

Standing Together, Standing Apart: Cultural Co-Belligerence Without Theological Compromise¹

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An ominous sense of urgency surrounds any gathering of those who claim the name of Christ and would dare to speak of eternal things. Darkening shadows and a sense of cultural decline are now settled on the Western Christian conscience with a heaviness of spirit and a tragic sense of loss.

We must not claim that Christianity is the property of Western civilization, but we do acknowledge that Western civilization, such as it is or was, is the product of Christianity and of Christians. Darkness has always loomed in the background, if not in the forefront of Western culture. The critical turning points in Western history were moments when darkness was defeated or dispatched, often just in the nick of time.

Augustine died in 430 as the Vandals were sacking his beloved Hippo. The earthly city would fall, he had warned, but the City of God would remain and stand eternally. Keeping the two cities distinct and clear in the Christian mind has never been easy, but Augustine knew that this distinction is crucial to Christian clear-headedness, and the distinction is irreducibly theological:

One of them, the earthly city, has created for herself such false Gods as she wanted, from any source she chose—even creating them out of men—in order to worship them with sacrifices. The other city, the Heavenly City on pilgrimage in this world, does not create false gods.

She herself is the creation of the true God, and she herself is to be his true sacrifice. Nevertheless, both cities alike enjoy the good things, or are afflicted with the adversities of this temporal state, but with a different faith, a different expectation, a different love, until they are separated by a final judgment, and each received her own end, of which there is no end.²

Western civilization now faces a new invasion of the Vandals, and Christians are again confused about the meaning of our current struggle. Theological vandals seek to undermine the Church; political vandals have debased our civic discourse; legal vandals have turned the law into a playground of invented rights; moral vandals entice with a promise of polymorphous perversity; psychological vandals have made every self a victim; and the academic vandals have transformed the university into a circus of irrationality.

We are in danger of forgetting and thus forfeiting the very foundations of our civilization—perhaps even of civilization itself. As T. S. Eliot expressed through the voice of Thomas Beckett,

You shall forget these things, toiling
in the household,
You shall remember them, droning
by the fire,
When age and forgetfulness sweeten
memory
Only like a dream that has often
been told
And often been changed in the telling.
They will seem unreal.

Human kind cannot bear very much reality.³

Eliot's Beckett is profoundly right; human kind cannot bear much reality. Christians are, on the other hand, those who claim to be stewards of ultimate reality—a reality more real than anything the earthly city claims as reality. We have no choice but to be the glad bearers and stewards of reality in the midst of a world gone mad. And, as G. K. Chesterton warned almost a century ago, "the most characteristic current philosophies have not only a touch of mania, but a touch of suicidal mania."⁴

This suicidal mania is evident in what Pope John Paul II has identified as the "Culture of Death" and a "conspiracy against life." In his words, "This culture is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency."⁵ Further, "This conspiracy involves not only individuals in their personal, family or group relationships, but goes far beyond, to the point of damaging and distorting, at the international level, relations between peoples and states."⁶

The Culture of Death has come hand in hand with the Death of Culture. Debris and ruins surround us as we survey the cultural landscape. Art has been debased, and what is celebrated in the salons is a self-conscious revolt against reason and objective standards. Literature has been thoroughly deconstructed, and the academy is reduced to what Lionel Trilling once called the "bloody crossroads" where politics and literature meet.

Hollywood and the electronic media bombard us with noxious programming labeled as "entertainment." Given the coarseness of our popular culture, we owe

the barbarians of old an apology. Some analysts advise that explicit pornography may be the seventh largest industry in America. Whatever its rank, the line between pornography and mainstream entertainment is so indistinct that it is nearly meaningless.

William Bennett recently quipped that America has become "the kind of nation civilized nations sent missionaries to." Indeed, missionaries are coming, and not all are Christian missionaries. This strange historical moment presents the Christian conscience with an unavoidable challenge.

Great Tradition Christians: A New Ecumenism?

In light of this challenge, one of the most interesting and promising developments has been a realignment of what have been traditionally identified as the three main traditions or movements within organized Christianity, the (Eastern) Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and evangelicals. Proponents and architects of this realignment celebrate the fact that believers from these communions are working in closer relation, and often in active solidarity, with each other—a development that would have been unthinkable just a few decades ago.

Observers explain that this realignment is the product of two related developments or trends. The first is the displacement of all serious believers in any Christian worldview from the mainstream culture. These believers are united in their verdict that the culture is now pervasively opposed to the convictions and values central to Christianity—and to Western civilization.

