Why They Head for Rome

By Dr James Grier

The reasons why notable evangelicals have been drawn into Catholic error



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Dr Grier (1932-2013) was for 16 years Dean of Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, and a very popular preacher at the Tabernacle's School of Theology. This article is derived from lectures given by Dr Grier at the 1997 Metropolitan Tabernacle School of Theology.

By whatever name we call it—evangelicalism, fundamentalism, reformed Christianity—a crossroads has been reached, and many adherents have gone down the wrong turning. It is a theological crossroads, and we are in a theological crisis. It is a crisis over the identity of the Gospel.

The Christian world in America has embraced a discredited form of modernity, and by embracing this she has purchased for herself all the methods of church growth that have set aside the primacy of Scripture, along with the technology that brings sensations into worship, while discarding the Word of God as the central focus of God's engagement with his people.

In the midst of all of this, there has come about an horrific disenchantment with historic elements of evangelicalism. I use the word 'evangelicalism' because it is the word that is employed to describe "Bible believers" in the document we shall examine in this article.

The Catholic drift

This document is entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: the Third Millennium and its Mission* (1994). This has caused an enormous stir, but behind it lies a steady movement to leave evangelical circles and join the Roman Catholic Church.

Something like this happened about 150 years ago. It was called the 'Oxford Movement', when the outstanding convert to Rome was John Henry Newman.

What is happening today, however, is somewhat different. None of the converts are as popular or well-known as John Henry Newman, but there is nevertheless a steady stream of known evangelicals who are abandoning their churches and joining the Catholic Church, and also the Greek Orthodox Church. Probably the best-known name among the leaders of this exodus is Frankie Schaeffer, the son of Francis Schaeffer. He joined the Greek Orthodox Church, and travelled all over America telling publicly why he left the Presbyterians. He also claimed that if his father were alive, he too would leave the Presbyterians and join the Greek Orthodox Church.

I would like to tell you about several examples of fairly recent converts to Rome to give a clearer impression of the climate of thought behind the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* document.

One such convert is Scott Hahn. Educated at Gordon Conwell Seminary in Boston, Scott Hahn served as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church of America. The Presbyterian Church of America is a firmly evangelical body, joining together many who walk in the paths of the old Reformed Presbyterians.

Scott Hahn wrote a book called, *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism*. His conversion to Rome had its roots in an experience that occurred one day when he was teaching in his church. A young person raised a question about conception control, which he could not answer. He went, therefore, to the evangelical literature and failed to find much written on the topic. Indeed, he found that the only writers who had addressed it were Catholics, who firmly opposed all forms of conception control, and who provided apparently biblical and traditional arguments to support their view.

He was concerned that he, as an evangelical, could not answer the questions that were being asked of him.

At another time a person put this question to him: "Where does the Bible teach *sola scriptura*?" He began to think about this, and though armed with a master's degree from Gordon Seminary he could not think of a place in the Bible that taught *sola scriptura*. (I would certainly hope that there is not any student, either at my seminary or at the LRBS, who would not know where to turn to substantiate the biblical doctrine of *sola scriptura*.)

Scott Hahn became very upset that there was no basis by which he could verify the canon of Scripture, and eventually with his wife joined the Roman Catholic Church, becoming a spokesman for this migration to Rome.

I have no way of knowing exactly how many people have taken this road. I do have friends who are very well-known in the evangelical community who contemplate doing the same. One of these is president of a noted evangelical college in our country. He has said

privately that as soon as he leaves the presidential office, he will convert to the Roman Catholic Church.

The end product of Scott Hahn's thinking was that the Reformation was a mistake. That is what he concluded, and that is what a surprising number of others are beginning to conclude today.

Another example of such a convert is Richard John Neuhaus, an evangelical Lutheran. He worked closely with Chuck Colson in developing the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* statement.

The person, however, who has written the most is Thomas Howard, the well-known author of *Evangelical is Not Enough*. He is the brother of Elizabeth Elliot, whose husband was martyred in South America by the Auca Indians. Thomas Howard left his evangelical roots to join the Episcopal Church. Becoming dissatisfied with that, he has now converted to the Catholic Church, and his writings have a great influence today.

A parody

I must emphasise that those who have migrated to Rome were formerly clear on their loyalty to evangelical doctrine. Another evangelical pastor who has turned to the Catholic Church provides the following parody of Paul's words in Philippians to describe his orthodox background: "I, too, was circumcised by the new birth on the eighth day, of the people of Protestantism, of the tribe of evangelicalism, a Calvinist of Calvinists. In regard to the law, a theonomist. As for zeal, persecuting the Roman Church. As to reconstructionist righteousness and Van Tilian virtue, flawless!" He is saying that evangelicalism is very much like the Pharisaism of New Testament times.

