave to the Israelites while they were at Mount Sinai. And in this sense it is clear that, “No mortal man shall ever be absolved or declared righteous upon his own personal obedience to the law of God.”⁵⁸ Yet this can be applied to any other law that man desires to indicate as a means for salvation for there was, and is, no higher law than that which God instituted with the Israelites.

⁵⁶ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publisher, 1988), 62.

⁵⁷ Poole, 639.

The thesis being clear, let us examine the argument. Paul, who is correcting Peter for incorrect behavior associated with the Law and Gentiles, established the fact that he and Peter were Jews. They were men under the law and as such, by adhering to it, might have been deemed justified. Yet they realized it was not the Law but only the Work of Christ that could justify them. Therefore, through faith, they believed in Jesus Christ and were justified. Now, as Paul argues, if they as Jews, a special people of God who received the Law of God, still needed to be justified by faith, then the Law is shown to be ineffective for justification. Instead, it could only be faith in Christ that they, or any others, could be justified. The end conclusion that must be taken, then, is that works, whether of the Law of Moses or of any other law established by man, cannot be a means for justification. It must be solely through faith in Christ Jesus. In short, justification comes by faith and faith *alone*.

Faith, Not a Work of Man

Moving to the second question poised; is faith itself a work? Ephesians 2:8-9 reads, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” It is here that we discover the reality of our faith; it is not of ourselves, but a “gift of God.” It is clearly ascertained that, by the grace of God, one is saved through faith, or the act of believing in Christ. However, the next phrase is of utmost importance. It reads, “and that not of yourself, it is the gift of God.” Here we can understand the word “that” as referring to the faith by which we are saved, seen in verse 8. This faith that saves us is clearly stated to be “not of ourselves”. It is not of our doing or something that we initiate. Instead, this faith is further clarified in the words “it is the gift of God.” Again the word “it” refers to the faith. Concerning this passage and the faith of a person in regards to Christ and His work, the Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commentary states, “The initiation, as well as the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 646.

increase, of faith, is from the Spirit of God, not only by an external proposal of the word, but by internal illumination in the soul.”⁵⁹

The teaching of Scripture, then, is that the faith one exercises in Christ, though appearing to be from within, is actually a gift that comes from God. The word “gift”, as defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary*, is “something that is bestowed voluntarily and without compensation.” This concept of giving an item freely without payment is not only inherent within the definition of the word “gift”, but also evident within the Word of God. God, knowing man’s propensity for a lack of spiritual wisdom, also clearly articulates for us in Romans 4:4 that a gift is something unmerited. This verse reads, “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.” The English word “favor” used here is the same Greek word which in Ephesians 2:8-9 is translated as “grace.” What this indicates, then, is the “favor” of Romans 4:4 is actually the Grace of God. Therefore, as this verse states, the man who works has earned his wage; it is what he deserves, and this wage is not a favor or a result of grace. In this transaction there is no action of grace being demonstrated, only what is rightfully due to the worker. The reverse of this, though, is that if a man receives something from God out of His favor or grace, the man has not earned it at all, and this is what Ephesians 2:8-9 is telling us.

Now turning back to Ephesians 2:8-9, it is clearly stated that the faith one has in Christ is a gift from God. It must then be concluded, keeping in mind the definition of a gift and what Romans 4:4 says, that in the grace of God a man is saved as he expresses faith in the work of Christ. However, for the salvation to be truly of the grace of God, or from His favor, the person must not have worked. The faith exhibited must not be a work, for if it were, salvation would not be of grace, or favor, but would be the wage that the man has earned. God would, in short,

⁵⁹ Robert Jamieson; A.R. Fausset; and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, CD ROM, 1998 ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. 1998).

be indebted to pay the man for his faith. Yet Ephesians 2:8-9 and other passages clearly indicate that salvation, or justification, does not come through works but stems from the free and voluntary act of God upon His people solely due to His mercy and out of love for His people. In summary, then, according to the Word of God, man is justified by his faith in the work of Christ apart or in the absence of any work the man has to offer. In addition, the faith the man expresses cannot be considered from or of himself. Instead it must be acknowledge that the faith this man has was also given to him by God for the purpose of allowing him to believe upon Christ.