The second trend, it is claimed, is a rediscovery of common Christian con-

victions that had been hidden during centuries of theological and ecclesiastical warfare. Some argue that the convictional lines separating Roman Catholics, evangelicals, and the Orthodox from each other have been transcended by history, reduced to matters of inconsequence if not irrelevance. Others argue that the various parties to historic theological controversies were victims of limited knowledge and misunderstandings. The first can be corrected by further study, the second cleared by explanation. Still others argue that organized Christianity simply cannot afford to present a disunited front against the new cultural reality. They sound like Benjamin Franklin in his challenge to fellow patriots during the American revolution, "We must all hang together, or, assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

Another version of this proposed realignment is based on the argument that the historic schisms of institutional Christianity have been overcome by history and theological development. This argument is found among those who claim, for example, that the Reformation has been accomplished in purpose—that the Roman Catholic Church has been reformed in theology and practice since the sixteenth-century, and the purposes of the Reformers are thus accomplished.⁷

Behind all this is the failed project of liberal ecumenism. The modern ecumenical movement was born in the optimism of modernity as it emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. The architects and planners of the ecumenical movement saw a vision of Christendom reunited visibly, institutionally, and gloriously in order to present a common Christian front in the modern world.

Regrettably, this ecumenical movement was not only an artifact of modernity and

its optimism, but of theological modernism and its reductionism. The major players in the ecumenical movement came from the Protestant left, and the movement based itself on a lowest-common-denominator foundation of doctrine. Even when traditional and orthodox theological language was used, it was undercut by the aberrant and sub-orthodox teachings of the ecumenical leadership. Conservatives in all Christian communions looked askance at the declarations and directives of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in the United States.

The old ecumenism produced a vast bureaucracy, promoted a leftist political agenda, and is effectively owned and operated by those committed to theological liberalism, revisionism, and cultural accommodationism. With the decline and rejection of the historic ecumenical movement as backdrop, some now declare a "new ecumenism" formed around a coalition of traditionalist or conservative elements in the three traditions, but most especially between conservative evangelicals and traditional Roman Catholics. Thomas Oden recently argued that the "new ecumenism" emerged out of the wreckage of the older ecumenism, which he charges was hijacked by the left in the 1960s:

Meanwhile the new ecumenism has been quietly rediscovering ancient Christian ecumenism, without press notice, without fanfare. It has silently reclaimed the courage of the martyrs, and the faith of the confessors, the resolve of the early Councils, and the wisdom of the Fathers. It is being rediscovered by the truth once for all revealed in Jesus Christ. That truth is constantly being renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit in engendering proximate unity of the community of baptized

believers world wide.⁸

Some champion this “new ecumenism” as the salvation of organized Christianity from its cultural isolation and displacement. Conservatives from the three historic traditions should present a united front as cultural co-belligerents—what Timothy George has described as “an ecumenism of the trenches.” Given the reality of the culture war, the description is immediately appealing. But is this really *ecumenism*? For some, the ecumenical claims simply go too far. Coalitions are built on identifiable foundations of common concern and common action, but not necessarily on a comprehensive agreement concerning issues across the worldview.

The older ecumenism aimed for the institutional ingathering of all Christians into one visible body—polity, confession, and structure to be worked out later. Thomas Oden suggests that the new ecumenism has yet to make its institutional ambitions clear. “It may decide not to seek any structure at all at this time, but allow the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit to shape whatever structures are required. This debate is only beginning.”⁹ He points to journals such as *First Things*, *Pro Ecclesia*, and *Touchstone* as influential voices. Interestingly, all three are published by what are essentially parachurch organizations.

The new ecumenism has been championed, defined, and described by figures such as Richard John Neuhaus, who has given personal leadership and an articulate public voice to the movement. The defining symbol of the new ecumenism is the 1994 statement, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.”¹⁰

The statement quickly gathered signatories from various branches of evangelicalism as well as an impressive roster of Roman Catholic theologians and churchmen. As intended, the statement also received a good deal of attention in the religious media. So far as liberal Catholics and Protestants were concerned, the statement was nothing more than theological window dressing for the Religious Right—a manifesto for a coalescence of conservative Catholics and evangelicals into a massive movement against the moral tide.

The response from many Catholic leaders was lukewarm at best, and this came as no surprise to the organizers, who were well aware of the liberal bent of many of the nation’s Catholic bishops. From the Catholic traditionalists came a mixture of celebration and concern. The evangelicals responded with a divided mind and a divided voice—no surprise, given the increasingly pluralistic character of the evangelical movement, in so far as it remains a movement at all.

The most vocal opposition to the very idea of a new ecumenism came from the evangelical wing most closely associated with the movement in its founding, and those most concerned with theological clarity—those most committed to the historic Protestant confessions that were championed and cherished by the Reformers and their spiritual children. Among these, the response was swift and clear. Those evangelicals who signed the ECT statement had forfeited their claim to evangelical legitimacy—had sold out the faith and the faithful. Others were more charitable in language, but shared the essential verdict.

