

**A Missionary Looks at Evangelicals and Catholics Together<sup>1</sup>**  
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As the drums pounded, the people, dressed in the brightly colored costumes and carrying the banners that represented their brotherhood groups, marched incessantly around the small church on the hill. They each were adorned with a silver crown, and after days of marching they eventually finished up in the small chapel where they laid down their crowns at the feet of the image of Mary, left offerings of flowers, and bowed and prayed in reverence and thanksgiving before joining in the carnival like celebration being held outside. They were there to pay their promises, that is, to fulfill a vow that had been made to Mary in order to gain her favor that she might answer their prayers.

After three days, the Sunday evening mass began. A huge crowd gathered from across the small town to meet at the outdoor grandstand that was temporarily set up for the occasion. The mass would climax the *congado* celebration, as the queen of the *congado* would be presented to the crowd.<sup>3</sup> When she took the podium she began by announcing to the celebrating crowd, “We are all gathered here tonight to worship Mary!”

I did a double take, wondering if my ears had deceived me, but they had not. While there are Portuguese words that are commonly used to express the desire to pay homage or praise another human being (*homenagear, elogiar*), she used the word *louvar*. While *louvar* technically can mean “to praise” or “to honor” someone in a more generic sense, it usually carries a connotation of worship when used in the setting of a religious ceremony. Of course, most Catholics would deny that they worship Mary, but after witnessing such ceremonies as an Evangelical one is reminded of the old expression, “If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck....”

I spent the summers of 1991 and 1993 and a portion of 1992 in Brazil doing research for my doctoral dissertation on the subject of black liberation theology in the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil. During that time I became somewhat knowledgeable of the cultural and folk Catholicism common in the eastern and southeastern parts of Brazil, as well as the ideology and practice of the more liberal or “progressive” elements of the church represented by liberation

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is a revision of a presentation made at the annual meeting of Evangelical Ministries to New Religions in Denver, Colorado on February 20, 2000. The author serves as Regional Research Coordinator for the Eastern South America Region of the International Mission Board.

<sup>2</sup>Correction of some typos were made and a new footnote (#8) was added in March, 2004. In addition the font was changed. However, the content of the paper itself was not changed.

<sup>3</sup>The *congado* is a religious ritual developed by African slaves in Brasil to help them preserve their own way of worship even as they were forced to accept the Catholicism of their Portuguese masters. The religious practice of slaves frequently involved various degrees of mixing Catholicism with the African spiritist religions that they brought to Brazil with them. The slaves established “brotherhood” groups that were responsible for organizing these events. These groups provided an important support system for the slaves in their difficult circumstances.

theology.<sup>4</sup> Always in the background was my experience of being married to a lady who grew up as a Roman Catholic and who was very devout in her practice and faith. I have even been told by some of our Brazilian friends who knew her first as a 16 year old exchange student, that she was a “super Catholic.” She was educated and catechized in Catholic schools and has an intimate practical knowledge of the day to day reality of being Catholic.

I start with this in order to set a context for the remarks I will be making in this paper, for it was with this experience fresh in my mind that I encountered the Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) statement shortly after it was released in 1994. I have read a good bit of theology, both Protestant and Catholic. I have studied the history of the Reformation. But much of what I am concerned about is the reality that is not necessarily found in the official theology books, but rather the faith that is lived by Catholic people. Beyond the library, my research involved in-depth interviews with a numerous practicing Catholics, as well as countless informal conversations and attendance at various ceremonies, masses and other events. I have since 1995 been a missionary in Brazil and have had ample contact with practicing, non-practicing and ex-Catholics. This has given me plenty of time for discussion and reflection on the meaning of being Catholic, especially in Brazil. I have often had discussions with my wife, whose insight and experience have been of great help in interpreting what I have learned.

My years of experience and study have led me to some serious concerns about the Evangelicals and Catholics Together document and the ECT movement as a whole. I would like to offer here an overview of some of those concerns and their implications for missiology in Latin America. Specifically, I want to show why it is so important that Evangelicals continue to evangelize in Latin America. Hopefully, I can also offer some contribution to the discussion of how we as Evangelicals might constructively respond to Catholics in North America. This might be of particular interest because North American Roman Catholicism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will become increasingly more Latin as Hispanic culture continues to grow.

