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Is the Reformation Over?

An Evangelical Protestant Assessment of Roman Catholicism in the Era of Vatican II and Pope

John Paul II

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In a pleasure to be with you today. As a historian I feel especially privileged to be taking part in this gathering, for only historians, I think, are able to gauge how truly extraordinary such meetings like the one you have convened today really are. Christian historians are also in the very best place to offer the sincerest thanks to God for the mercy he displays in making a meeting like this possible. Fifty years ago such a gathering between Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants was all but unthinkable. Four hundred and fifty years ago gatherings like this were indeed thinkable, but they would have been called, not to reason, pray, and worship together in light of Scripture, Christian tradition, and the practical needs of the hour, but for the purpose of conducting a trial for heresy or even for witnessing the burning to death of a convicted heretic.

What I'd like to attempt with you today is a foolish thing, which is to present a digest of a book, and its conclusion. I am writing this book with Carolyn Nystrom--my friend, fellow Evangelical Presbyterian, and long-time co-laborer with me at our local church. The book has the same title as the title of this talk.

It begins with a pretty long chapter that records a few of the many, many instances where in the United States and around the world today it is possible for evangelicals to observe Roman Catholics acting pretty much like, well, evangelicals--for example, showing the "Jesus Film," conducting Alpha classes, protesting against public immorality of one kind or another, promoting study of the Bible, seeking the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so on. In the next chapter

we step back and summarize the way things used to be from the time when Martin Luther faced off against the Catholic emperor Charles V in 1521 right up until the early 1960s and the opening of the Second Vatican Council. To be sure, it is possible in such a historical overview of persistent antagonism to find a few instances where evangelicals and Catholics actually treated each other with some charity—John Wesley, for example, in 1749 wrote a public Letter to a Roman Catholic in Ireland, in which he expressed the hope that, even if Protestants and Catholics maintained their sharpest disagreements, they might in the future avoid the abominable polemics of the past. To Wesley, it was of first importance, not that Catholics leave their church, but that that they “follow after that fear and love of God without which all religion is vain. I say not a word to you about your opinions or outward manner of worship.”¹ In similar spirit, John Henry Cardinal Newman, when he was an old man, after decades of sometimes sharpest polemic with Protestants, wrote these moving words to an old evangelical antagonist, Edward Bickersteth, who had sent him a kind note: “I can but bow before the great mystery that those are divided here and look for the means of grace and glory in such different directions, who have so much in common in faith and hope.”² But since most of this historical chapter tries to summarize things before 1960, it features what seemed at the time to be permanent disagreements between Catholics and evangelicals. In fact, most evangelicals and most Catholics held that those disagreements were so serious that one could not be a true Christian and continue to adhere to the other faith.

We then go on to offer our speculations as to why relations between Catholics and evangelicals have changed so dramatically, at least in many places around the world, in the last forty-five years. And here I would like simply to summarize the changes in five areas that we take a little more time to unpack in the book.

¹ Wesley, A Letter to a Roman Catholic (1749), in The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 10:80, 83.

² Quoted in Sheridan Gilley, Newman and his Age (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), 372.

First are changes within Catholicism. Most importantly, these changes began with the momentous Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965, which in a sharp reversal from previous practice went out of its way to address non-Catholic Christians as “brothers,” to acknowledge that blame lay on both sides for ecclesiastical ruptures of the Reformation, to stress the unique role of Christ as mediator between God and humanity, and to urge ordinary lay Catholics to lives of practical Christian holiness.

But a new interest in ecumenicity was only one mark of even deeper changes in the Catholic church since the 1960s. The Council’s focus on the importance of the laity as “the people of God” has made at least some parts of the church’s structure, and some aspects of its day-to-day life, less clerical and ecclesiastical. Emphasis on the privileges of all Christians in living out the gospel have encouraged ordinary Catholics to be more active in public worship, private devotion, evangelization, and service to the world. And so the last decades have witnessed a bewildering array of local Catholic initiatives – Bible studies, workshops for peace, coalitions for the right to life, base communities (especially in Latin America) practicing a theology of liberation, masses with guitars and contemporary music, traditional masses in Latin, and on and on. To outsiders, these developments look like a Catholic acceptance of some aspects of Protestant emphases on “the priesthood of all believers,” though Catholic insiders can explain how the newer tendencies grew from long-standing, though obscure elements of Catholic tradition.