Meetings were quickly organized and at least one new organization, the Alliance

of Confessing Evangelicals, was formed (indirectly, at least) out of the controversy, and as evidence of the fact that ECT had aroused evangelical outrage as well as evangelical appreciation. J. I. Packer, one of evangelicalism's most respected theologians, felt the necessity of explaining his signing of ECT in a lengthy article published in *Christianity Today*.¹¹ Packer explained that he signed it,

Because it affirms positions and expresses attitudes that have been mine for half a lifetime, and that I think myself called to commend to others every way I can. Granted, for the same half lifetime I have publicly advocated the Reformed theology that was first shaped (by Calvin) in opposition to Roman teaching about salvation and the church and that stands opposed to it still—which, I suppose, is why some people have concluded that I have gone theologically soft, and others think I must be ignorant of Roman Catholic beliefs, and others guessed that I signed ECT without reading it.¹²

The article simultaneously clarified and confused the issues. Packer said that he could not become a Roman Catholic “because of certain basic tenets to which the Roman system, as such, is committed.”¹³ Yet, he seemed to acknowledge that the statement implied more agreement than was actually achieved, and he stated that “historic disagreements at the theory level urgently now need review.”¹⁴

The entire ECT project is open to various interpretations, and no consensus on its precise meaning may even be shared among the signatories—indeed this lack of consensus is apparent. This confusion must be set over against the clarity of the confessions and statements of historic importance that stipulate the issues of doctrinal *disagreement* between the traditions.

In this light, George Lindbeck correctly identifies the issue of concern to many evangelicals. How can Catholics and evangelicals, or Orthodox and Catholics, claim simultaneously to hold their historic and conflicting doctrines without alteration, and to find themselves now in basic agreement? The very structure of the claim raises suspicions, at the very least. Official dialogues between some Lutheran bodies and the Roman Catholic Church have produced statements claiming that, in essence, everyone party to the historic Reformation debates was right in his own way, if understood on his own terms, as now interpreted by his confessional great-grandchildren.

As Lindbeck notes, many find these reported agreements difficult to understand and inherently self-contradictory:

They are inclined to think that the very notion of doctrinal reconciliation without doctrinal change is self-contradictory, and they suspect that the dialogue partners are self-deceived victims of their desire to combine ecumenical harmony with denominational loyalty. The dialogue members . . . usually protest. They say they have been compelled by the evidence, sometimes against their earlier inclinations, to conclude that positions that were once really opposed are now really reconcilable, even though these positions remain in a significant sense identical to what they were before.¹⁵

When the ECT project was first announced, I was very hopeful. My understanding was that the project was essentially and specifically focused on cultural co-belligerence. Given the cultural disaster we face, and what is at stake, it simply makes sense for men and women who share basic worldview concerns to gather strength from each other, join hands and hearts, and enter the cultural

fray. On this point, all but the most extreme separatists among us would agree.

But when the ECT statement was released, it was something very different than I expected. The statement went into rather substantial detail on issues of doctrine and theology, claiming basic agreement, and promising even the possibility of common witness. I did not sign the statement. I could not in good conscience sign the statement. At the most basic level, I am in full agreement with the critics of the statement who have registered serious theological concerns about the document and its interpretation.

Those on either side of the ECT project who express surprise at this verdict should take note to distinguish those who reject the statement for both its call for co-belligerence and its theological content beyond a foundation for co-belligerence, and those who reject the statement for the latter, while joining in the former, at least in spirit. Most of the evangelical critics of ECT support the call for co-belligerence, even as we protest what we believe to be inherently dangerous theological claims within the statement.

A certain logic reveals itself within the ECT statement, and this is the most foundational criticism among evangelicals. The central objection is found in this partial paragraph:

All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have not chosen one another, just as we have not chosen Christ. He has chosen us, and he has chosen us to be his together (John 15). However imperfect our communion with one another, however deep our disagreements with one another, we recognize that there is but one church of

Christ.¹⁶

For the confessional evangelical, the problem is evident in the logic joining the first and second sentences, and then following through the remainder of the section. Certainly, all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. No responsible Roman Catholic, evangelical, or Orthodox theologian would deny that fundamental reality. But this begs the most important question: What does it mean to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

Here we are face to face with the theological debates of the Reformation era, and the mutual anathemizations that ensued. The next sentence of the statement claims that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ." At this point, the basic logic behind the Catholic and evangelical understandings diverges. It is completely within the logic of the documents of Vatican II for Roman Catholics to accept baptism in evangelical churches as a valid baptism, and thus sacramentally salvific. The reverse simply does not apply. In so far as evangelicals remain *evangelical* we must reject any claim that the sacraments in themselves are saving acts—whether the baptism is received within a Catholic or an evangelical church.

