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ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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THE EVANGELICAL ADVANTAGE: A NEW ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PETRINE MINISTRY



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Something quite evangelical¹ occurred in the Roman Catholic Church on May 25, 1995. The current pope,² John Paul II, released his papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* ("That They May All Be One") with its clear intention to promote the unity of all Christians.³ Its most outstanding remarks came near the end of the document in a discussion of the work of the pope and his papal office, where John Paul II openly acknowledged the profound difficulty the papacy posed for most Christians outside Roman Catholicism, "whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections."⁴ "To the extent that we are responsible for these," he stated, "I join my predecessor Paul VI in asking forgiveness."⁵

The pontiff then proceeded in unprecedented fashion to invite representatives of other churches to participate with him in a programme of reform that would transform the Petrine office. He enquired:

Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between

us persuade church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea “that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21)?⁶

Contemporary evangelicalism prides itself on a background immersed in the waters of renewal, forgiveness, and transformation. Similarly, several decades ago, Protestant Christianity witnessed a shift in outlook and ministry in Roman Catholicism not unlike that of the evangelical movement. The revolutionary Second Vatican Council (1962–65) signalled a significant turning point for Catholics in their thinking, relating, and service.⁷ George Weigel, well known for his biography of John Paul II, is reputed to have said that Vatican II was set in motion by Pope John XXIII in order to make the church more evangelical. This evangelical orientation reached a profound level in the 1995 encyclical, where renewal and reform was directed even deeper—toward the papacy.

The intention of this article is to highlight some of the perspectives on the papacy in recent (post-Vatican II) evangelical thinking.⁸ Following a brief analysis for interpreting these narratives, I will attempt to build a case for evangelical engagement with the reform programme of the papal office, in order that it reflect in a more tangible manner the evangelical agenda of Protestant Christianity.

POST-VATICAN II EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVES

The contemporary scene in evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic relations is changing, albeit at a slower pace than other Protestant traditions.⁹ We are presently in a new ecumenical dispensation on the matter of the papacy. Today Pentecostals share in an audience with the pope, fundamentalist evangelicals express their admiration for the current

pontiff, while others participate in discussions about papal primacy.

If this emerging theological landscape is anything to take seriously—which it undoubtedly is—we will observe more and more evangelicals concerning themselves with the person and work of the pope. This is nothing less than extraordinary in light of Protestant-Catholic history. To better understand these new evangelical perspectives, four stories should suffice in providing a resourceful basis for interpreting these shifts.

1. A small fundamentalist church in Texas, describing itself as an independent Bible-believing Baptist church, faithful to the King James Version of the Scriptures, lets the Christian world know just how it feels about the pope. Its website contains the following hymn written by one of its staff members and sung to the tune of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”:¹⁰

“THE BATTLE HYMN OF THE PROTESTANTS”

The Lord is soon returning all his loved ones he shall find he will rapture up the Christians and will leave the Pope behind then Rome shows her true colours and those on the earth will find that the Pope's the Anti-Christ

Chorus

*Glory, Glory, Christ is coming
Glory, Glory, Christ is coming
Glory, Glory, Christ is coming
to destroy the Anti-Christ*

The martyred saints are calling for the vengeance of their blood and are waiting for the judgment to be sent down by their God at the bloody whore's destruction how the choirs of heaven will swell when the Pope is cast in Hell

How Martin Luther will rejoice when he shall see that day and Latimer and Ridley will be cheering all the way when the

Roman Church is burning at the presence of the Lord as He wields the Spirit's sword

Blaspheme not my holy name I can hear Jesus shout as he tramples down the Vatican and throws the papa out then the word of God will triumph and will every foe surmount on Babylon's judgement day

2. Various evangelical leaders meet with John Paul II in New York City—Pat Robertson, Charles Colson, Don Argue, Bill Bright, et al. Following a brief conversation with the pope, Pat Robertson expresses in a later telephone interview with the press his sincere admiration for the pope: “He’s got great humility and spirituality; that’s what people admire about him.” In a separate report the same leader is quoted as saying: “There was a real sense of harmony. We all admire the Holy Father tremendously. We all want to build bridges with the Catholic Church.”¹¹

3 An ecumenical commission releases a convergence statement on ministry by church representatives from every major Christian denomination.¹² This agreement achieves instant popularity as a fruitful resource for overcoming the problem of ministry as a primary church-dividing issue, with obvious implications for the papal problem.