Since 1978 the papal leadership of John Paul II has also reflected significant changes in the Catholic church. In his own mind, John Paul II has followed the guidelines for church renewal outlined by the Second Vatican Council. Later historians and theologians will certainly express their own judgments on the relationship between the Council and John Paul II’s pontificate. For our purposes, however, it is enough to see that the jolt administered to the church by the Second Vatican Council has led on to dramatic innovations, dramatic initiatives,

dramatic contests within Roman Catholicism over the future of the church, and dramatically altered relations with Protestant evangelicals.

A second reason why this gathering is taking place today concerns changes in world Christianity. In particular, the shift to the south in the center of gravity for world Christianity has relativized the antagonism inherited from European church history. The rapid recent expansion of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific—combined with the ferment of renewal in the Americas and the rapid decline of historic Christendom in Europe—have pushed Catholic-evangelical relationships into unknown territory. Where the weight of traditional European divisions, with attendant civil and political tensions, remains strong (mostly Latin America and southern Europe), Catholic-evangelical relations remain quite cool. Where traditional European forms are now thoroughly intermixed with post-Christendom realities (North America, parts of Africa and Asia), Catholic-evangelical relations are cordial, if still cautious. Where traditional European Christendom is only a vague reference to an un-experienced past (most of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific), Catholic-evangelical relations are much more relaxed.

A second world-wide Christian development that has eased the way for Catholic-evangelical connection is the charismatic movement. In particular, charismatic emphasis on the direct work of the Holy Spirit has made historical sources of ecclesiastical strife--doctrine, traditional church practices, and inherited authority structures--less important for Catholic and evangelical charismatics, but also for the much broader circles that have been touched in some way by charismatic influences.

Evangelical youth movements, which are organized to reach specific Christian, but not ecclesiastical, goals, have also promoted positive interactions between Catholics and evangelicals.

Yet another feature of modern world Christianity that has altered the historic situation is the increasing prominence of women in almost all activities of all of the churches. Since very close to 100% of the polemical literature in the centuries of Catholic-Protestant polemic was authored by men, it is not surprising that as women broaden their participation in public

religious activity that the focus shifts away from contentious definitions of doctrine and church practices. Documentation is hard to come by for the impact that neighborhood Bible studies have exerted in recent decades, but the considerable success of these very local institutions is due almost exclusively to the leadership of Christian women. At least since the 1960s, the participation of Catholic women with evangelicals in such studies, and vice versa, has played a large part in lowering the temperature of Catholic-evangelical relationship in many places throughout North America, Europe, and the rest of the world.

A third arena of change concerns changes in American politics and society. The most visible public signal of a shift in the United States was the election of a Catholic as president in 1960. John F. Kennedy's victory was itself a milestone for overcoming Protestant bias and fulfilling earlier trajectories of Catholic public service.

Much more important in the political and social sphere, however, has been what Timothy George once called an "ecumenism of the trenches." On many moral issues—"support for parental choice in education, advocacy of the traditional values of chastity, family, and community, opposition to abortion on demand, and repudiation of pornography"—more and more evangelicals have found themselves joining more and more frequently with more and more Catholics. The result has been a conviction growing in many places that behind this common public testimony lay, again in George's phrases, a "coalescence of believing Roman Catholics and faithful evangelicals who both affirm the substance of historic Christian orthodoxy against the ideology of theological pluralism that marks much mainline Protestant thought as well as avant-garde Catholic theology."³

In the international arena, even more damage was done to Protestant notions of Catholic tyranny by the contribution of the Catholic church to the Solidarity movement in Poland, the public leadership of Pope John Paul II in combating communism in Europe, and the pope's

³ Timothy George, "Catholics and Evangelicals in the Trenches," Christianity Today, May 16, 1994, p. 16; George, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A New Initiative. 'The Gift of Salvation': An Evangelical Assessment," Christianity Today, Dec. 8, 1997, p. 34.

temperate statements on various explosive political situations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These political actions did not address doctrinal issues directly, but they did strip away much of the civil anxiety with which American Protestants had always looked upon Roman Catholics.