I am using the concept of theological *logic* here in order to demonstrate that the problem is not limited to any individual doctrine, or even to a set of doctrines, but is tied to the entire envisioning of theology, salvation, authority, and ecclesiology. Though I am seldom in agreement with Andrew Greeley, I am pointing to something similar in spirit to what he identifies as the distinction between the Protestant and Catholic *imaginings*.¹⁷ Given

this fundamental difference in theological logic, evangelicals and Roman Catholics will respond to the same document in different ways. The danger comes in claiming agreement where no real agreement exists.

How *Mere* is *Mere* Christianity?

The idea of something like “mere Christianity” may be directly traced to Richard Baxter, among the most influential of the English Puritans. Nevertheless, the concept is rightly associated most directly with C. S. Lewis, whose book of that title emerged from radio addresses delivered during World War II. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis contended for a conception of Christianity that was irreducible and central to all authentic Christian expression. Pointing to the use of the word “Christian” as first used to identify believers in Antioch (Acts 11:26), Lewis suggested that Christians are “those who accepted the teaching of the Apostles.”¹⁸

Of course, an older conception of “mere Christianity” was offered by Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century as “*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*” (“that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by everyone”). Here again we face a difficult quandary. *Some* doctrines must surely have been believed by all true Christians everywhere and at all times. But do we really agree on *what* those doctrines are?

We face the twin dangers of minimalism and maximalism at this point. We should be thankful for a body of doctrine that unites Roman Catholic, evangelical, and the Orthodox believers when each is faithful to his tradition. Such shared doctrines include belief in the Trinity, in the Bible as the inerrant and infallible deposit of divine revelation, in the unique hypo-

static union of full deity and humanity in Jesus Christ, in the sinfulness of humanity and the necessity of salvation, and in the fact that salvation is found in the gospel of Christ as preached by the Apostles. Lewis referred to such doctrinal agreement as “an immensely formidable unity.”¹⁹

A minimalist approach would either deny this common ground or deny the importance of this convergence. But the more pressing danger is a maximalism that claims basic doctrinal agreement beyond this commonly accepted body of doctrine. Central to the Christian message is the *kerygma*—the most basic declaration of how sinners are saved by the atonement achieved by Christ and applied to the believer through faith. Here, the three great traditions are separated by not only logic, but by explicit doctrinal claims as formalized in historic confessional statements, declarations, and formulae.

This separation increases to a gulf of distance once the logic of the system moves to the nature and identity of the Church as the Body of Christ, and to issues of revelation, authority, sanctification, ministry, sacraments, and the remainder of the body of doctrine. From these roots come the historic divisions over the contested claims related to the papacy, justification by faith, the relative authority of Scripture and tradition, the veneration of Mary, purgatory, doctrinal mystery, and many other theological issues of inherently kerygmatic importance. *These are basic claims that caused the divisions, gave birth to the traditions, and remain still in force.*

As faithful believers from these three traditions, we should give thanks for the agreement among us without fear, and give voice to our conflicting claims with-

out compromise. Compromise would be evident when truth claims are withheld, or when truth claims are surrendered or modified against conscience.

Lewis believed that “mere Christianity” would be clearest at the center of the faith. “It is at her center, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests that at the center of each there is something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice.”²⁰ There is a poetic quality of hopefulness to this claim, but the more I reflect upon it, the less I believe it to be true—at least as will be popularly believed. At the center of all three traditions is a claim to basic faith and trust in Christ as Savior. This is expressed in the historic creeds and confessions of the Church and is irreducible. But behind this hope and trust is a basic understanding of *how* the saving work of Christ accomplishes our salvation, and how this is applied to believers (or to others). Evangelicals, Catholics, and the Orthodox do not share a common understanding of *how* the work of Christ accomplishes our salvation—and this is the heart of the gospel.

An evangelical Christian is pulled in two directions here. We believe in justification by faith *alone*, and we believe that this doctrine is indeed the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (“the article by which the church stands or falls”).²¹ Thus, while we hold without compromise that theology matters, we do not believe that we are saved by theological formulae. But we really do believe that theology matters, and that a sinner must believe that Christ is Savior, and that salvation comes

through Christ’s work and merits alone. We do not claim to be able to read the human heart—that power is God’s alone. We must, on the other hand, evaluate all doctrinal claims—ours and those of others—by a biblical standard of judgment. Evangelicals came to our understanding of justification by faith alone the hard way, and we defend it as central and essential to Christianity itself. This is the doctrine of salvation, the *kerygma*, as preached by the true church.