## **ECT - the controversy**

The Evangelicals and Catholics Together statement was originally published in *First Things* in 1994 and later in the book *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: toward a common mission*.<sup>5</sup> The statement was the result of a consultation between Catholics and Evangelicals that began with the initiative of Chuck Colson (evangelical) and Richard John Neuhaus (Roman Catholic priest) due to a common interest in combating the increasing secularism in American life and culture. If Catholics and Evangelicals have common moral concerns and social goals, then why not work together to achieve them? Indeed, supporters of ECT often note that it was

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<sup>4</sup>Liberation Theology is an interpretation of Christianity developed by Latin American Catholic theologians during the 1970s. It draws its major inspiration from a Marxist critique of capitalist society, liberal theology and relies heavily on the denunciation of the oppression of the poor that is encountered in the Old Testament. Liberation Theology sees the goal of Christian faith as being the establishment of a socialist economy in the present world rather than reaching heaven in the world to come.

<sup>5</sup>Colson, Charles and Richard John Neuhaus, eds. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: toward a common mission*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995.

while working together in the pro-life movement that Evangelicals and Catholics began to discover each other as fellow believers in Christ and began to overcome some of the stereotypes and distortions that had traditionally created fear and mistrust between the two.

However, as the two sides came began to come together they realized that any attempt at unity would have to address concerns over historic differences as well as areas of continuing tension. Mentioned as prominent among these areas of tension, and of special interest to me, was the growing conflict in Latin America, which Colson and Neuhaus feared might become a “Belfast of religious warfare.”<sup>6</sup> While I consider this fear to be greatly exaggerated, it is true that much distrust prevails between Catholics and Evangelicals in Latin America. If for no other reason, the Roman Church is concerned because it is literally hemorrhaging with high rates of conversion to Evangelicalism, especially Pentecostalism. Evangelicals in Latin America remain suspicious because of the record of persecution at the hands of Roman Catholics that still lingers in recent memory.

ECT represents a significant step towards an attempted reconciliation between the two sides. It was endorsed by a number of high profile Evangelicals but raised the ire of others equally as prominent. When representatives of the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board endorsed ECT an outcry from Southern Baptists resulted in the retraction of this endorsement. Controversy surrounded the ECT document. In order to address this and to further the dialogue a second document, *The Gift of Salvation* (ECT II) was released. It appeared in *First Things* in January of 1998 and served to make the controversy more intense. Supporters claimed that it was aimed at clarifying misunderstandings that separate us, while detractors regarded it as a sell out of the gospel.

Evangelical critics of ECT point to three central points raised by ECT, although other questions were broached as well. The first point of controversy is that ECT claims that Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ. It teaches that they have a common mission to witness to the same gospel. It argues that both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics that are communities of authentic Christian witness. If this is the case, then the differences that exist, serious though they be, do not eradicate the common witness to the gospel that both communities represent.

The second point follows immediately, for if Evangelicals and Catholics actually share a common gospel then what are we to make of the doctrine of justification?<sup>7</sup> ECT leaves us with

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>7</sup> The Reformation that gave birth to the Evangelical churches was based on the premise that justification is the declaration by God that the repentant sinner who comes to Christ is pardoned and viewed as righteous by God. It is not a process, but an act that is completed the moment a person receives Christ. It is based entirely on the righteousness of Christ and his death on the cross to pay for the sinner’s sins. Justification is a free gift of God’s grace. It is received by faith alone apart from any good works or religious ceremonies. The Roman Catholic response to the Reformation was officially set forth in the Council of Trent. At Trent, the Evangelical understanding of justification was declared anathema. Roman Catholicism understands justification as a process. In this process a person is never declared just before God, but is instead made gradually more righteous until qualified for heaven. Faith is important in this process, but it is not sufficient. One may earn higher degrees of justification through good works and participation in Catholic rituals. Salvation is thus merited by the individual. It is not based only on the work of Christ, but also on the works of the sinner.

only two options really. We can relegate the doctrine of justification to a secondary position as a doctrine not really essential for the gospel, or we can take the position that the disagreement over justification that erupted during the Reformation was really more of a misunderstanding. The two sides were really saying more or less the same thing from different perspectives. This second position would indicate that cultural and theological changes since the 17<sup>th</sup> century render much of the division of that time irrelevant for us today.