One last note that is necessary, and which these four passages all indicate, is that justification is an accomplished event in the life of a believer. All four of the above passages indicate that justification has already occurred in the lives of those receiving the letters. As such, in the life of a believer there is one point in time in which God counts the believer righteous or just. This implies that justification is not a continual process (the continual process of being more like Christ is called sanctification) but a one-time event in the live of a believer.

The Separation

Having seen the definition of the Gospel according to the Word of God, we now turn to the second point that is found within Galatians 1:6-9. This point is found in the verses of 8 and 9 which state, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!”

There are three main points within these two verses that need to be highlighted. The first point considers the people, or actors, who are immediately indicated in verse 8. Paul is not solely talking about those who might be causing the disturbance for the Galatian church but even includes himself and, amazingly enough, even angels. The importance of this should be obvious.

There is neither person on earth nor any angelic or spirit being who is exempt from the warning that is to follow.

The second point to consider is the action that is not to be taken. The action is that of teaching a false gospel. A false gospel would be any other teaching, or gospel, contrary to what Scripture has declared and which has already been examined above. This Gospel is the message of man being justified solely through the work of Christ, and that man is enabled to partake of this good news not due to any work of his own nor even through faith that originates from within. Instead man partakes of this Gospel solely because God gives the gift of faith, enabling man to believe and trust in the work of Christ for justification. If this truth is in anyway altered, it is a “gospel contrary to what you have received”, as Paul states. From these first two points, then, it is clear that no man on earth nor angel from above has the authority to alter in any way the message and truth of the Gospel. It is a truth that is eternal and changeless in as much as the simple mathematical problem of $1+1 = 2$ is an unchangeable truth in the science of mathematics.

The final point to consider in this section is the consequence of one who does preach a different Gospel. It is upon this area alone that we now focus. Galatians 1:8 and 9 are very clear; the man that does preach a different Gospel, regardless of who this being is, will be cursed. These are very strong words and never seen in this same context again in the New Testament. The Greek word used here for “curse” is used only five times in the New Testament, and two of those are Galatians 1:8-9. The other three uses (Romans 9:3, 1 Corinthians 12:3, and 1 Corinthians 16:22) have no relation to a person being cursed for improperly teaching doctrine. Set this in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrinal standard, the Council of Trent, which has no less than 125 canons pronouncing anathemas, or curses. In addition to these, often within the canons themselves, an anathema is pronounced, such that there are more than 125

anathemas in the documents of Trent.⁶⁰ In light of the fact that Scripture has only one anathema assigned to a person mishandling the Gospel of Christ or any other doctrine, it must be regarded as something of great importance.

To understand this significance, let us examine the word “curse”. This word, according to Thayer, means “a person or thing doomed to destruction, a thing abominable and detestable, an accursed thing.”⁶¹ Any person or thing that is cursed in this sense is clearly set for destruction. This is not simply a correction as a father corrects an errant son but a destruction causing death as that same father encountering a rat in his home would hunt and kill the rat, knowing it brings disease and sickness to his family. More awesome is that this destruction is not caused by man but by the Holy and Righteous Judge of all creation.

To further understand the implications for one under the anathema, we look to Romans 9:3 which states “for I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” Paul clearly states that he would rather be accursed for the sake of his fellow Jews’ salvation, yet he gives further enlightenment by defining what it would mean to be accursed when he states, “separated from Christ”. The connection between these two, being accursed and separated from Christ, indicates that one who is under the anathema is separated from Christ, or not united to Him through faith. The conclusion of this fact can only be one thing; any person that is condemned in this manner cannot be a child of God.

⁶⁰ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol 2. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).

⁶¹ Thayer, 37.

The Conclusion

The conclusion that is drawn, then, from Galatians 1:6-9 carries a great weight, one that must not be ignored. We must acknowledge, based upon these verses, that there is one and only one Gospel of Christ. Though this particular passage does not define that Gospel, it does clearly dictate to the reader that only one Gospel exists. This one and only Gospel is the same that Paul defends in the remainder of the letter of Galatians and the same that the witness of the Word of God provides.

Yet we must not ignore the second conclusion to be drawn from this passage; the man, or organization, that teaches a gospel other than the one and only Gospel is accursed, set aside for destruction, by God. This person is outside the Family of God and under no circumstances can he be considered a child of the Most High God nor a brother to those who do believe and teach the Gospel according to the Word of God.