4. Members of different Protestant traditions involved in bilateral consultations with the Roman Catholic Church explore together the benefits of a universal ministry of unity. They discover a new appreciation for the ministry of communion, which is the bishop of Rome’s primary responsibility, as a precious gift to the worldwide community of Christian churches in the face of a divided and fragmented past.

The first story is a popular but serious matter. For far too many evangelicals and other Protestants, the abiding presence of the myth of the Roman Catholic Church as the “harlot of Babylon” and the pope as “the Antichrist” or “Beast” still

exists. To collaborate with Rome, therefore, is to collaborate with evil. Moreover, to question their viewpoints is regarded as unbiblical and unspiritual. And yet, this position is usually accompanied by a basketful of unspiritual values and dispositions such as bitterness, hatred, hostility, malice, slander, and so on.

These beliefs grow out of a sixteenth-century perspective of Catholicism and the papacy, which is totally ignorant of the genuine and far-reaching developments in Roman Catholic thinking in the past few centuries. Many evangelicals have no inkling of the internal and ecumenical impact of Vatican II. Some mistakenly label it a “mere cosmetic facelift.”¹³

It behooves those evangelicals who share in the thinking of this story to consider seriously the following questions. First, how much do we really know about Roman Catholicism—then and now? Second, to what extent are we elevating secondary differences between evangelicals and Catholics to the primary level?¹⁴ And third, to what extent is our Christian witness and character compromised through our attitude to and relationship with Catholics?

The second story highlights a promising direction in some evangelical Protestant circles. It reflects openness to the person and work of the pope in recent years. While most still wrestle with an array of doctrinal viewpoints in Catholicism about, *inter alia*, the pope—such as the claims to divine institution (*iure divino*), papal infallibility, apostolic succession, universal jurisdiction, and the nature of how the papal office is exercised—some are discovering in the current pope many praiseworthy traits.

Evangelicals in this camp include the world-renowned evangelist, Billy Graham, who has on numerous occasions in past decades spoken favourably of the popes.¹⁵ In 1963, in Germany, following the death of John XXIII, Graham declared: “I admired Pope John tremendously . . . I felt he brought a new era to the world.” In 1973, he recommended a biography of John XXIII, hailing it as “a classic in devotion.” In 1979, Graham recognized the visit of John Paul II to the United States as “an event of great significance not only for

Roman Catholics, but for all Americans as well as the world." He then asserted: "In the short time he has been the Pope, John Paul II has become the moral leader of the world."

Graham's papal praise continued. In 1980, he remarked: "Since his election, Pope John Paul II has emerged as the greatest religious leader of the modern world, and one of the greatest moral and spiritual leaders of this century." And later, in 1990, after meeting with the pope, Graham noted that in the pope's speeches it is particularly evident that his attitudes and decisions "are based on his great personal spiritual life. . . . He bases his work and messages and vision on biblical principles."

John Paul II's moral leadership and spiritual devotions account fundamentally for turning the tide in evangelical attitudes to the papal office. They find much congruency between the Petrine ideals of morality and spirituality and their evangelical ideals. The pope, they are learning, is an influential evangelist. Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), released on December 8, 1975, is a case in point of the growing recognition of mutual concerns.¹⁶ In the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* on October 23, 2002, the current pope's World Mission Day activities and speeches were recorded, with the headlines reading: "Go and make disciples of all nations"—another typical evangelical preoccupation. And in a recent edition of *The Pope Speaks*, two papal speeches are additionally telling in this regard—"Encounter with Christ is the Source of Mercy" and "Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium."¹⁷ The person and work of the pope is more evangelical than most evangelicals know.