I believe that the primary causes behind these conversions to Rome, and behind the whole *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* movement, are the following. First, there has been a lack of a sense of the holiness and awesomeness of God, and of his eternal purpose, in the evangelical community; a loss of transcendence.

In other words, in the past, God was supreme, and his people were his obedient worshippers.

A man-centred view

But everything has become so man-centred. Man's experience has dominated modern church growth material, and the conduct of worship. The result is that people become disillusioned, because they lack any sense of a transcendent God in their worship (as well as any sense of history).

I was born and raised in a pastor's home in New York City. My father was from Prestwick in Scotland, and my mother from Ayr. As a boy I had never been in a Catholic church. In order to play basketball in the Catholic league, I had to go at least once to their church. I went and I was shocked. That place was so beautiful! The stained glass and the lofty ethos was new to me. I have visited subsequently many cathedrals, and through this have seen that at the human, architectural level at least, there is some recognition of the magnitude of God.

In historic Protestantism, this has been better expressed through the style of worship and evangelism—but no longer.

This change to man-centredness, I suggest, is a major reason for the embracing of Catholicism by evangelicals.

A second reason is the strong influence of an outlook whereby many evangelicals seem to think that Christianity began with their conversion. Much of modern evangelicalism is non-historical in its orientation. It has become so influenced by the needs of the individual, and by popular culture, that it no longer has any roots. It operates as though it has no basis in historical events, and possesses no historical documents.

Numerous evangelicals view themselves as being extremely contemporary. They are 'up to date'. From the time they were 'born again' they are nourished in this individualistic, pietistic outlook, in which everything revolves round the individual.

I believe this has been a powerful factor behind the quest of many to find something very affirming in the solid history of Rome, and in her credal affirmations.

* * *

The two primary theological matters that are at issue when evangelicals defect to Rome are *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* (faith alone). As far as Roman Catholics are concerned, the Bible has been developed by Protestants into a complex set of terms such as 'inerrancy' and 'verbal inspiration'. They say we have imposed various hermeneutical systems to arrive at our position. Thomas Howard says it is a lot easier simply to accept the Magisterium of Rome, which amounts to an infallible, interpreting office to give meaning to the Bible.

Most evangelicals who convert to Rome still use the word 'evangelical' to describe themselves. One put it this way. "I am first a Christian. I am an evangelical Catholic Christian." And he claims that he can make that assertion without any contradiction in terms, or logic. But can you be an evangelical and a Catholic? What does the word 'evangelical' mean?

According to the people who go over to Rome, they do not have to abandon their evangelical background when they make this move. All they have to do is add some new things that they did not get from their evangelical background. They can be evangelicals and

also Roman Catholics because to them ‘evangelical’ only describes a person who claims to have been born again.

There are approximately one billion Roman Catholics in the world. I am told that five hundred million of them claim to have experienced the new birth, and would therefore identify themselves as evangelical Catholics. This is one of the primary difficulties when assessing the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* movement.

A vital missing word

I would like to address *sola fide*, and I quote from the front of the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* where it says: “We affirm together we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.” This was endorsed by both evangelicals and Catholics.

However, there is one word missing that is essential, and that is the word “only”. The Truth is *sola fide* or faith alone. To my utter amazement, JI Packer, in an article written for *Christianity Today* under the title ‘Why I signed the ECT Statement’, said:

“We need to put *sola fide* in small print because it is no longer one of the large-print issues that ought to divide us, nor should it divide us in common mission.”

When this can be said by such an influential evangelical, it is clear that the foundations are crumbling, and the light of the Reformation is surely dimming. *Sola fide* should always be put in large print, for the word *sola* marks the difference between the Catholic view of justification by faith and the view of the apostle Paul (and of Luther and of Calvin).

Calvin said that the doctrine of justification is the principal ground on which religion must be supported. If you misunderstand this doctrine, there will be no foundation. In other words, no doctrine stands by itself. Every doctrine is connected to every other doctrine.

We have had a great tendency, especially in American evangelicalism, to see doctrine as little pieces of isolated truth. But *sola fide* is the overriding principle of the Reformation, as the Reformers argued.

You cannot isolate the doctrine of salvation from any other aspect of biblical teaching. The Church stands or falls on justification. Is *sola fide* an essential element of the Gospel? Yes. If you deny *sola fide*, do you deny the Gospel? Yes.