Without this doctrine, no church is a true gospel church. Many evangelicals, myself included, remain unconvinced that any consensus on salvation now exists between those who hold to the teachings of the Reformers and those who hold to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. As a matter of fact, the embrace of an inclusivist model of salvation by the Catholic church at Vatican II (and expanded thereafter) has served to increase the distance between the evangelical affirmation of salvation through faith *alone* by grace *alone* through Christ *alone* and the official teaching of the Catholic church. Central to the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith is faith *in Christ*—and this faith is a gift received consciously by the believer through the means of the proclamation of the gospel.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis acknowledged his reluctance to define who is and who is not an authentic Christian. “Now, if once we allow people to start spiritualizing and refining, or as they might say ‘deepening,’ the sense of the word *Christian*, it too speedily will become a useless word.”²² Yet, this “deepening” of verbal specificity is precisely what we as theologians are called to do—whatever our tradition. Here, I must respond as a free-church evangelical that *no visible commun-*

ion is coterminous with the Body of Christ—even my own. Given our cherished Baptist principle of regenerate church membership (and the doctrine of believers' baptism), we attempt to identify the church by conscious confession of Christ and in congregations made visible by their allegiance to Christ through personal declaration of faith and the ordinance of baptism, reserved for believers. Even so, no thoughtful Baptist would claim that all members of Baptist churches are true Christians, for such will be seen only on the Day of Judgment. Beyond this, it is impossible for a true Baptist to recognize the claims of any denomination or church as authentic, lacking this principle of regenerate church membership, the rightful preaching of the gospel, and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper reserved for believers.

Evangelicals must measure the claims of any church or individual by the simplicity of the gospel. If the true gospel is not preached, it is no true church. Again, any thoughtful evangelical would acknowledge that there are certainly true Christians within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. But these true believers must in some sense come to the simplicity of faith through means other than the official teaching of these churches.

An entire system of interconnected doctrines and beliefs, all driven by a theological logic, separates Roman Catholics, evangelicals, and Orthodox believers from each other. As those who hold to our traditions, claim them as biblical, and teach them as normative, we must be sufficiently honest to concede that our doctrinal disagreements are not incidental, but urgently important and carry significance for eternity, in that we teach what

we claim to be the gospel of salvation.

At the end of the day, the traditional Roman Catholic, the confessing evangelical, and the Orthodox believer may be the last three men (or women) on earth who can have an honest disagreement. In our contemporary context of postmodern irrationality and cultural superficiality, this is in itself a significant achievement. We all believe in the existence of truth, in the unity of truth, and in our accountability to Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This sets us apart from the larger culture, distinct in our honest agreements and in our honest disagreements. This is no small matter.

Our Changed Situation: Traditional Believers in a Culture of Unbelief

Our theological conversation among honest believers representing three historic traditions is now taking place in a changed cultural context. Christendom is gone, and a new post-Christian reality now dominates the cultural space in which we work, worship, and witness. The radical displacement of theistic belief and historic Christian forms is the product of the modernist hermeneutics of suspicion and the postmodern embrace of irrationality. Nihilism looms as the only alternative to Christian theism, and yet theism is increasingly abandoned by those who claim to be Christian.

A form of Christianity unhooked and unhinged from any historic tradition and antithetical to them all has been loosed in the world and now masquerades as a form of updated Christianity. Liberal, revisionist, and radical forms of Christian theology come packaged today in two basic forms. The first is old-style anti-supernaturalism as perfected by the framers of the naturalistic worldview now firmly

entrenched within the academy, especially in the sciences, including the social sciences.²³ The clearest example of this form of anti-supernaturalism is the so-called “Jesus Seminar,” a self-appointed cadre of self-described “scholars” who seek to debunk the historical basis of Jesus’ words and deeds. True to form, they present a vision of a demythologized Jesus who sounds remarkably like a leftist, laconic, academic pundit, ready to demand tenure but misunderstood by the powers that be, who fear the well-intended rabble-rouser. This form of unbelief has been thoroughly ensconced in liberal Protestant and Catholic seminaries and divinity schools. This worldview is fundamental to the current structure of academic guilds and university culture.

The other form of anti-traditional pseudo-Christianity is the esoteric, New Age, structure-free “spirituality” that drives so much of the popular culture. The do-it-yourself spirituality of American consumerism is directed at nothing more transcendent or authoritative than the self. These “hard” and “soft” versions of pseudo-Christianity have infected all three historic traditions, but have been especially damaging to Catholicism and evangelicalism, the traditions most closely identified with Western culture.