Fourth are changes arising from the work of individuals. The roster of effective change agents is now a long one: for example, the Vatican officials who set up to treat with pentecostals, evangelicals, and Baptists; the church and seminary leaders who in 1987 founded the Los Angeles Catholic/Evangelical Committee as the nation's first dialogue of its kind; Billy Graham who arranged for increasing cooperation with Catholics in his evangelistic efforts; Richard John Neuhaus and Charles Colson who have stage-managed the Evangelicals and Catholics Together initiative that has had such interesting effects in the United States; Father Theodore Hesburgh and Father Edward Malloy who as presidents of the University of Notre Dame hired some of evangelicalism's brightest scholars to deepen the Christian intellectual witness of that university; and many, many more who in their local situations have taken the steps required for information, dialogue, mutual learning, and mutual edification.

Fifth are changes within evangelicalism, particularly the actions of evangelicals who claim that evangelicalism is not all it should be. A tradition of vigorous self-criticism is actually its own kind of testimony to evangelical vitality. But where evangelicals have been moved to admonish themselves and other evangelicals for weaknesses in ecclesiology, tradition, the intellectual life, sacraments, theology of culture, aesthetics, philosophical theology, or historical consciousness, the result has almost always been selective appreciation for elements of the Catholic tradition.

A recent essay by the evangelical Bible scholar Scott McKnight, which reflects on a number of McKnight's once-evangelical students who have become Catholics, suggests the type of issues that find some evangelicals looking to Rome for what they have not found in their own

churches.⁴ These converts seek more thoughtful liturgy, deeper grounding in Christian history, a fuller use of the sacraments, authoritative interpretations of Scripture, and (sometimes) the Catholic sex ethic with respect to contraception. But above all, McKnight describes a search for what they did not experience as evangelicals – that is, a search “to transcend the human limits of knowledge to find certainty . . . to transcend the human limits of temporality to find connection to the entire history of the Church . . . to transcend the human limits of interpretive diversity to find an interpretive authority.”⁵

Most evangelicals who think about these questions, even those who strenuously criticize evangelical practices and traditions, do not become Roman Catholics. But consideration of such matters by those who do join the Catholic church illuminates a situation where evangelicals are more attentive to instruction from Catholics because they have perceived weaknesses in their own forms of faith.

After explaining why we think things have changed so significantly in the last half century, we then present several chapters that provide documentation for our overall claim that evangelical-Catholic engagement has now entered a new era. The careful documentation in this part of the book is mostly the work of my collaborator, Carolyn Nystrom, and I wish it were possible for her to expound at this point on the wide range of reading she has done. But I will race ahead. We begin with an assessment of many of the ecumenical dialogues that have taken place between the Vatican and various Protestant churches since the Second Vatican Council, including the much-publicized dialogues between the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican which led in late 1999 to a this remarkable joint declaration on justification by faith: “Together we confess: by grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts

⁴ Scott McKnight, “From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 45 (Sept. 2002): 451-72.

⁵ McKnight, “From Wheaton to Rome,” 460.

while equipping and calling us to good works. . . . Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life . . . Our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit it in any way."⁶

In the book's next chapter, we examine the documents that have been produced by the Evangelical and Catholics Initiative spearheaded by Richard John Neuhaus on the Catholic side and Charles Colson on the evangelical side. And we conclude this effort at documentation with a lengthy examination of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church that the Vatican published as an official digest of authorized Catholic teaching in 1994.