However, this application cannot stop there. Since an assembly of people gathered to worship God is a church and since the foundation of the Church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ; it must be concluded that any group which proclaims itself a church of God and which does not teach the True Gospel of Christ is accursed according to Galatians 1:8-9. This group must be considered a false church since it is not united with Christ. As such, it is a group of people needing to hear the True Gospel of Christ.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

Protestant Theology clearly offers certain marks that are valuable in determining whether a group or organization is to be considered part of the Church of Christ. Within these marks one seems to stand out as crucial, for it is upon this that the other(s) depend. This one mark is the right preaching of the Word of God or Gospel of Christ.

In addition, upon examining Scripture, it became clear that a standard, or foundation, for a church existed. This foundation was evident in the definition of a church as defined by current Greek lexicons and as seen in the writings of New Testament Apostles. This foundation that Scripture put forth was the same as that of Protestant Theology, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Scripture, then, was examined further to determine what is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet there is still one more question that must be dealt with in order to answer the foundational issue. In the start, the basic problem revolved around the current ecumenical movement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Tradition; the major rift being the issue of evangelization of Roman Catholics by Protestants. The argument against evangelization was that the Roman Church is a true Church of Christ (that is it is teaching the true Gospel of Christ). Now that the standard has been determined through Scripture, it can be determined if the Roman Church is a teaching the Gospel. If it is, Protestants have no right to evangelize Catholics. However, if, upon measuring it's doctrinal standards throughout history against the standard of Scripture, the Roman Church is proven not to be teaching the Gospel, then Protestants do indeed have the duty to evangelize Catholics just as they would evangelize any other unbeliever.

To determine the status of the Roman Church, we must look at the results of two key councils that relate to this argument. The first is what resulted from the Council of Trent during the 16th Century. The calling of the Council of Trent was a reaction to all the issues raised by the reformers of that time. “Everything the Protestant Reformation stood for was vigorously - one could almost say violently - rejected at Trent.”⁶² Trent was then a response against the attacks of the reformers, and the results of the Council “marked the birth of the modern Catholic Church. This was not exactly the same as the medieval church against which Luther protested, for it bore the marks of a reaction against Protestantism.”⁶³

The second key council that must be addressed is also the most recent one, the Second Vatican Council called in 1959 by Pope John XXIII. He was convinced that the Church needed a total updating, in Italian an *aggiornamento*, and that this could only be done through the collaboration of all the bishops of the Roman Church. The council, while not ecumenical in the sense that non-Roman Christians use the term (since it included only Roman Catholics as active participants, though there were many observers from outside the Church), “was ecumenically oriented in the sense that it looked to a future in which divided Christendom would be reunited.”⁶⁴ This was most obvious when Pope John created the Secretariat of Christian Unity. The creation of this organization “indicated his seriousness in the pursuit of a rapprochement with other Christians, and his intention that the Council pursue this concern.”⁶⁵ This particular council is of import because its results created openness to ecumenicalism and willingness to dialogue with Protestants and Orthodox traditions alike. Though other councils

⁶² Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 295.

⁶³ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 1985), 121.

⁶⁴ Robert McAfee Brown, *Observer in Rome: A Protestant Report on the Vatican Council* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), 8.

⁶⁵ González. 351-352.

are important, only these two will be examined for this particular study because the Council of Trent provided a definition of the foundation of the Roman Church and the Second Vatican Council provided the openness to ecumenical dialogue within the Roman Church. The Council of Trent will be examined first, presenting the early doctrine of the Church relating to salvation, or the Gospel of Christ. With this foundation, the later Council will be examined to determine if any changes have occurred that would warrant a change in outlook within the Protestant Community. In addition, the cause of the openness will also be examined.

The Council of Trent

It must first be understood that while the Council of Trent reacted against much of the Reformation itself, it condemned many other heretical ideas that were equally rejected by the Protestant Reformers. In addition, since the Council of Trent and the Roman Catholic Church had in its possession the Word of God, the Bible, there are many facts that both the Protestant and Catholic Churches hold in common. In this respect, the Council of Trent clearly points out man's inability to justify himself due to his sinful condition. The Council clearly pointed out that, due to original sin, man is no longer able, in himself, to work towards a state of justification or righteousness before God. Up to this point Scripture, and the majority of the Protestant Tradition, affirms the Council.