Let us look again at the statement in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. “We affirm together we are justified by grace through faith.” The words, “through faith”, are the issue. “Through” indicates that faith is the instrument or means whereby we are justified. For Paul—and for the Reformers—faith was not only the

sole instrument for justification, but also the *all-sufficient* instrument.

In other words, it was not faith plus something else, it was faith and faith alone that was the sufficient instrument and condition for justification.

Now in the Roman Catholic Church (and this is since Vatican II, as well as before) the instrument for justification is twofold. (Interestingly enough, when they talk about this twofold instrument they never talk about faith, even though they signed this document affirming that justification is through faith.)

For Catholics, justification comes *first* by the sacrament of baptism. It is in baptism (they say) that the Holy Spirit regenerates a person, and the initial aspect of justification comes. However, because the sacrament of baptism only *initiates* a person into spiritual life, that spiritual life and justification can be lost.

Penance

To counter this risk, the Catholic Church has a *second* instrument of justification, and that is the sacrament of penance. This is the means by which the justification initiated in the sacrament of baptism is maintained. If one commits mortal sin, it is penance that allows one to revive, and brings grace back into one's life.

So to sign a document that says "through faith" without adding —"alone"—is not a matter of small print. It is to compromise the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those evangelicals who signed that document *did* give away the faith. I believe they not only compromised it, but *abandoned* it.

Is faith the sole and sufficient condition of justification? Yes. Without faith there is no justification. Faith is both essential and sufficient.

I have spent a great portion of my life in pastoral ministry. It was in the pastorate that I became a Calvinist. I did not (at first) go to a Calvinistic seminary. At seminary I did not have much time to reflect upon, or to evaluate by exegesis, what I was being taught. I was married and had a child. I worked a night shift in a factory and went to seminary full time during the day.

When I began my first pastorate and stood before the people of God to exegete and teach Scripture, I found that much of what I had been taught did not fit what Scripture said.

One of the things that occurred in my second pastorate was that the Lord brought an amazing number of conversions. And in the midst of this blessing I found myself often in the waters of baptism baptising people, and then offering them the right hand of fellowship at the Lord's Table.

As a consequence of this, I would often talk with people who doubted their salvation. In my naivety I would take them to the texts of 1 John. “Do you believe?” I would ask. “Yes,” they would reply. “Well then, if you believe these propositions, you are saved.”

How foolish I was! I did not have the sense of Spurgeon to say, “If you are still serious on Wednesday come back and talk to me.” I dread telling you this, but I took people through the waters of baptism when there was no real evidence that they were converted. Soon they were no longer with us. I learned slowly that faith is more than just assenting to a set of propositions.

Faith was defined by Luther as consisting of three well-known ingredients—*notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assurance), and *fiducia* (trust). All three of these are the work of the Holy Spirit. No person will ever come to the knowledge of Christ from the text of Scripture while his eyes are blind. The only way a person can come to know (an essential ingredient of faith) is by the scales being removed from his eyes by the Spirit of God.

But saving knowledge is not just a matter of knowing, in the sense of saying, “I accept these propositions.” A second ingredient (*assensus*) means that there must be conviction. There must be a real persuasion that these propositions are true.

This brings us to the third ingredient of true faith which is *fiducia*. Or we may define it as the placing of my allegiance and loyalty in the person who is disclosed in the Gospel, that is, the person of our Saviour Jesus Christ. This means that whatever the driving force of my life was, it is now abandoned, and replaced by the pearl of great price. It is replaced by the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Above all else my allegiance and loyalty must be to the kingdom, or to the rule of Jesus Christ.

Knowledge, assurance (or certainty) and allegiance are not three separate steps; please understand that. We do not move from one to the other. This threefold definition is simply a way of defining what constitutes faith.

If faith is to be defined as knowledge, persuasion, and allegiance to Jesus Christ, it is clear that *sola* is a vital part of it. This faith must be in Christ *and Christ alone*. Faith cannot be redefined as an act or sacrament. It is something arising from the whole of our being—knowledge, persuasion and allegiance (to the personal work of Christ) and nothing else.

Imputed only?

Another pivotal issue we must consider is the distinction between *imputed* righteousness and *infused* righteousness. Is justification a legal act, whereby God declares a person just? Catholics will affirm that it is, but the enormous difference between them and the Reformers springs into view when you ask, “Does justification *impute* righteousness to us, or does it *infuse* it?”

Rome says that the declaration of justification comes *after* people have been made just by regeneration and infusion. They do not say that there is no declaration of righteousness. The point is that they say the declaration of righteousness comes at the *end* of the process, not the *beginning*.