Our conclusions about the Catechism pretty much sum up our conclusions about the other significant Catholic-evangelical discussions. Carolyn's readings highlight what a tremendous proportion of the Catechism, and of contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine in general, we as evangelicals should be delighted to embrace—on the Trinity, on the person of Christ, on the power of the Holy Spirit, and especially on the saving work of Christ. In fact, especially in the Catechism we found so much solid Christian doctrine expressed in such solid form that it took our breath away. For example, these words on "Christ's death [as] the unique and definite sacrifice":

(613) Christ's death is both the Paschal sacrifice that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men, through "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," and the sacrifice of the New Covenant, which restores man to communion with God by reconciling him to God through the "blood of the covenant, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

(614) This sacrifice of Christ is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices. First, it is a gift from God the Father himself, for the Father handed his Son

⁶ Ibid., pp. 568-569, # 15-17.

over to sinners in order to reconcile us with himself. At the same time it is the offering of the Son of God made man, who in freedom and love offered his life to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience.⁷

Or, for another example, these words on “Grace”:

(1996) Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.⁸

While the phraseology of such statements might just be different enough from common evangelical ways of speaking to be noticeable, the substance is as thoroughly evangelical as it could possibly be.

But in studying the Catechism and other official statements, Carolyn also draws attention to elements in contemporary Catholicism that still sound either strange, or simply wrong, to evangelicals. These elements include statements especially about the pope, the sacraments, and Mary, although in each of these cases there is more with which evangelicals can agree than we had anticipated. The key difference, however, transcends any particular doctrine. That difference lies in how the church is understood as an agent of divine salvation and how it is seen as functioning as a home for those who are being saved. This understanding of the church, we have concluded, is the central affirmation of modern Roman Catholicism that remains furthest from evangelical beliefs.

Then we move on in the book to a chapter chronicling how different evangelicals have responded to the modern opening of doors and building of bridges between evangelicals and Catholics. As many of you have probably experienced, those reactions fall into a predictable range: First, a few evangelicals and fundamentalists continue ancient polemics that treat Catholicism as a satanic delusion. Second, more evangelicals remain critical of Catholicism and nervous about cooperating with Catholics, but also express their views in much more moderate

⁷ p. 159

⁸ p. 483

terms than was customary not so long ago. Third, a considerable number of evangelicals now express gratitude for increased openings, shared fellowship, and mutual encouragement between evangelicals and Catholics. Such ones look eagerly for ways of expanding fruitful cooperation, even if they recognize the seriousness of remaining evangelical-Catholic differences. Fourth, a few evangelicals have become so convinced of the virtues of Catholicism that they have actually become Catholics.

Finally, the book closes with two chapters of assessment. In the first of these, where we try to treat the American dimension of evangelical-Catholic relations, our stress is on the political transformation of the last decades. Although that transformation is quite complicated, it can be easily summarized: once upon a time, and not too long ago, evangelical Protestants looked upon Roman Catholics as the most dangerous possible opponents of the highest ideals of American freedom. Now many evangelicals have joined forces self-consciously with some Roman Catholics in together defending a vision of American freedom that they see as threatened by the forces of modern secularism. This momentous shift on American public life has provided for many people the first plank over the chasm of historical antagonism. The broader significance of such political and social co-belligerency, however, is that this single plank has steadily broadened out into a much more substantial bridge.

The last chapter in the book tries to take the measure, both historically and theologically, of where we stand today as Catholics and evangelicals. Here is a digest of that chapter, which treats areas of agreement and disagreement, probes how we might interpret the contemporary situation, and then returns to the question of our title to ask if the Reformation is over.

Evangelical Protestants of a certain kind and Roman Catholics of a certain kind now enjoy the kind of fellowship with each other that, short decades ago, was unimaginable. Of course, not all evangelicals and not all Catholics have either desired to experience or actually experienced such a breakthrough to more positive relationships. Evangelicals who are open to

closer cooperation with Catholics tend to be those who define their religion primarily by faithfulness to Scripture and the experience of God's grace, and only secondarily by the particular beliefs and practices of their inherited denominations. Catholics who are open to closer cooperation with evangelicals tend to be those in the moderate or moderate-conservative wings of the church who are encouraged by statements of Vatican II about the presence of the Holy Spirit in other Christian movements; such Catholics often worry as much about the advances of theological modernism in their church as evangelicals do about the advances of modernism among Protestants, and they regard the small wing of Catholic conservatism that rejects Vatican II as unrepresentative of true Catholicism. What Carolyn and I would like to assert about evangelicalism and Catholicism by way of a summary analysis pertains to the evangelicals and the Catholics who have already shown a willingness to cooperate in some particulars of faith and witness.