However, a difference arises at the point of defining justification, which the Council defines as "being a translation, from that state wherein man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace, and of the adoption of the sons of God, through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. And this translation, since the promulgation of the Gospel, can not be effected, without the laver of regeneration."⁶⁶ In this definition we must notice the absence of

⁶⁶ Schaff, 91.

any mention of remission of sins, or forgiveness of such. This is so because the Council firmly stated that justification is not merely the remission of sins but also “the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace and of the gifts.”⁶⁷

Therefore, according to the Council, justification is the process of becoming just, a process that is a lifetime affair.⁶⁸ It would include remission of sins but more properly entails the working out of ones salvation, or remission of sins, through daily striving to be a more righteous man.

As important as this point is, the Roman definition of justification contains a statement that sheds greater light on the issue; justification is effected through the “laver of regeneration”. This “laver” is none other than baptism by water. The Council further stated, “Now they [adults] are disposed unto the said justice (justification), . . . when they purpose to receive baptism, to begin a new life, and to keep the commandments of God.”⁶⁹ The first pass or step towards justification is water baptism. This is further confirmed by the sixth canon treating the issue of water baptism, which states, “If any one saith, that baptism is free, that is, not necessary unto salvation: let him be anathema.”⁷⁰ Water baptism was clearly the door through which one must normally pass to begin the process of justification. Therefore, justification, which is not the remission of sins but the process of becoming more righteous, is initiated by the sacrament of water baptism.

Having seen that justification is begun through water baptism, which is rightly considered a work of man, it must fairly be noted that the same Council strongly affirms the necessity of faith. “Faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation, and the root of all

⁶⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁶⁸ The difference in the definition of justification between the Catholic and Protestant traditions is key. Protestants agree that justification is a one time event in which God declares someone right or just, and that sanctification is the daily process of living more like Christ that has no impact on ones efforts to be right before God. Catholics combine justification and sanctification under one name, calling it justification, and make the daily process of living more like Christ a part of the requirement to be right before God, or justified.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93.

Justification.”⁷¹ The Council, therefore, affirmed the necessity of faith within a man for justification. However, there is a key statement about this faith that is of utmost importance in the Catholic Churches concept of faith in justification. In the Ninth Canon from the section dealing with Justification, the Council states:

“If any one saith, that by faith *alone* (my emphasis) the impious is justified, in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will: let him be anathema.”⁷²

This canon clearly affirms that, though faith is necessary, it alone is not what brings about justification in the man. Faith is simply the “foundation”, but like the foundation of a building, it must be built upon. What is built upon the foundation of faith? His preparation and disposition “by the movement of his own will.”

We also must understand that the Council did not reject the work of God’s grace in one’s justification. Faith was the foundation; it was necessary for justification, but that faith was possible only as a result of God’s grace. “They, who by sins were alienated from God, may be disposed through his quickening and assisting grace.”⁷³ Grace, then, is the element from God that enables one to have faith. However, the Grace of God is not simply unmerited favor shown to man, but it is the element that enables one to “to convert themselves to their own justification.”⁷⁴ Man must have the grace of God shone down upon him. Yet, this grace is nothing more than the means that enables man to begin working out his own justification before God, which must start with faith. With God’s grace man is able to convert himself. However,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 123.

⁷¹ Schaff, 97.

⁷² Ibid., 112.

⁷³ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

the opposite is also true, without such grace no man is able to do anything worthy of meriting justification before God.

The Council wrote thirty-three canons that relate to justification. The purpose of these canons was to lay out, in a clear format, the resolution of the Council and to announce a condemnatory anathema upon those believing contrary to the Council. Therefore, they provide an excellent and concise opinion from the Council and help affirm and collaborate the Roman Catholic view of justification, based upon the Council of Trent. The ninth canon has already been examined; however, the eleventh also provides a clear affirmation of the above conclusion.

It states:

If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God: let him be anathema.⁷⁵

The canon clearly confirms, in its condemnation, the conclusion of the Council, that grace simply allows man to begin working out his justification, but that justification is finished or completed through the good works performed by man.

