

Editorial: A Unity Based on Truth

Thomas R. Schreiner

Thomas R. Schreiner is a professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has also taught New Testament at Azusa Pacific University and Bethel Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Romans* in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament and co-author of *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*. His most recent book is *Paul, the Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*. In addition, he is serving as the preaching pastor of Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

I grew up in a Roman Catholic home and attended parochial schools for nine years. When I was young, I attended church regularly. I was baptized in infancy as a Roman Catholic, received my first communion at six years of age, and was confirmed at the age of twelve. During those years I was convinced that Protestants were wrong, though I never gave Protestantism much thought. I do think that one can be a genuine believer in Christ as a Roman Catholic, but I was not in that company. In my teenage years I slowly drifted from the church, for religion meant very little to my everyday life. Almost all of my Catholic friends had the same experience. When I was seventeen years of age, I was converted through the influence of the person who later became my wife. She gave me a Bible to read. As I read it, I realized that we are justified by faith alone and not by our works. This teaching of the Apostle Paul was wonderfully liberating and refreshing. I understood that Mary was not a mediator between God and man, but our one and only mediator was Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5). It dawned upon me when reading Hebrews that the only priest I needed was Jesus Christ, the great high priest whose blood was shed so that I could enter into God's presence with confidence. The theology of the mass contradicted the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. Nowhere did the scriptures teach that a pope should rule the church.

I had these experiences some thirty years ago. Since then I have met genuine Roman Catholic believers, especially charismatic Catholics. I have also met some

evangelical converts from Roman Catholicism who had very negative experiences with Catholicism in their early years. Such converts have occasionally responded with words about Roman Catholicism that are overly harsh and vituperative. For myself, I do not look back on my years as a Roman Catholic as years of repression. I grew up in a wonderful home and have many fond memories of my early years. I am thankful that I learned from Roman Catholics that God is a holy God. He is to be revered and feared as the holy one. Some Protestants seem to think of God as their buddy. By God's grace I learned a different view of God, a more biblical one, as a Roman Catholic. I am also grateful for the biblical teachings that I learned in my early days as a Roman Catholic. I believed in the Trinity, the deity of Christ, Christ's resurrection, and the inspiration of the scriptures. I believed that all of us were born in Adam as sinners, and that heaven and hell were real.

The issue in the current journal in which we examine the relationship between Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism is not merely academic, for many evangelicals have Roman Catholic roots. In recent years evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics have joined hands in contemporary culture wars, repudiating the secularism of our age and contending for moral values in the public square. More controversial have been theological discussions and statements jointly prepared by evangelicals and Catholics. The articles in this journal seek to give our readers an overview of some of the important issues and implications

involved in the recent evangelical and Catholic dialogue. For readers unfamiliar with the topic, the articles will serve as an introduction and orientation to the debate. Don Sweeting sets the historical landscape for us admirably. Both Ben Mitchell and Kevin Offner note that progress has been made in the various discussions and encourage us to seek unity, where possible, with Roman Catholics.

The call to unity is salutary, for we all need to heed Christ's call for unity that resounds throughout John 17. Nor should we surrender hope, for we believe that God can work in new ways and break down old walls. Still, R. Albert Mohler, Jr. reminds us that unity must be based on the truth of the gospel. And Russell Moore rightly observes that contemporary Roman Catholics believe that final unity means submission to the pontiff in Rome. Unity at the expense of truth, particularly unity that compromises the gospel, is not true unity. The essay by Mark Seifrid on justification by faith and judgment according to works reminds us that justification *sola fide* is the touchstone of the gospel.

We must not compromise on *sola scriptura*, or *sola fide*, or *sola gratia*. Though God can do all things, it is hard to imagine how we can be united with Roman Catholics: They would have to surrender their teaching on Mary, on the sacraments, on the primacy of the Pope, on the role of tradition, and revise their official teaching on justification. It is clear that the official Roman Catholic teaching on all these matters is not taught in the scriptures. Perhaps I lack even a mustard seed of faith regarding the prospect for unity. It is difficult to conceive of Roman Catholics changing their teaching on such central matters, especially since tradition is venerated by Roman Catholics.

On the other hand, we as Protestants must be vigilant to stay true to the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) in the scriptures. I fear that Protestants longing for unity may compromise theologically. Anyone who attended the Evangelical Theological Society Meeting in Colorado Springs this fall had to be astonished at the theological vacuity that now exists among evangelicals. Too many cannot see what would have been obvious to all evangelicals even fifty years ago, viz., that open theism is heretical. Given such a state of affairs, will the center hold, or will evangelicals try to find some security and stability by compromising with Roman Catholics? May the Lord grant us his grace so that we do not ever abandon the beauty and simplicity of the gospel. May we seek unity, but never at the expense of truth.