We face the reality that our situation is drastically changed from what it was a century ago—and this is true in light of the secularization of the culture and the secularization of the church. As J. I. Packer reflects,

Time was when Western Christendom’s deepest division was between relatively homogeneous Protestant churches and a relatively homogeneous Church of Rome. Today, however, the deepest and most hurtful division is between

theological conservatives (or “conservationists” as I prefer to call them), who honor the Christ of the Bible and of the historic creeds and confessions, and theological liberals and radicals who for whatever reason do not; and this division splits the older Protestant bodies and the Roman communion internally.²⁴

J. Gresham Machen recognized this reality eight decades earlier, when he identified the liberal theology then (and now) infecting the mainline Protestant denominations as a religion distinct from authentic Christianity, and never to be confused with it. Machen, a confessional Presbyterian, recognized the divisions within evangelical Protestantism, but looked to the larger conflict.

Far more serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.²⁵

Note Machen’s distinction between the “gulf” that separates evangelical and Roman Catholics, and the “abyss” that separates Christianity from liberal unbelief. Ever the careful scholar, Machen describes this gulf with honesty and clarity. He never denies the importance of the issues at stake, nor does he minimize the distance between Catholic and evangelical convictions. But over against this gulf

is the abyss of anti-supernaturalistic liberalism—another religion altogether, presenting itself as updated Christianity for modern times.

There is something deeper here, for Machen wrote this paragraph with the lingering hope that the gulf between evangelicalism and Catholicism could be bridged—not by theological compromise, but by theological correction. So long as the Bible is recognized as the authoritative revelation of the one true and living God, there is hope for this bridge by the corrective ministry of the Holy Spirit. To the extent that either tradition compromises this principle (as in the Roman Catholic understanding of Scripture as interpreted by tradition or in the popular evangelical heresy of interpreting Scripture by personal experience), the hope is denied. For this reason, the evangelical principle of *sola Scriptura* is non-negotiable.

These same principles apply to the engagement of evangelicals with the Orthodox churches. We have less experience in this engagement than is the case with Roman Catholics; but, in a changed world situation and missiological context, we are learning about each other.

With all this in mind, and with the cultural challenges now before us, evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and the Orthodox should stand without embarrassment as co-belligerents in the culture war. The last persons on earth to have an honest disagreement may also be the last on earth to recognize transcendent truth and moral principles—even the sanctity of human life itself.

Standing Together: Cultural Co-Belligerence

Our agenda for cultural co-belligerence

must include three dimensions covering philosophical, theological, and cultural challenges. The first two are necessary foundations for the third.

At the philosophical level, we must contend together for the *transcendent reality of truth*, over against the postmodern despisers of all truth claims. In this regard we must be advocates for what Francis Schaeffer called “true truth,” or what philosopher William Alston calls “alethic realism.”

Pope John Paul II addressed this crisis in his 1993 encyclical letter, *Veritatis Splendor*, warning that a “crisis of truth” threatened civilization by elevating personal freedom over truth, even bending the very notion of truth to an absolute confidence in human autonomy.²⁶ Without a recovery of confidence in truth—a truth external to ourselves and to which we are accountable—no progress on theological or cultural fronts is possible.

With this recovery of truth must be a recommitment to the *unity of truth* and a denial of the relativistic worldview that is so attractive to postmodern Americans. Without this, rational discourse and civic conversation is impossible.

We must also move to recover the *dignity of language* and the *objectivity of texts*. The march of postmodern deconstructionism through the English and literature departments of America’s leading universities has now filtered down to popular culture, where Everyman and Everywoman seem ready to declare the author of every text to be dead, and meaning to be up to every reader. Needless to say, this hermeneutic is also evident in America’s law schools and courts, even the United States Supreme Court, where some justices seem completely unconcerned with and unlimited by the inten-

tion of the author or even the words of the text. To acknowledge that original intent is not always easily established is to be contrasted with the contemporary disregard and disrespect for this responsibility.

The philosophical dimension also requires that we redignify the reality of truth by acknowledging the *inseparability of the transcendentals*. The good, the beautiful, and the true cannot be separated from each other, for all are established in the being and glory of God. The crisis in the arts is inescapably tied to the human effort to call the false good, the true ugly, and the evil beautiful. The cultural crisis in the arts cannot be corrected merely by adopting consensual patterns of taste. Something far deeper is at stake.

At the theological level, we must contend together for the *ontological Trinity* as more than a metaphor, for *Nicean/Chalcedonian Christology*, for the *historical veracity of the Holy Bible*, and for a model of *theological realism* which, like the alethic realism described above, understands doctrinal statements to make propositional claims about ultimate reality, and not merely to express the religious sentiments of the speaker or author.