It follows that if Evangelicals and Roman Catholics share a common faith and especially if our differences over justification are only secondary issues that do not touch on the essentials of the gospel, then we must view faithful Roman Catholics as truly saved individuals who are, indeed, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Hence, ECT admonishes both communities that they are not to attempt to proselytize baptized, believing members of the other community. The implied message for Evangelical missionaries, especially those in Latin America, was taken to be stop “stealing our sheep”. The controversy surrounding ECT is quite understandable, for at stake is nothing less than the definition of the gospel of salvation itself.

Another consequence of ECT is that it calls into question the status of Evangelical missions in lands that have been traditionally Roman Catholic. Erroneous and exaggerated statistics have already given many Evangelicals the impression that Latin America is evangelized, thus creating pressure on missions agencies to send their resources elsewhere. In Brazil, for example, some sources have reported that as much as 30% of the population is Evangelical. Our own research in the region shows that once cultic groups are factored out, the reality is that between 8 and 10 % can reasonably be considered born-again Evangelicals.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the misconceptions continue and ECT may be cited by some as further evidence that missions resources are no longer needed in Latin America. Indeed, if good Catholics are already evangelized, why waste resources in predominantly Catholic nations? While missionaries serving in Latin America recognize that the evangelism of Latin America is far from being completed, the favorable reception of ECT, even by some within mission organizations, has obscured this fact. In light of ECT it is necessary to re-examine the definition of the gospel according to Rome and see whether or not we are really on the same page after all. Only then will we be able to determine if the diversion of missions resources away from Latin America is truly justifiable.

The controversy that ECT provoked prompted the release of another document by Evangelicals, produced by both ECT signers and ECT critics, that attempted to clarify the situation and affirm evangelical doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Evangelicals signers of ECT have issued statements reaffirming the Reformation understanding of justification. Another book was released with a series of essays taking a more critical look at ECT and the divide between Evangelicals and

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<sup>8</sup>More recently I have been able to analysis carefully the raw sample data on religious affiliation from the year 2000 census taken by the Brazilian government ([www.ibge.gov.br](http://www.ibge.gov.br)). Based on this study I have concluded that, at best, about 7.3% of the Brazilian population may be considered to be Evangelical. It is my considered opinion that this number is still high.

<sup>9</sup>This document was produced by Christians United for Reformation (CURE) and reproduced by J. I. Packer in Colson and Neuhaus, pp. 157-159.

Roman Catholics.<sup>10</sup> Much discussion has been generated over what exactly it is that official Roman Catholic theology teaches today about justification and how does that relate to Evangelical understandings of Scripture.

### **Roman Catholicism, Cultural or Official?**

Several years ago I attended the Evangelical Theological Society regional meeting at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. At that meeting Dr. Norman Geisler gave a lecture in which he argued that official Roman Catholic doctrine supported the notion that justification is purely an act of grace and not a result of good works. While Dr. Geisler's clarified that he was referring to initial justification and not the total process, I was not satisfied that his presentation adequately represented the Roman Catholic position. I indicated in a question that my experience with Catholics had led me to believe that they understood salvation to boil down to one's doing of good works, period. These works include faithful participation in the rites and ceremonies of the Church and submission to the Pope. He responded by saying that while the notion of salvation by good works might represent popular or "folk" Catholicism, the official (i.e. real) teaching of the Catholic Church does not attribute justification to good works without grace. I am not intending here to criticize Dr. Geisler. In his book with Ralph MacKenzie he makes it clear that the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation does compromise the gospel by adding good works as one of the conditions of justification.<sup>11</sup> I am simply stating that on that day I left unsatisfied, feeling that our discussion did not adequately account for what Roman Catholicism really is. That is because we raised a critical question that needs to be addressed from a missiological standpoint. That question is simply this: Is a religion defined by the writings of its elite, the theologians, the declarations of its councils, and the proclamations of its official spokesmen? Or is it defined by what the masses of its adherents actually believe and practice? What is the real Roman Catholicism anyway?

The answer to this question is not so simple. It is not at all inaccurate to talk of Roman Catholicisms in the plural. From a missiological perspective, the real or I should say, the relevant form of any religion is that which the missionary happens to be dealing with at any given moment as he attempts to communicate the gospel to individuals from all walks of life. The questions raised by ECT may very well take on different significance in Latin America than in North America. On the other hand, it may be that the nature of Catholicism in Latin America might shed some light on the North American variety that could remain otherwise obscured. For despite the pluralism on the surface in the Catholic Church, there remains an underlying unity of teaching on its central doctrines, including the question of salvation. With this in mind I would like to make some observations about the Roman Catholicism, especially as it is in Brazil and

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<sup>10</sup>John Armstrong, ed. *Roman Catholicism: evangelical protestants analyze what divides us*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.