The Second Vatican Council

The Council of Trent, held during the 16th Century, clearly delineated the Roman Catholic Church's view on justification, that it was a lifelong process for man that began in baptism and was a result of God's grace poured into him, giving him the necessary strength to finish the course. The question, though, is whether this view survived the four centuries of time that elapsed since then and up to the Second Vatican Council. Again, this council is key because it was through the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, that the Roman Catholic Church began its drive towards ecumenicalism. Was there a dramatic change in the Roman doctrine of

justification that would allow a unification of Rome with the rest of “Christianity”? Was there a change that would now negate the anathemas of the many Canons produced by the Council of Trent? The answer is unequivocally no. Vatican II made no changes towards the Protestant standard, and, it could even be argued, the changes that were made actually moved in the opposite, or more liberal, direction of the spectrum.

Vatican II was not designed to alter any of the major doctrines of the Church; therefore, there is not much discussion of such doctrines like that of Justification. However, there is enough information to indicate no change occurred, and the resultant Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1994, upholds the standard laid down by the Council of Trent. At the beginning, Vatican II, in an effort to define the mission of the Church, stated, “For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made sons of God by faith *and baptism* (my italics) should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord’s Supper.”⁷⁶ One is made a son of God not by faith alone but also by baptism. The importance of baptism is furthered by Vatican II when it states, “But even in spite of them (obstacles to unity) it remains true that all who have been justified by faith *in baptism* (my italics) are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.”⁷⁷ It would seem that this council is clearly affirming the necessity of baptism for justification. This is even stronger in Vatican II’s statement concerning ecumenicalism. In its Decree on Ecumenicalism Vatican II states, as a guideline in reaching out and accepting the willing, “the Church’s practice

⁷⁵ Ibid., 112-113.

⁷⁶ Austin P. Flannery, Ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 455.

in this matter is governed by two principles: that *baptism is necessary for salvation* (my italics), and that it can be conferred only once.”⁷⁸

However, to insure that this point was clearly understood by all, the Catechism of the Roman Church, published after Vatican II and in response to the reforms in liturgy made by Vatican II, states:

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door that gives access to the other sacraments. Through baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.”⁷⁹

Baptism, as is clear from the Catechism, is the one sacrament upon which all others are dependent. A person must be baptized in order to enjoy the other sacraments. This would seem somewhat normal, for it is common that one be baptized before he partakes of the Lord’s Supper. Yet, baptism is considered not only the door to the other sacraments but also, more importantly, the one sacrament that frees us from sin and causes us to be reborn so that we are regenerated through water baptism and thus able to begin, through the grace of God, working towards our justification.

Verdict on Roman Justification

At the conclusion of the Council of Trent in 1536, the Roman Church established its standard for all its doctrines. Similar to the Westminster Confession for Presbyterians, the documents from the Council became the supreme guide for the Church in relation to its doctrinal beliefs. Regarding justification, one of the key issues that caused the Protestant Reformation, the Council was very clear. Through the grace of God, one is able to begin working towards

⁷⁸ Ibid., 487.

⁷⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), para 1213, quoted in James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 24.

justification, which is not merely remission of sins but additionally living a holy life. And this process is begun in the “lavers of regeneration”, or water baptism.

This stance on justification has continued up to this day. The last major council, the Second Vatican Council, made no alteration in the Church’s doctrinal position concerning justification. Even though Vatican II was the catalyst that opened the doors of the Catholic Church in an effort to unite all other such “Christian” traditions under the Roman Church, it did so with no alterations to its doctrinal standard, the Council of Trent. The belief established during the Council of Trent in the 16th Century is the same today. Justification is not the full remission of sins brought about by faith alone in the work of Christ. It is, instead, a process of doing good works for the purpose of making oneself just, and this journey starts upon baptism, the sacrament which takes away ones sins up to that time.

CONCLUSION

“Nothing separates evangelicals from Roman Catholics in their common loyalty to the great ecumenical creeds of the ancient church.”⁸⁰ Though this statement has been rightfully challenged by Robert M. Zins in his book On the Edge of Apostasy: The Evangelical Romance with Rome, it aptly demonstrates that these two traditions express many of the same doctrinal standards and creeds. Yet in spite of this, it would be foolish to ignore that a large chasm does exist between them. The chasm does not consist simply of governmental order, liturgy, or any other such functional differences. No, the difference directly affects the key teaching of Scripture about man’s justification. “Traditionally Roman Catholics and evangelicals fall apart right at the very heart of the gospel.”⁸¹ The result of this falling-out is what has caused the chasm or division between these two traditions. The Roman Catholic tradition has strongly believed that one meets the condition of being righteous only by God’s grace, yet it rejects the need of faith alone. Thus both faith and good works are the means of divine justification for the sinner.