There is now present among such evangelicals and Catholics a broad and deep foundation of agreement on the central teachings of Christianity. Such evangelicals and such Catholics affirm together the Trinity, the sinfulness of humanity, the love of God extended to sinners in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to change men and women into servants of God. Whatever differences might still exist between such Catholics and such evangelicals when they examine the foundations of Christianity are infinitesimal by comparison with differences between traditional Christianity of all sorts and modernist Christianity of all sorts. Differences on such basic issues between Catholics and evangelicals fade away as if to nothing when they are compared with secular affirmations about the nature of humanity and of the world. The awareness of how deep such common doctrinal affirmations can be is, in the eye of history, astounding. It is one of the strongest proofs to my historian's mind that we still live in the age of miracles.

More specifically, such Catholics and such evangelicals trust equally in the full inspiration and final authority of the Bible. On Scripture, they stand together against modernistic

proposals from within the churches that would treat Scripture as only a product of human consciousness; together they stand against the non-Christian world in affirming that the Bible communicates normative revelation from God.

Within a common affirmation of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, however, differences do continue to separate Catholics and evangelicals on how to interpret the Bible. Catholics rely in principle more on the voice of tradition and on the formal teaching magisterium of the Church; evangelicals rely in principle more on the personal appropriation of Scripture and on local traditions of interpretation. Because of these hermeneutical differences, evangelicals continue to regard some Catholic practices and dogmas as un-Scriptural (however much they look to Catholics like dogmas and practices legitimately rooted in Scripture). Conversely, evangelical rejection of some Catholic dogmas and practices as un-Scriptural looks to Catholics, not as a trust in the Bible, but as a caving in to the skepticism, the individualism, and the functional anti-supernaturalism of the secular Enlightenment.

For many Catholics and many evangelicals, however, it has become important to insist that such continuing differences flow – not from significant differences about the character of divine revelation in the Bible as such – but from different customs, habits, or principles in interpreting a divinely authoritative Bible .

Likewise many Catholics and many evangelicals now believe approximately the same thing concerning justification by faith. To put this expanding area of agreement in more precise terms, it is better to say that more and more Catholics and evangelicals now affirm that a God-honoring, Scripture-based, and orthodox theology of justification by faith is found where the following two propositions are believed separately and together: (1) Salvation is an absolutely free gift from God. (2) There is no Christian salvation that is not manifest in good works.

Precisely how those two proposition are to be understood as individual Christian doctrines and then held together as defining essential Christian practice does produce disagreement. But it is disagreement found as much, or more, within evangelicalism and within

Catholicism as between Catholics and evangelicals. Official Catholic teaching, especially as articulated in the Catechism and the Joint Declaration on Justification, now seems to fall somewhere in between John Wesley's Arminianism and the Augustinian positions maintained by Martin Luther and John Calvin.⁹ All of these depictions of salvation by grace through faith are closer to each other than any are to extreme forms of evangelical Arminianism, some forms of Anabaptist soteriology, and other sectarian Protestant doctrines where the agency of the unredeemed sinner is in every case much greater in the picture of salvation than found in official Catholic teaching, Lutheran and Calvinist Augustinianism, or Wesley's Arminianism.

A difference more likely to show up systematically between Catholics and evangelicals as a whole concerns the merciful means that God has given to provide his grace for the justification of sinners. But, again, more and more Catholics and evangelicals recognize that differences over questions about the means of grace can be held up for debate while they also make common affirmations concerning the basic character of God's justifying grace. Of those continuing differences, most concern the issue of how justification is imparted and received, and on that issue questions of the church come front and center.