A very important issue of co-belligerence relates to the *claims of tradition*. Here, the first reality to note is the important distinctions between the way evangelicals, Catholics, and the Orthodox value and understand the role of tradition. Evangelicals must reject any notion that the Bible is to be interpreted in light of an authoritative tradition, much less by an official magisterium, or that tradition is in any way a second source of revelation. The Bible is the *norma normans non normata*—it norms and cannot be normed.

At the same time, evangelicals are

growing in our understanding that we are, as fallible and frail humans, traditioned people. We are not the first to read the sacred text of Scripture, nor the first to confront crucial theological challenges. In conscious and unconscious ways, tradition informs and shapes us. As Timothy George, my own church history professor at Southern Seminary began his introductory lecture, “My job is to inform you that there were Christians between your grandmother and Jesus—and that it matters.” *How* it matters is an issue of conflict between the traditions, but *that* it matters is increasingly a conviction common to all three. We need to resist the anti-historical temptation of postmodern culture and argue with each other about what the tradition(s) mean, and how Scripture alone can correct us all. This humility of spirit is indicative of what Chesterton called “the extension of the franchise.” He continued, “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”²⁷

In the cultural arena, we must be vigilant together in defending the *sanctity of human life* at all stages of development, from conception to natural death. The massive assaults on human dignity seen in the twentieth century stand as evidence of the devaluation of human life and human dignity produced in the wake of the Enlightenment. Human life has been cut down to size, man is just another of the animals, and human life is not inherently more valuable than any other form of life, or at least any other form of conscious life.

The Culture of Death has invaded the womb and the laboratory. Millions upon

millions of preborn children have been aborted, hundreds of thousands of frozen human embryos lie in a state of suspended life, awaiting their disposal as parents have no need or desire for them. Embryos are created for destruction through stem-cell research and scientists announce their intention to clone human beings, even against the near unanimous outrage of the medical establishment. But the medical establishment has shown itself to be anything but a bulwark of moral defense. Medical school graduates recite the Oath of Hippocrates at their commencement ceremonies, only to embark on careers antithetical to that ancient pledge.

Governments, too, have been found to be inadequate defenders of human life. The democracies of the supposedly civilized West have legalized abortion and increasingly accommodate themselves to the logic, if not yet the universal practice, of euthanasia. Totalitarian governments have murdered millions in what Zbigniew Brzezinski has called “the century of Mega-Death.” Political scientist R. J. Rummel surveyed the twentieth century and found that most persons murdered during that murderous century were killed by totalitarian regimes, a crime Rummel called “death by government.”²⁸

We must contend for *objective moral principles* when most Americans believe that morality is either an outdated philosophical concept or a constructed reality designed to protect established and entrenched powers. Actually, most Americans are merely amateur moral relativists, mostly related to matters of sex. The recovery of *authentic sexual morality* will certainly not be achieved easily. The moral relativists control the dominant centers of cultural production, and the cultural elite embodies the very sexual anarchy we seek

to correct. The homosexualization of America continues apace, and the *institution of marriage* is increasingly undermined by a culture of expressive divorce and calls for homosexual “unions” on par with marriage. Sexual intercourse outside of marriage is now taken for granted, and sexual antinomianism reigns.

We must contend even for the *reality of gender*, and the creation of human beings as male and female as a part of the goodness of God’s creation. We are the first generation required to contend for gender as a fixed, meaningful, and unexchangeable reality, but contend we must.

Against the culture of death we must fight the *hostility to children* that pervades some sectors, and an anti-natalist philosophy that treats children as unintended and accidental by-products of sexual recreation—needy little creatures that take up critical resources, demand attention, interrupt careers, and need nurture.

We must recover a *vision of education* that is distinctively Christian and cognitively distinctive. A confidence in transcendent revealed truth will necessarily produce a model of educational structure and practice that humbles itself, and its learners, before the truth. This stands in stark contrast to the educational nihilism of the leading universities and academic centers. We must also contend for our educational institutions to be accountable to our churches, and not surrendered to the vandals of the secular academy. As James Tunstead Burtchaell traced in *The Dying of the Light*, the predominating pattern of academic life in America is “the disengagement of colleges and universities from their Christian churches.”²⁹

The list is incomplete, and necessarily so. We must rebuild an entire civilization. Love of neighbor demands that we give

ourselves to this task. We must rebuild this culture brick by brick, stone upon stone, truth upon truth, until we see a recovery or until this task is removed from us by divine intervention.

Standing Apart: No Theological Compromise

This is the harder task, and far less welcome, but standing apart is also a part of our witness to ourselves and to the larger secular world. If we authentically honor truth, we dare not compromise that which we believe to be true. With this in mind, I offer some humble principles for theological truth-telling among the three traditions here in question.