The third story is perhaps reflective of the most methodological paradigm shift in the evangelical mind. In January 1982, in Lima, Peru, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches released its magnum opus—*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (BEM). Widely regarded as the most significant theological achievement of the ecumenical movement, it became the most widely distributed, translated, and discussed ecumenical text in modern times. Its section on ministry is particularly applicable to the present discussion,

notwithstanding the unfortunate omission of the ministry of the bishop of Rome, for it rightly talked about ministry as a major church-dividing issue in church relations vis-à-vis its nature and form.

In this way, then, the problem of the Petrine office was repositioned as an ecumenical problem of ministry among the churches, rather than being a foreign piece of Catholic ecclesiastical baggage. I would contend that an underlying factor in the past deadlock in Catholic-Protestant discourse on the papacy rests with wrong starting points. Evangelicals traditionally start out with the problematic claims of infallibility or jurisdiction or divine institution, which inevitably achieve little or no progress in understanding and relations. However, with BEM's methodological framework of ministry, the papal office should be assessed as a ministry, albeit a different form of ministry against the backdrop of evangelical forms of ministry. This would provide a more helpful and constructive basis from which to tackle an old problem in a new light.

Many evangelicals have become increasingly cognizant of the nature of the pope's work as a Petrine ministry, which has phenomenally enhanced their understanding of and relations with Roman Catholicism. In this new awareness they have sought to juxtapose the evangelical agenda in ministry (i.e., that which is most dear to evangelicals) with the ethos and agenda of the Petrine ministry. Since what ultimately unites evangelicals in all their variety with one another relates to their commitment to preserve, protect, and promote the gospel of Christ, it is this very gospel factor that may potentially close much of the gap between evangelicals and the pope. To the extent that the Petrine ministry is readily recognized by evangelicals as a ministry of the gospel and mission, evangelicals are nearer the mark of embracing the papal office as a legitimate structure of the churches.

It is both intriguing and revealing that, in recent years, the Petrine office is increasingly discussed and envisioned as a ministry or service rather than an institution or office. This is no trivial development in ecumenism, as it almost instantly

alters the nature of the papacy from a juridical or political image to one of pastoral care and service. The papacy as an institution usually conjures up the wrong images for evangelicals. This terminological alteration goes a long way in presenting the Petrine service as a ministry of the gospel and mission that provides a benefit and service for the broader community of churches.

In Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, for instance, the ministry of Peter along with the other apostles is identified as an assembly that Christ sent out to preach the kingdom of God.¹⁸ They are sent to Israel and to all peoples with Christ's power to make all peoples his disciples and sanctify and govern them to the point of spreading, administering, and shepherding the church. "For that very reason," the text states, "the apostles were careful to appoint successors in this hierarchically constituted society."¹⁹ Furthermore, the ministry of the bishops, of which the bishop of Rome is a part, is detailed as follows:

The task of announcing the Gospel in the whole world belongs to the body of pastors . . . [and they] are obliged to enter into collaboration with one another and with Peter's successor, to whom, in a special way, the noble task of propagating the Christian name was entrusted. Thus, they should come to the aid of the missions by every means in their power, supplying both harvest workers and also spiritual and material aids, either directly and personally themselves, or by arousing the fervent cooperation of the faithful. Lastly, in accordance with the venerable example of former times, bishops should gladly extend their fraternal assistance, in the fellowship of an all-pervading charity, to other Churches, especially to neighbouring ones and to those most in need of help.²⁰