<sup>11</sup>Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie. *Roman Catholicism and Evangelicals: agreements and differences*. Grand rapids: Baker Books, 1995, pp. 238-239.

then use those observations to look at the ECT documents in order to suggest something of a possible response from a missionary's point of view.

### **Roman Catholicism Brazilian Style**

Perhaps the characteristic that stands out most to the observer of Brazilian religion is the mysticism which seems to permeate everything. In popular religion, whether Catholic, Evangelical or spiritist, this often appears in the form of a highly emotional rituals and worship that frequently breaks down into a superstitious and magical view of the world. Miracles and other supernatural acts are thought to be readily available for those who employ the proper methods of invoking them. Worship is often understood as an ecstatic or mystical experience.

Since the beginning, Brazilian Roman Catholicism has been heavily characterized by syncretism with African-spiritist beliefs and practices.<sup>12</sup> During the colonial era the main interest of the Brazilian elite concerning their African slaves was keeping them under control and productive. They agreed to the Church's demand to christianize the slaves, but this was only tolerated to keep the peace with the Church. The slaves, for their part, simply accepted Roman Catholic symbols as a veneer behind which they could continue to practice their traditional religions. They were baptized into the Catholic Church, often in large groups, but their basic world view did not change. They identified the various gods and spirits of their religion with the Catholic devotion to Mary and the saints. They participated in the mass, but then continued the spirit possession rituals and magical practices of the tradition of their African ancestors. The slave owners were quite content to let things stand, so long as the slaves would remain subservient and do their work.

Though the syncretism with occultism was at first shunned by the upper classes as being a vulgar expression of the ignorance of the uneducated poor, the introduction of the spiritism of the French medium, Allan Kardec, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century changed this. Kardec's variety of spiritism was more sophisticated and suited to the tastes of white, upper-class Brazilians. Since then, upper class spiritism has flourished and hence, Catholics of all social classes have been involved. It is interesting to note that while less than 10% of Brazilians claim to be spiritist, a much higher number are observed to participate in spiritist practices. That is why a simple reporting of statistics showing church membership does not even begin to describe the reality of religion in Brazil.

More recently, training of Brazilian theologians in European and North American universities has been a channel for the introduction of theological liberalism into Roman Catholic life. The critical study of the Bible flourishes in Catholic universities. The universalism implicit in such theology, as well as in Vatican II, is evident in the attitudes of

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<sup>12</sup>An overview of this may be found in my dissertation, *The Movimento Negro in the Roman Catholic Church of Brazil*. Ph.D. dissertation, Denver University and the Iliff School of Theology, 1995. The dissertation may be viewed at [www.geocities.com/myatts3](http://www.geocities.com/myatts3).

many Roman Catholics, who figure that everyone will make it eventually if they just try to be good.<sup>13</sup>

The black liberation theology movement in the Brazilian Roman Catholic Church reflects the possibilities for syncretism at their best. Here we have the deliberate conjunction of liberal liberation theology, traditional Catholic ritual, and Afro-brazilian spiritist traditions such as Candomblé. The activists in the movement see no conflict in any of this because they have adopted the post-modern relativist attitude that the various religions equally represent legitimate paths to God. All religions are said to be cultural products and they consider it racist to suggest that only the religion of white European culture counts for anything with God.

Brazilian Roman Catholicism can be said to represent a smorgasbord of traditional, liberal and spiritist beliefs with many Catholics shifting back and forth with great ease depending upon which seems to be the most convenient at the moment. This is evident in the widespread participation in various practices by the people. This is seen in the example of the couple who had three wedding ceremonies in one day; the required civil ceremony, the Catholic mass and finally, a Candomblé wedding. It is important in Brazilian culture to cover all the bases. The syncretist tendency of Brazilians continues to be present in the widespread popularity of New Age practices and ideas as evidenced by the large volume of such literature available in Brazil today.<sup>14</sup>

These issues are further complicated by the fact that though most Brazilians identify themselves as Catholics, only a small percentage are actually *practicing* Catholics. It could be argued that since most Brazilians do not identify themselves as practicing Catholics, then the syncretism and confusion of popular Catholicism is not relevant to the ECT controversy. However, I think such a judgment is not accurate. Certainly the Brazilian hierarchy in the Church is concerned about the majority of non-practicers in the Church and speaks of the need to evangelize its own people. Yet the attitudes and beliefs of the non-practicers are basically shaped by their Catholic upbringing and their living in the context of the mixture of spiritist and folk religious traditions. This syncretism speaks volumes about the nature of Roman Catholicism itself, and this *is* very relevant to our discussion. I believe that we need to look at the question of why syncretism so readily occurred in Latin America as opposed to the lack of such syncretism in Evangelical North America.