First, we must be absolutely honest with each other, both in our agreements and our disagreements. Second, we must strive for genuine understanding, and not settle for caricatures of the other's convictions. Third, we must seek to understand the parts in light of the whole. That is, no truth is understood in isolation from other truths. We must aim for the larger understanding. Fourth, we must hope for the best from each other, and never celebrate the discovery or affirmation of aberrant doctrine in the other. Fifth, we must be careful with words and specific in clarity. Confusion harms all concerned, and clarity is never to be feared. We must be ready to admit disagreement and agreement where each is appropriate. Sixth, we must not personalize the issues at stake or the doctrines in question. We cannot afford to speak to each other with a false concern for personal feelings or what the secular world considers the politically-correct etiquette. When convictions collide, we may both be wrong, but we cannot both be right. Seventh, we must be ready to stand together in cultural co-belligerence, rooted

in a common core of philosophical and theological principles, without demanding confessional agreement or pretending that this has been achieved. We must contend for the right of Christian moral witness in secular society. We indeed need to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves to know how to contend for Christian truth in what Robert P. George rightly identifies as *The Clash of Orthodoxies*—secular and Christian.³⁰

Standing Together, Standing Apart: Cultural Co-Belligerence without Theological Compromise: A Concluding Word

My ambition and hope as expressed in this project is to present a consistently evangelical understanding of the issues at stake in a meeting of those identified as "Great Tradition Christians." I hope that my approach has been both humble and honest. The great danger comes when one is severed from the other.

We claim the name of Christ. We claim a purchase on the Great Tradition of authentic Christianity. Each of our traditions claims to be normative Christianity. These claims are incommensurate and necessarily involve conflict. These claims do not necessarily prevent cooperation in the cultural arena.

In the sovereign providence of God, we face a great cultural challenge. We must be unembarrassed co-belligerents in this battle. Human rights, human dignity, and human happiness hang in the balance. Standing together, we work *with* each other. Standing apart, we witness *to* each other. Nothing less will do.

ENDNOTES

¹This article was originally given as an address to the Conference, *Christian*

Unity and the Divisions We Must Sustain: A Gathering of Traditional Christians II, at the University of St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein, Illinois, November 10, 2001.

²St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972) 842.

³T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral," in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1950) 209.

⁴G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Wheaton: Shaw Publishers, 1994) 35.

⁵Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life {Evangelium Vitae}* (New York: Times Books, 1995) 22.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Interestingly, this argument often turns on how one interprets the Second Vatican Council. Here, the interpretation of the Council by traditionalist Roman Catholics seems on a collision course with the hopefulness invested in the Council by some evangelicals.

⁸Thomas C. Oden, "The New Ecumenism and Christian Witness to Society," an address given on the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, October 1, 2001. The address may be found on the web at <http://ird-renew.org/News/News.cfm?ID=214&c=4>.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Hereafter referred to as "ECT." The document may be found in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995) xv-xxxv.

¹¹J. I. Packer, "Why I Signed It," *Chris-*

tianity Today, 12 December 1994, 34-37.

¹²*Ibid.*, 35.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 15.

¹⁶ECT statement, in Colson and Neuhaus, xviii.

¹⁷Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Greeley points to a critical distinction at a level deeper than doctrines. "These philosophical and theological differences are the bases (or perhaps only the justifications and rationalizations) for the two different ways of

approaching the divine reality that arose out of the Reformation. Put more simply, the Catholic imagination loves metaphors; Catholicism is a verdant rainforest of metaphors. The Protestant imagination distrusts metaphors; it tends to be a desert of metaphors. Catholicism stresses the 'like' of any comparison (human passion is like divine passion), while Protestantism, when it is willing to use metaphors (and it must if it is to talk about God at all), stresses the unlike" (p. 9).

¹⁸C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1945; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980) 11.

¹⁹C. S. Lewis, "Introduction," *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (1944; reprint, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1989) 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 8-9.

²¹I acknowledge the point made by

Richard John Neuhaus that the first recorded use of this formulation is found in Valentius Loescher, who in 1718 used it to correct the Pietists. I reject his further claim that this formulation indicts contemporary evangelicals *qua* evangelicals. It certainly does indict those who claim to be evangelicals, but who preach a gospel of health, wealth, prosperity, consumerism, self-esteem, or good works.

²²Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 10.

²³Interestingly, a revival of Christian thought has emerged among the philosophers. Some now claim that as many as a third of all those teaching philosophy at the graduate level hold to some model of Christian belief.

²⁴Packer, 35-36.

²⁵J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 52.

²⁶Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth: Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching* (Washington: Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1993).

²⁷Chesterton, 47-48.

²⁸R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 2000).

²⁹James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³⁰Robert P. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001).