For Rome, baptism (regeneration) followed by penance *infuses* righteousness. Then, this must augment itself by good works and

the right use of the sacraments. Then, at the end of life, the declaration that the person is 'just' can be made.

(There is no guarantee this declaration will be made, because it is never certain that the person has done enough to qualify. After the person's death, his children and family may add merit to his account through having masses said, and doing acts that will secure his release from purgatory in readiness for justification.)

The issue, therefore, is this: Is righteousness infused and then built upon, or is it imputed? The authors of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* are guilty of almost criminal deception to say that both parties can affirm the doctrine of justification, when the distinction between their understanding of this doctrine constitutes two entirely different systems of religion.

For the Reformation, the imputation of Christ's righteousness is the basis whereby we are declared just, and counted to be reconciled to God.

(If readers would like a good treatment of this issue, especially on the views of the Roman Catholic Church, the book by James McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome*, is excellent. It is based on the newest Catholic catechism, and is meaningful to all, including those with no background in Roman Catholicism.)

Righteousness has two basic elements. Since the Fall, we are in sin; we are unable to know and respond to God. Our sin necessitates penal judgement, or the wrath of God against it. One aspect, therefore, which is essential for our justification is *acquittal from guilt*.

This, however, is not enough, because even if acquitted, we are still not righteous. However, Jesus Christ rendered a perfect obedience for us, so that his righteousness could be put on our account. We thank God that righteousness is *substitutionary*.

These two aspects of righteousness—acquittal and imputation—are what we call justification by faith.

Without both aspects being satisfied, there is no Gospel. If we deny either, we no longer have the Gospel. Therefore, to affirm *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* is to deny the Gospel.

Rome considers imputation to be a legal fiction. What is at stake here, as I have sought to explain, is the Gospel. Our sins are imputed to Christ. He takes the penal wrath of God. His righteousness is imputed to us. It is absolutely essential to say that faith is the only instrument whereby justification is achieved.

In Galatians 1:6 we read: "I marvel that you are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel."

If I put that into contemporary terms, this is happening quickly today. Such an abandonment of vital truth does not always take place incrementally over long periods of time. It can occur rapidly, as it is happening today. To JI Packer we must say—"I marvel that you have been so soon removed."

In Galatians 1, Paul goes on to say that there is no other Gospel, but there are those who give trouble by perverting the Gospel of Christ. He then declares—

"But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed."

A warning not enough

Paul does not say, “Let him be warned; let him be regaled with adjectives.” He says, “Let him be accursed,” and he repeats the command, saying—

“As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.”

The psalmist asked the question in Psalm 11:3: “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

I say to you with sorrow that the foundations are crumbling, and people who once appeared to stand with us have become our opponents. It is time to stand with Truth, and not to identify with statements which claim to represent us, but which leave out essentials. May we remain firm in the Gospel that Jesus Christ delivered to Paul, and we in turn have received from him.

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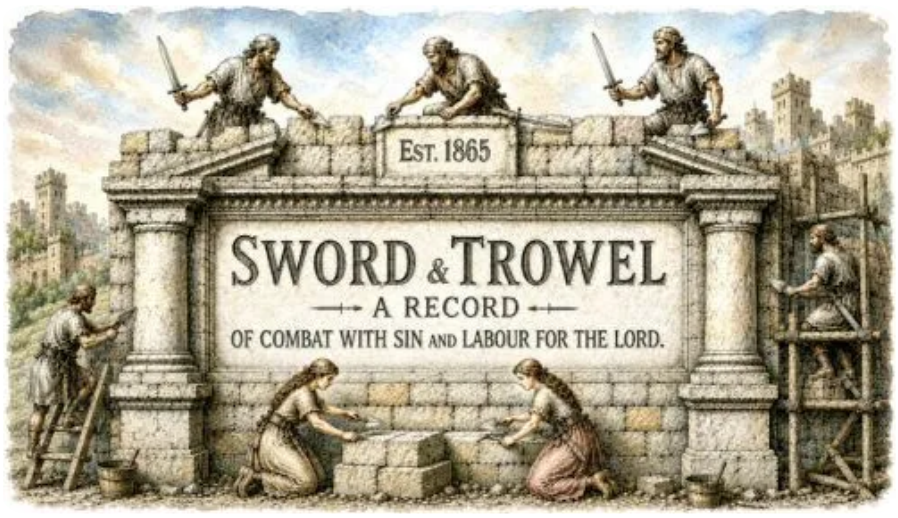
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