A detailed analysis of the question of syncretism is beyond the scope of our discussion, but I would like to suggest some points that at least might help us in our evaluation of the ECT

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<sup>13</sup>The Second Vatican Council held during the 1960s adjusted Roman Catholicism for the modern age. The Church assumed a more open status, translated the mass into the languages of the people and concluded that salvation could possibly be encountered by Christians who are not Catholics. However, it should be noted that concerning the supremacy of the Catholic Church and the doctrine of salvation, the Council did not repudiate or correct *any* previous Roman Catholic teaching in this area. This appears inconsistent, but one must understand that while Rome continues to develop, it very rarely takes back anything that was taught previously. The Council of Trent's declarations concerning salvation are still considered official doctrine to be believed by all Catholics. This is quite clear in Pope John Paul II's movement of the Church in a more conservative traditional direction.

<sup>14</sup>In the typical book store in Brazil the New Age/occult section is by far the largest, indicating the widespread demand for this type of literature.

statements. Specifically I would note that Roman Catholicism itself provided a framework that made syncretism not only possible in Brazil, but practically inevitable. This is due to some serious flaws in the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation that persist to this day. These flaws are the same ones that the critics of ECT are concerned about.

The problems of the Catholic doctrine of salvation are readily observable. The first problem that is the system of intermediaries that exists between the people and God, as manifested in the Church's priestly hierarchy and the veneration of Mary and the saints. The second is the emphasis on salvation as a process that is achieved by the individual, at least in part due to his or her own effort at "meriting grace." This translates in practice into the reliance on one's own good works for attaining salvation. Let's have a look at how this works out.

The west African Yoruba religion, which formed the base of much of Afro-brazilian religion posited a hierarchy of spirits who relate to humans. The supreme God is thought to be so transcendent that he is unreachable, and indeed unconcerned about the affairs of humankind. Access to the spirit world in Afro-brazilian religion is typically controlled by the *pai de santo*<sup>15</sup>, the cult leader, and occurs by means of spirit possession. Those who channel the spirits must go through a rigorous process of initiation often taking years to complete. The bottom line is that access to the divine, just as in Roman Catholicism, is highly controlled by what amounts to a priestly hierarchy, both in the spirit world and in this world. Yet there is widespread practice of magical rituals and spells, or folk traditions, in order to bring the sacred closer to the people and allow them to achieve their goals.

Spiritism, like Catholicism, emphasizes salvation by good works, although there is no real concept of grace. The high spiritism of Kardec promotes a belief in reincarnation and the notion that achieving spiritual salvation is based on one's personal moral conduct and the performance of works of charity. African based spiritism does not have a notion of original sin and thus does not even engage in the discussion of justification. It does promote that good works is a path to spiritual advance, although this is countered by the practice of black magic by some in this tradition.

My contention here is that the parallels between spiritism and Catholicism facilitated the syncretism process. This similarity was more than just a superficial resemblance. It reveals that the way that Catholicism was (and is) understood by the masses was such that to them the differences were minimal. Specifically, the people understood that in order to reach God it is necessary to go through various mediators and that in the end one's salvation will be determined based on one's meritorious moral behavior; i.e. the performance of good works. Regardless of what we might find in official Roman Catholic declarations, it is clear that this understanding prevails in popular Catholicism. And while the Vatican has responded with attempts to combat syncretism, I am unaware of any attempts to reform the Roman Catholic doctrines of the church and salvation that would improve this situation.

My observations, as I have stated, are based on hours of personal conversation as well as evangelistic encounters with Brazilian Catholics of all sorts. These include devout practicing Catholics, nonpracticing, as well as those involved in spiritism or liberationist groups. What I have observed is that overwhelmingly, if we apply the two diagnostic questions of Evangelism

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<sup>15</sup>Literally "father of holy".