The intimate relation between the ministry of the gospel and mission and the ministry of the pope and the college of bishops is underlined throughout the text. The 1995 encyclical also confirmed this connection at several points. For instance, in the section on the ministry of the bishop of Rome, the pope drew attention to the mission of Peter in the

gospel of Matthew as a pastoral mission, in the gospel of John as a shepherding ministry, and in the gospel of Luke as a mission to strengthen his brethren.²¹ The pope also emphasized the responsibility he has for safeguarding the unity and integrity of the church. In this way he rightly communicated the need to go beyond merely gathering people into a new communion, but also taking responsibility for their nurture and well-being. He stated:

The mission of the bishop of Rome within the college of all the pastors consists precisely in "keeping watch" (*episkopein*), like a sentinel, so that through the efforts of the pastors the true voice of Christ the shepherd may be heard in all the particular churches.²²

What should be increasingly clear to evangelicals as they study the Vatican II documents and *Ut Unum Sint* is the missiological nature and orientation of the Petrine ministry. It is a legitimate ministry of the church that seeks sincerely and effectively to proclaim the gospel of Christ and to shepherd the flock of Christ who respond to the gospel. And it is from this perspective that Protestants could at a later stage consider the issues of infallibility and so forth.

In this way, therefore, there is juxtaposition in the evangelical and Petrine ministries. Can evangelical Protestants not conceivably accept the pope as a fellow minister and the Petrine office as a fellow agency of ministry? I would like to think so, though not without modifications in the way the Petrine office is presently exercised. The pope's remarks are therefore quite appropriate when he declares in his encyclical:

As bishop of Rome I am fully aware, as I have reaffirmed in the present encyclical letter, that Christ ardently desires the full and visible communion of all those communities in which, by virtue of God's faithfulness, his Spirit dwells. I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian communities and in heeding the request made of

me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.²³

The last story picks up on the understanding of the Petrine ministry as a propitious gift to the wider community of churches. It should be clearer to evangelicals that the pope can realistically be appreciated as a gift to the evangelical community vis-à-vis his role as a moral leader, spiritual role model and guide, pastoral shepherd, authoritative world voice, guardian of communion, and so on. But while these are self-evident, the other side of the papal coin relates to the necessary modifications in how the papal ministry is exercised. Evangelicals are ever aware that renewal and reform are always part and parcel of the Christian ministry; that is a particular evangelical distinctive.

Applied to the papal question, evangelicals must assume a primary responsibility in engaging with the Vatican on how best to renew and reform the papacy as it presently exists in order that it be seen more visibly as an authentic ministry. In this area evangelical silence still exists, except for a few prominent leaders and theologians who do engage in direct response to the 1995 invitation. But if the subject of the papacy continues to feature prominently in ecclesial, ecumenical, and global affairs, evangelicals have much to offer the discussion around the papacy. For example, they are at a distinct advantage to speak to Catholics about collegiality, openness to change, flexibility, the personal dimension of faith, opportunities for men and women in ministry, and so on.

CONCLUSION

If evangelicalism as a transdenominational, ecumenical, renewal movement is committed to the ideals of the gospel and mission in the world, can it afford to turn a blind eye to a person and role recognized globally as the most significant individual voice on the church and its gospel and mission? Evangelicals now find themselves at a new crossroads—to

perpetuate longstanding divisions and fragmentations in the church that discredits the ministry of Christ, or to venture into new territory for the sake of Christ and his gospel so that the world may know him.

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NOTES

1. In this article I will depend on Gabriel Fackre's typology of evangelical Christianity in all its diversity. In his book *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective*, Fackre highlights the different nuances in contemporary evangelicalism by noting six varieties. First, "fundamentalists" are those who adhere to ultra-inerrancy of the written Word as the criterion of faithfulness and who exude a polemical and separatist mentality in faith and life, with the Jerry Falwell type as the classic model. Second, "old evangelicals" are those who stress personal conversion and mass evangelism, with Billy Graham as its classic model. Third, "new evangelicals" are those who since the 1950s stress the social import of faith and criticize fundamentalist sectarianism, with the periodical *Christianity Today* as its classic expression. Fourth, "justice and peace evangelicals" are those activist evangelicals who advocate a political agenda at variance with the Religious Right, with Ronald Sider and the journal *Sojourners* espousing its typical tradition and political agenda. Fifth, "charismatic evangelicals" are those who advocate the expression of the new birth in second blessings—glossolalia, healing, celebrative worship, and intense group experience. Sixth are the "ecumenical evangelicals," those who tend toward relationships with the larger Christian community, with Charles Colson or Richard Mouw as exemplary fig-