However, when Scripture is examined, it clearly indicates that any type of work done by man does not earn justification. Paul was very clear in Galatians that if the Law could justify man, he and Peter would have been justified, but they clearly knew that was not the case. Instead of justifying, it condemned a man to eternal perdition. However, what did justify them (Peter, Paul and any other man) was their faith, and faith alone, in the work of Jesus Christ. Their

⁸⁰ Editorial, “What Separates Evangelicals and Catholic,” *Christianity Today*, 25 23 October 1981, 12.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

faith was not of themselves but was, in reality, a gift from God that He bestowed upon them and upon every other child of God, from His grace. The faith necessary to understand one's wicked state and yet cling to Christ for redemption was a gift that God bestowed upon man. This is contrary to the standard that Rome established during the Council of Trent and still upholds, as seen in the Second Vatican Council. In contrast, the Protestant tradition has consistently rallied behind the Reformation cry of "faith alone" as the means of receiving divine pardon. This difference, then, "represents the sharpest cleavage separating Roman Catholics from Protestants, for it is the focus of the gospel."⁸²

The only conclusion that can be drawn, then, is that the Roman Church does not hold nor officially teach the Gospel according to Scripture. Though bits of the Gospel exist within its doctrinal standard, this truth is so shrouded and even condemned by other statements within the standard, that any member holding to the teachings of the Roman Church would not receive the Gospel of Christ. Since the Roman Catholic Church does not hold to the Scriptural teaching of the Gospel but instead teaches "another gospel", we, those who are children of God, are under order by our King to go forth and teach the Gospel to Catholics, bringing them to an understanding of the Truth. Failure to do so is not politeness, though it may be politically correct, but outright disobedience to our King.

However, there are further implications for the Church in general that must be considered and applied. It is clear that, despite the misunderstandings of many Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church as an institution is not teaching the Gospel. As such, there should be no dialogue with any member of the Roman Church concerning doctrinal unification unless justification is first agreed upon according to the Scriptural definition. Yet this same standard must also be applied to all groups who consider themselves part of the true Church of Christ.

⁸² Ibid., 14.

Every group, before being acknowledged as part of Christ's Church, must first confess and willingly teach the Gospel according to Scripture. It does not matter how nice their church building is or the character of the members nor the style of worship. The group's stance on the Gospel is what matters. If that group holds to the Gospel according to Scripture, then it must be accepted as part of the true Church of Christ.

This implies that if its style of worship is different than mine but it holds to the Gospel, I must accept its members of the Body of Christ. It is possible that they may be in error on other issues; however, I am not to reject their membership in Christ's Body on these "other" issues. Instead I am responsible for attempting to correct those errors through Scripture, our ultimate standard and guide. However, the opposite is also applicable. If a group seems to hold to all my traditions and forms of worship but they do not hold to the Gospel, I must reject them as members of the Body of Christ.

This does not simply apply to groups but also to individuals; as we meet others who claim to be Christians, we have a responsibility to determine if they truly are, using the Gospel as our guide. Should we live in a state of perpetual doubt of other Christians? No, but we would also be in error to assume, in this age of syncretism and Scriptural error, that all who profess to know Christ have been taught the Truth according to Scripture.

Missions is the great work of the Church to advance the glory of God in all nations, peoples, and tongues. It is a wondrous work, for its primary focus is to give God the glory as men come to the knowledge of their sinful state, their inability to make amends, and then see the love of God as He provided the way through His Son Jesus Christ. This mission is to be conducted in lands that have little or no Scriptural influence; yet it is also to be conducted in lands that have a false Scriptural influence. This directly affects countries that are dominated by

the Roman Catholic Church; lands that at one time many may have considered evangelized. We must realize that if the Gospel that was taught was “another” gospel, those lands are not really evangelized. We must go forth boldly and teach the truth, the Truth according to Scripture. Additionally, we must also stand strong against any effort of unification that would weaken or degrade the Gospel. We have our standard, and we must abide by it. Unification is always a desirable goal, but we can only be unified with those who are true members of the Body of Christ. Our unity is not a physical one but a spiritual one based upon the Gospel according to Scripture.

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