Explosion<sup>16</sup>, the answers indicate that they simply do not understand or know what the basic message of the gospel is. Keep in mind that we are talking about people who have been exposed to Roman Catholic teaching all of their lives.

Among the educated I have talked with many who have spent years in Roman Catholic schools. Yet, they do not have any assurance of salvation nor are they aware that it is possible to have such assurance. They do depend on their ability to be good along with the hope that God will not hold them to too high of a standard when it comes time for judgment. What is lacking is any comprehension of justification as an accomplished fact and that this is received by faith in the finished work of Christ. There seems to be little or no awareness of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, although there may be much devotion to Mary. Of course, there are exceptions to this that I know of, but this seems to me to be the general pattern that I have encountered personally. I have not observed that the situation is different among the uneducated majority. Indeed, it appears to be much worse, for they are even more likely be attracted to the lower forms of spiritism.

It is true that in the recent charismatic renewal in the Roman Catholic Church there is more emphasis on knowing Christ personally, and I know people in this movement who I am persuaded do have such a relationship. But is also my experience that this is still the exception rather than the rule. In particular, the charismatic renewal has been credited by participants with deepening their devotion to Mary, while leaving unchanged Roman Catholic teaching concerning purgatory, sacramentalism and gradual justification. It is my impression that the vast majority of those who are involved in the charismatic renewal still have no basic understanding of the gospel. This is not because of their failure to listen to the teaching of the Church, but in my view it is precisely because they *do* listen to the teaching of their parish priests.

The reason for this lack of assurance of salvation involves the doctrine of justification as taught by Rome. This is summarized succinctly by the *Dicionário de Teologia*, published in Brazil by the Loyola publishing house:

For Luther, on the negative side of justification, one's sins are not really canceled, but only covered or not imputed; and on the positive side, it does not include the sanctification or renovation of the inner man, but only the exterior attribution of the righteousness of Christ. On the contrary, according to Catholic doctrine, on the negative side, one's sins are truly canceled, and, on the positive side, man is supernaturally sanctified and renewed.<sup>17</sup>

The difference in the Catholic conception and Evangelical teaching is also manifested in the doctrine of the properties of the state of justification. While, according to the reformers, through trust in Christ the justified is absolutely secure in the

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<sup>16</sup>The first, If you were to die today, do you know where you would spend eternity? is designed to diagnose assurance of salvation. The second, What would you say to God if he were to ask you why should he let you into his heaven? is designed to diagnose belief in salvation by works, or some other means. (D. James Kennedy. *Evangelism Explosion*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970.)

<sup>17</sup>W. Detloff, in *Dicionário de Teologia*. vol. 3. Heinrich Fries, ed. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1987. My translation., 105

justification attained, the Tridentine formula, in accord with Scripture (cf. 1 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 2:12), teaches that no one can know that he possesses the grace of God with the certainty of faith.<sup>18</sup>

The 1994 Roman Catholic Catechism agrees:

“Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.”(quoted from the Council of Trent: DS 1528).<sup>19</sup>

*...no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.*<sup>20</sup>

Justification is seen as a process in which a person is literally made righteous in his or her being, rather than the forensic declaration that one is righteous due to the imputed righteousness of Christ. Eternal life is something to be attained or achieved by the sinner, who must merit the additional graces that are required beyond the grace of initial justification. Hence, one’s good works play a crucial, if not decisive role in the salvation process. Since the grace of justification can be lost due to certain sins, it follows that one cannot have true assurance of salvation. Indeed, such assurance is considered by many Catholics to be presumption.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, we can say that the attitude towards salvation found among the Catholic people in Latin America that leads them to the conclusion that their salvation is largely a matter of their own good works is entirely consistent with official Church teaching, regardless of how much that teaching is said to also emphasize that justification is finally based on the grace of God. Folk, or popular, Catholicism is not an anomaly in this respect, but rather it naturally grows out of the official Church doctrine.

## **ECT on salvation**

Given the background of Latin American Roman Catholicism, one is compelled to look again at the ECT documents and determine if they are useful as any kind of a guide to Catholic and Protestant relations, especially in Latin America, or if they actually serve to obscure the real

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 108

<sup>19</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1995, p. 536, § 1989. The Catechism is approved by the Pope as the official Roman Catholic teaching that all Catholics are obliged to believe.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 542 (§ 2010)

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 411 (§1472)

issues and create a sense of unity where none objectively exists. Do ECT I & II help clarify the issues between us or do they just muddy the water?