- ures. These tendencies notwithstanding, evangelicals are united by their distinctive loyalty to Scripture and mission, conversion and transformation, and so on.
2. This article was originally written in 2002 (see comments in author information above), hence the references herein to John Paul II as the "current" pope.
 3. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint. That they may be one: On commitment to Ecumenism* (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1995), §1.
 4. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, §88.
 5. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, §88.
 6. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, §96.
 7. Among the many resourceful books on Vatican II is Xavier Rynne's *Vatican Council II* (New York: Orbis, 1968, renewed 1996).
 8. Returning to Fackre's typology, what it communicates, inter alia, is the splintered and diversified nature of contemporary evangelicalism. While there are evangelical churches such as some Baptist churches, evangelicalism is essentially a transdenominational movement in Protestant Christianity. This presents an added problem in ecumenical discussion around the matter of the papal office, as evangelicals are so spread out in different denominations and thus lack a distinct ecclesial polity as a loose transdenominational coalition of churches, groups, and ministries. They lack a formal structure uniting all who share their faith tradition and have no institutional voice that speaks on behalf of all—hence, the inevitable problem posed in ecumenical quarters in seeking to discern a common evangelical attitude or viewpoint vis-à-vis Catholicism or the Petrine office. The argument in this article, therefore, appeals to the unifying factor of the gospel and mission that underlies the evangelical tradition, notwithstanding their respective ecclesial differences.
 9. Various Protestant churches have engaged in ecumenical conversations with Roman Catholicism from as early as the 1950s. Most visible in their participation are the Lutherans and Anglicans, followed by the Methodist and Reformed traditions. These consultations owe their origin primarily to the influence of Vatican II. Evangelicals, on the other hand, have generally maintained a silence when it comes to the Vatican. In the past decade, however, they have started to join the discussions. A most notable evidence of this renewed interest is the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together Project" (ECT). See Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus (eds.), *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995). Their most recent work is *Your Word is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), which explores anew the relationship between Scripture and tradition.
 10. See Todd Barker, "The Battle Hymn of the Protestants" at www.biblebelievers.com/Stocker2.html (last accessed 03/10/2003).

11. See David W. Cloud, "Charismatic and Evangelical Leaders Meet with the Pope," www.ncinter.net/~nejt/wc13.htm (accessed 03/10/2003).
12. See the "Ministry" section of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1983).
13. A "Letter to the Editor" in response to an article I wrote that, inter alia, highlighted the impact of the Second Vatican Council on modern Roman Catholicism, argued that Vatican II was not worth the fuss contemporary ecumenists make over it, asserting that it was no more than a "mere cosmetic facelift." Cf. Clint Le Bruyns, "A Pentecostal and the Pope," in *Today Magazine* (February 2001), 60–62.
14. By "primary beliefs" I mean those non-negotiable doctrines of Christian faith—such as the existence of God, Jesus Christ as Savior, etc. By "secondary beliefs" I mean those negotiable doctrines—such as the mode of baptism, eschatological timetable viewpoints, etc.
15. See Walid, "Billy Graham love affair with the Pope," www.bycovenant.com/billy_graham_love_affair_with_pope.html (accessed 03/10/2003).
16. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi. On Evangelisation in the Modern World* (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1976).
17. See *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 48, no. 1 (January/February 2003), 52–54 and 5–39.
18. See *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), November 21, 1964, in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello, 1996), 369ff.
19. Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 371.
20. Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 377.
21. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, §91.
22. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, §941.
23. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, §95.