It is, in fact, over questions of the church that the most serious disagreements continue to exist between Catholics and evangelicals. Questions about the papacy, about the Blessed Virgin Mary, about the sacraments, about the mandatory celibacy of priests and religious – these issues all grow out of a different conception of how God fashions the Body of Christ in the world, what he has called that Body to do, and how he has empowered it to do the work of building his Kingdom.

For Catholics the visible, properly constituted and hierarchically governed church is the God-given agent for the work of apostolic ministry. For evangelicals the church is the spiritual Body of Christ made up of all those who have responded to the apostolic proclamation of the God-given offer of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. For Catholics, the church constitutes

⁹ On the conservative, Augustinian character of Wesley's Arminianism, see the article by Packer.

believers; for evangelicals, believers constitute the church. For Catholics, individual believers are a function of the church; for evangelicals, the church is a function of individual believers.

This is a deep divide, because even more than being a question of different doctrine it is a question of different (and deeply ingrained) assumptions about practice. Thus, evangelicals cannot understand how in good conscience a genuinely Christian church could have engaged (and in limited areas of the world still engage) in coerced constraint of large populations as part of efforts at exerting hegemonic control over entire local societies.

Evangelicals, further, cannot understand how the Catholic church can be genuinely Christian if it seems to tolerate the substitution of church adherence for church practice – this is the problem of nominal belief and nominal practice that evangelicals see whenever they look at Catholicism as a whole. To be sure, Catholic leaders do address this problem, but to evangelicals it looks like they don't mean it. How can the church tolerate a definition of Christianity that looks more to one-time baptism and an ethnic-type of identification as a definition of what constitutes a Christian and tolerate what sometimes looks like a nearly complete indifference to the vast numbers of Catholics that do not seem to be concerned about practicing anything but the most formal and rudimentary kind of Christian faith.

I have to use my imagination a little to frame a Catholic response, but I can imagine Catholics looking at the bloomin', buzzin' confusion that is evangelical Christianity and asking, with the same bewilderment I have just expressed the other way, questions like this: As Catholics we cannot imagine that genuine Christianity could be so torn apart as we see evangelical Protestantism torn apart, and for such a never-ending list of sinfully schismatic reasons: personality disputes, ego trips, preferences in music, preferences in sermon length, preferences in politics, economic classes, races, denominational pride, eccentric interpretations of a limited part of the Bible, very eccentric interpretations of a limited part of the Bible, and so on.

Or, again, as Catholics we cannot understand how you evangelicals can claim to be Christian and limit your faith to what goes on in your heads – to words, preaching, testimonies,

books, more words – but no real sacraments, no real sense that Christ died for bodies as well as for heads, no real appreciation for what comes to us through the physical senses. So why is all the good Christian literature and about 95% of the good Christian painting, and most of the really serious Christian scholarship done by Catholics, huh?

Such visceral cross-denominational reactions are rooted in alternative conceptions of what it means to be Christian, and those alternative conceptions are rooted in what it means for a body of humans to make up the Christian church.

At this point it is natural to think about what might be done. But that desire might be premature if it neglects asking why this fundamental difference exists and how it should be interpreted, before trying to figure out what can be done about it.

Here I abridge severely what we hope to develop in the book. But I have come increasingly to the conclusion that there exists four quite distinct types of Christianity in the world. If I am right, then basic Catholic-evangelical differences on the church grow out of different conceptions of what the Christian faith is in its essence.¹⁰ Here are the four.

(1) Orthodox, constituted in the third to fifth centuries and given shape by its adaptation to Hellenism (by the translation out of Hebrew and Aramaic idiom into Greek). Today, the survival of Orthodoxy represents a continuing Christian tradition in which the blinding metaphysical reality of what it meant for God to take on flesh “for us and for our salvation” continues to supply the spiritual lifeblood to the church.

(2) Catholic, constituted in the ninth to thirteenth centuries and given shape by its adaptation to European Christendom (by the translation of Greek into Latin). Today, the survival of Catholicism represents a continuing Christian tradition in which the tangible ideal of living all life under God continues to supply the highest model for Christian community, the use of the mind, and the expression of God’s love in the world.