As noted above, the ECT documents assume that we share the same faith together with Roman Catholics. In the words of ECT II: “We give thanks to God that in recent years many Evangelicals and Catholics, ourselves among them, have been able to express a common faith in Christ and so to acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.”<sup>22</sup> This seems to me to beg the entire question at the outset. How can we be said to share a common faith if we disagree over the question of justification? The solution would have to be to blur the differences somehow. What do ECT I & II say about this?

Regarding justification ECT I simply states that, “ We affirm that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> This ambiguous statement was acceptable to both sides, but does not resolve the disputed question. Specifically it obscures the important distinction that separates the Reformed notion of *sola fide* (faith alone) from the Council of Trent’s teaching of justification by grace which is received through faith plus works. The wording of the ECT document simply left the issue untouched. But if being justified is an essential element of the gospel, or simply the gospel itself, then how can we maintain that Catholics and Evangelicals share a common gospel when they disagree so radically on this point? And on what basis should we cease to evangelize practicing, baptized Roman Catholics who adhere to such a view if it is really a negation of the gospel?

ECT II proposed to clarify the question by facing the issue of justification head on. It defines justification in these words:

We agree that justification is not earned by any good works or merits of our own; it is entirely God’s gift, conferred through the Father’s sheer graciousness, out of the love that he bears us in his Son, who suffered on our behalf and rose from the dead for our justification. Jesus was "put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25). In justification, God, on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so.<sup>24</sup>

This should be enough to warm the heart of any Evangelical. ECT II gives us reason for further hope by stating, “We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).” This is a remarkable statement bearing the assent of Roman Catholics, yet our optimism is soon cut short when ECT II notes continuing disagreement over the following:

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<sup>22</sup> “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The gift of salvation.” *First Things* 79 (January 1998): 20-23. See <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9801/gift.html> .

<sup>23</sup> “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian mission in the third millenium” *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 15-22. See <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9405/mission.html> .

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

the meaning of baptismal regeneration, the Eucharist, and sacramental grace; the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness; the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine; the assertion that while justification is by faith alone, the faith that receives salvation is never alone; diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences; Marian devotion and the assistance of the saints in the life of salvation; and the possibility of salvation for those who have not been evangelized.<sup>25</sup>

The problem here is that many of these issues such as the Roman Catholic teachings on, merit, purgatory and indulgences for example, are simply incompatible with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone. One might as well try to make two plus two equal to five. The two visions of salvation are contradictory. The doctrine of purgatory, for example, necessarily involves the notion that justification is a gradual process of inner renewal rather than an immediate legal declaration by God that the person with faith in Christ is justified. The Catholic holds that justification is a matter of infused righteousness which makes the person fit for heaven, but since it is rarely achieved in this life, necessitates a time in purgatory to finish the process. The Evangelical holds that justification is a matter of imputed righteousness, distinct from sanctification, that immediately sets the sinner free from the demands of the law. If the Catholic signers of ECT II think they really are, “conscientiously faithful to the teaching of the Catholic Church,” then it appears that they are more post-modern than traditional since they seem to affirm that incompatible religious propositions may all be true at the same time.

Richard John Neuhaus tries to get around this by arguing that when the council of Trent anathematized the doctrine of *sola fide* it was condemning what it thought the Reformers were saying. However, it turns out that what Trent thought they were saying is not necessarily what Reformed Christians actually affirmed, or at least not what they are affirming today. “In sum, the Catholic Church today does not condemn the formula ‘justification by faith alone’ because to do so would be understood as a condemnation of heirs of the Reformation who do not mean by that formula what was condemned by Trent.”<sup>26</sup> I found this to be rather startling. My response would simply be that a reading of Luther and Calvin seems to me to be unambiguous on this question. They carefully defined justification and the theologians of Trent were certainly astute enough to understand what was being said. And in any case, what Trent condemns is exactly what I and a host of Evangelicals affirm. It is what statements of faith such as the Baptist Faith and Message and the Declaration of Doctrine of the Brazilian Baptist Convention affirm. Without doubt what Trent condemned is what Evangelical systematic theologies texts have taught ever since the Reformation. I have a difficult time understanding how someone could conclude otherwise.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Difference*. in Colson and Neuhaus, eds. , 210.

Finally, Neuhaus wants us to believe that these questions are not important enough to be at the center of our gospel proclamation in the third millennium because they are esoteric, nitpicking that only the theologians are really aware of anyway. “But it seems exceedingly doubtful that Evangelicals reaching out to Catholics in Brazil or Peru are themselves familiar with the theological niceties of those controversies. The arguments surrounding the *sola fide* formula are the preserve of a relatively small number of professional theologians, mainly Lutheran and Calvinist, in North America and Western Europe.”<sup>27</sup> This is, in my view, a flatly false statement based on misinformation, to say the least, about the reality of Latin America. Granted that most Brazilian lay people do not know the intricate details of all the arguments, for those of us living and working in Latin America it is obvious that Neuhaus is dreadfully wrong.

Evangelicals in Brazil who have been saved out of Roman Catholicism generally understand the issues quite well, even if they are unable to articulate them in technical theological language. They understand clearly that they used to think that their salvation depended on their good works, not apart from the grace administered through the Church, but as the essential element for securing that grace. Salvation had to be earned, pure and simple. They understand that when they heard the good news of salvation as a free gift, received by faith and based on the work of Christ plus nothing else and accepted this free gift, they entered into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For the first time they experienced freedom from the bondage of man-made righteousness and had assurance of eternal life.

## Conclusion

As I conclude this discussion, it is important to point out that my remarks should not be understood as a statement about the salvation of any particular person. I am not saying that all Roman Catholics are condemned to hell. I think there will be Catholics in heaven just as there will be “Baptists” and other Protestants who are not. It is not a question of what church one belongs to, but rather does one have genuine saving faith. That is, does one trust in Christ and Christ alone, that is Christ plus nothing, Christ plus no good works, plus no rituals or ceremonies or church membership, for one’s justification. All denominations have their nominal members and hypocrites, while even in places where the gospel in its simplicity is obscured by man-made embellishments at least some people still manage to find it. But in the latter cases it will be in spite of, not because of the teachings of such a church.

Returning to the three issues raised by ECT that were highlighted in the beginning of this paper, I conclude that ECT I & II are not adequate guides for Evangelical and Catholic relations today. First, we cannot generally consider Roman Catholics to be our brothers and sisters in Christ because we have distinct witnesses to different gospels only one of which can be true. They are mutually incompatible and as such, only one of them will lead us safely to heaven. Second, the doctrine of justification is central to the gospel. *Sola fide* is, in fact, the essence of the gospel. Both the Reformers and the Council of Trent correctly saw what was at stake and the two sides remain as irreconcilable today as they were 400 years ago. Third, because of this it is imperative that Evangelicals bear witness of the true gospel to Roman Catholics and attempt to

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.

persuade them to stop depending on anything other than the finished work of Christ for salvation. Discipleship of those who respond to the gospel will involve their integration into a Bible believing Evangelical church, which entails their exit from the Roman Catholic Church. Anything less would be irresponsible.

A reading of the ECT documents in the light of Latin American Catholicism leads me to the conclusion that they are much more damaging than helpful. They do very little to advance the cause of the gospel, and indeed, they throw up road blocks to that goal by discouraging legitimate missionary activity among the lost. For among the lost we must include those faithful, baptized, practicing Catholics who believe the gospel according to Rome, which is no gospel at all, but rather a message of bondage. If I am to have any kind of a message of hope to those at the *congado* ceremony, as they look to Mary for help, and sing praises to her name, then I dare not compromise the message that the Reformers won back for us with their very lives at stake.

Other questions remain from ECT in light of the Latin American situation. One could reasonably ask whether or not the cooperation for cultural and social reform that motivated ECT in the first place is itself misguided. The history of Roman Catholicism in Latin America has much to say about what kind of culture results when Roman Catholicism is the dominant religious force in society. Given the differences between what Catholicism produced in Latin America and what the Reformation produced in North America, this is a serious question that ought to be addressed before forming alliances with the Catholic Church. We may be forced together in moments of desperation, but what happens if we win and the secularist threat is no longer upon us? What will we do then? But in the final analysis, the responsible conclusion is that in no way can we imagine that the task is finished in Latin America. People captive in the false system of salvation in the Roman Catholic Church are just as lost as those held in the grip of Islam or Hinduism. We must not imagine that the Christian veneer of Roman Catholicism brings them closer to the Savior. If anything the opposite is true. There is much for Evangelical missionaries to do in reaching the lost around the world and Latin America remains a key harvest field, where many are still in need of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ.