¹⁰ Louis Bouyer, Helmuth Thielicke, Abraham Kuyper

(3) Protestant, constituted in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries by its adaptation to a new Europe marked by nationalism and, eventually, the Enlightenment (by the translation of Latin into vernacular languages). Today, the survival of Protestantism represents a continuing Christian tradition in which the life-transforming implications of what it meant for Christ to live, die, and reign pro me continues to supply a source of great spiritual comfort to individuals and remarkable spurs to individual Christian activity.

(4) Pentecostal, constituted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by its adaptation to global economics (by the translation out of European languages into indigenous tongues). Today, the spread of Pentecostalism represents a new Christian tradition in which the living possibility of union and communion with God through the Holy Spirit brings light in many of the darkest places of the world.

The “mere Christians” in all of these traditions believe very similar things about the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, the Trinity, the centrality of the work of Christ for human salvation, and the power of the Holy Spirit as the motive force for holy living in the world. But each tradition expresses these realities with characteristically different emphases:

Orthodoxy, the mystical mysterious of God

Catholicism, the power of God to build his City

Protestantism, the civil society shaped by individual choice

Pentecostalism, the direct empowerment of the Holy Spirit

These major expressions of Christian faith may be likened to language families. Each stands closest to the “language” from which it emerged: so Catholicism from Orthodoxy, Protestantism from Catholicism, Pentecostalism from Protestantism. Each is a family of languages rather than a single tongue. Each language family, however, has enjoyed much contact with representatives of other language families. The result is much borrowing of vocabulary, some cross-over of syntax, and often considerable ability to figure out what people from other languages are saying — but still a basic divide.

If this line of reasoning reflects reality, it helps to explain a great deal. For example, it is only marginally useful for evangelicals to quote Bible verses at Roman Catholics for whom authoritative interpretations of Scripture exist that deny the force of the texts as used by evangelicals. Or again, it is only marginally useful for Catholics to describe the ineluctable bonds between Scripture and Tradition to evangelicals for whom Scripture has long been valued for its ability to challenge tradition.

In conclusion, what can we make of a world of multiple tongues? First, I think we can recognize the continuing differences between Catholics and evangelicals as both a problem and a gift. It is a problem because serious Christ-followers of one sort simply cannot understand why serious Christ-followers of another sort believe and act in the details of how they believe and act. It is a gift because, by the mercies of God, more and more Christ-followers of one sort are coming to recognize the sanctity, the holiness, the telltale manifestations of the Holy Spirit among serious Christ-followers of other sorts. The gift in this realization is to see that God has always been bigger than our own group's grasp of God, that he has been manifesting himself at times, in places, and through venues where we and our mates have not expected him to be present at all.

It is also a gift because continuing differences among different families, or languages, of serious Christ-followers testifies to the capacity of the once-incarnate Son of God to repeatedly and continuously incarnate himself again in human cultures marked by great cultural differences among themselves. What we today see may be described as an incarnation of Christ in Catholic form and an incarnation of Christ in evangelical form. What we can be confident that God sees is his love shed abroad in the person of his Son to the whole world.

So what are we going to do about this situation? Historians look backward. I've said about all I can say. By contrast, workers with other college students must look forward. Is the Reformation over? This may not be the best question to be asking.

Better questions might sound like this: Is God truly going to draw people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation [and major Christian tradition] to worship together the

Lamb who was slain? And will he really make of them – all these tongues and peoples and traditions – a single Kingdom united in the Body of his Son Jesus Christ? These might be the more pertinent questions.

Do you doubt that the all-merciful God can still do such great signs and wonders. Think about it. We have gathered here today as people who not so very long ago looked upon each other as orcs and elves, and were as repelled by orc-speech and elf-speech as it was possible to be. Today, it is more like ents and hobbits, not yet speaking the same language, but nonetheless getting quite a charge from hearing the other tongue and actually getting along quite well together. Might God do even more? Look around you. Listen. It is happening right before your eyes and ears.