

Of Sacraments and Sawdust: ECT, The Culture Wars, and The Quandary of Evangelical Identity

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In 1960, a Catholic presidential candidate traveled to Texas to reassure evangelical ministers there that he would not listen to the Pope on social and political matters. In the year 2000, an evangelical presidential candidate travels from Texas to Washington to reassure the American public that he will in fact listen quite closely to the Pope. With the recounting of this anecdote at a recent symposium on American evangelicalism, Roman Catholic commentator Richard John Neuhaus winsomely summarized the change in evangelical/Catholic relations in the past generation.¹ Neuhaus might just as easily have illustrated this point by pointing to his very presence at a forum designed to explain the fortunes of conservative American Protestantism.

The conference, “Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail,” sponsored by Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School, explored the direction and prospects of American evangelicalism and fundamentalism. While representatives from various communions addressed the topic, perhaps the most provocative voice was that of Neuhaus, a former Lutheran pastor and 1960s civil rights activist turned Roman Catholic priest and editor of the neo-conservative monthly *First Things*. Exploring topics ranging from the notion of “Christian America” to the threat of militant Islam, Neuhaus and his respondents navigated much of the discussion toward the significance of the “Evan-

gelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT) discussions for conservative American Protestantism and the larger goal of Christian unity, a debate that has continued almost non-stop since Neuhaus spearheaded the ECT phenomenon with Southern Baptist Charles Colson in the mid-1990s.² Neuhaus’s intellectually rigorous attempt to forge a precise definition of the Christian unity sought by the “mere Christianity” of the ECT project is not incidental to the questions about the “sawdust trail” raised by the Beeson conference. Indeed, the ECT project and its accompanying efforts to forge a doctrinal consensus between the evangelical and Roman Catholic communions strikes at the very heart of evangelical theology’s ongoing quest for definition. As such, the ECT project is more than a series of documents. Instead, it represents both the best and worst impulses of contemporary parachurch evangelicalism. Therefore, the ECT dialogues carry with them some important implications for the future of evangelical theology.

ECT and the Promise of Evangelical Theology

As Neuhaus’s wry observation about the place of Catholicism in the respective campaigns of John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush would suggest, the effort toward evangelical/Catholic unity has much to do with politics. Indeed, at first glance, the initial 1994 ECT document would seem

to be a “culture war” manifesto. Galvanized by a cultural ethos typified by *Roe v. Wade* in the American courtroom and *Heather Has Two Mommies* in the American classroom, Neuhaus and Colson, along with representatives of their respective constituencies, unveiled ECT in March 1994 as a united Christian front against the “culture of death,” with the document recognizing that the “pattern of convergence and cooperation between evangelicals and Catholics is, in large part, a result of common effort to protect human life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable among us.”³ The document did not limit itself to addressing questions such as abortion and euthanasia, however, but instead went on to address questions of racial reconciliation, the exploitation of the pornography industry, vouchers for private school education, the protection of the family and other societal mediating structures, and the larger question of the preservation of Western culture.

Still, ECT and its successors did not stop at a call to a united front in the culture wars. Instead, they have sought to ground Catholic/evangelical co-belligerency not in a tactical political maneuver, but in a theological consensus that sets evangelical and Roman Catholic sociopolitical activism in the context of a shared commitment to Nicene Trinitarianism, Chalcedonian Christology, and even a common salvation received by grace through faith alone (*sola fide*).⁴ Colson, among others, has argued forcefully that a common theological starting point is necessary for a united Christian front:

These are the reasons for “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” Because, to bring God’s truth about the public good into the public square and to resist the abortionists and mercy-killers, the relativists and

the tyrants, Christians must stand together. The controversies that have divided believers for nearly five hundred years are real, to be sure, and none of them is to be minimized. However, the divisions between us are not the battle of the hour, when hosts of secularists and relativists threaten to sweep away the last trace of Christian truth, thought, and influence from our culture. Indeed, the controversies that divide us are far less significant than the common threat that confronts us.⁵

The need for such a theological consensus, Colson contends, was discovered by Catholics and evangelicals on the picket lines of the abortion debate: “There, evangelicals and Catholics have discovered that their presence is inspired by a distinctly Christian ethic that rests on a common foundation of Christian doctrine about God, human nature, the sanctity of life, and the Church’s mission to the world.”⁶ Neuhaus agrees, arguing that genesis of the evangelical/Catholic search for a theological consensus was not the 1994 statement, but instead began when Reformed apologist Francis Schaeffer led evangelicals into the Roman Catholic terrain of anti-abortion activism following *Roe v. Wade*. “The evangelicals and Catholics who found one another in the pro-life cause knew that they were not simply co-belligerents in a political movement,” Neuhaus observes. “Behind the political agreement was the discovery of agreement about moral truth, expressed in terms of common grace or natural law. Undergirding it all was the discovery of a shared allegiance to the Author of truth and a shared faith in the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.”⁷

By recognizing that united action in the public square requires an underlying theological consensus, the ECT project rightly resonates with one of the primary

distinctives of the postwar evangelical movement led by theologians such as Carl F. H. Henry, Harold John Ockenga, and Edward John Carnell. It must be remembered, after all, that the origins of contemporary evangelical theology are most often pinpointed to 1947 with the publication of Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.⁸

Henry's *Uneasy Conscience* was a call for a new evangelical theology, which would define itself by leaving behind the cultural isolationism of its fundamentalist heritage.⁹ As Henry and his colleagues understood it, however, this social and political engagement required theological agreement to remove the obstacles to cultural penetration and to provide a united evangelical front. Henry's manifesto called for evangelicals to transcend the bitter arguments between, for example, dispensational premillennialists and covenantal amillennialists.¹⁰ Still, he maintained, this was not to be done by ignoring the crucial question of the nature of the kingdom of God. Instead, he argued, evangelicals must coalesce around a common understanding of the kingdom, one that would provide the basis for a comprehensive worldview of evangelical engagement in every facet of human life.¹¹

Indeed, in the early days of the postwar evangelical renaissance, evangelical leaders claimed that a renewed conservative evangelical theology could provide the basis for cultural engagement precisely because it was an alternative to the detailed public philosophy of Roman Catholicism. Henry, for example, asserted:

Formulation of an evangelical philosophy is not without its difficulties. For one thing, Protestantism has no official philosophy, whereas Roman Catholicism has its Thomism. But the more one wrestles with

Thomism and modern problems, the more he senses how much of an advantage this may prove to be. For the evangelical is free to go back to biblical theology—without any mediator but *the* Mediator; without any authority save the Scriptures themselves; without any imperative testimony save that of the Holy Spirit.¹²

The theologians of the postwar evangelical movement recognized that social and political concerns were, at their core, ultimately matters of theological reflection. This contention gains credence in light of the way in which *Roe v. Wade* caught evangelical Protestantism off-guard. As Francis Schaeffer saw it, evangelicals lagged behind Roman Catholics in condemning abortion rights for a precisely theological reason; namely, because of “the prison house of [evangelical] platonic spirituality,” which severed body from soul and thereby failed to recognize that the trampling of human life is not at the periphery of the Christian gospel.¹³ Schaeffer's prophetic word was verified in the public scrambling of evangelicals in the wake of *Roe*, many of whom seemed to be asking, “What hath the revival tent to do with the abortion clinic?”¹⁴

The ECT project recognizes, with the founding generation of evangelical theologians, that social and political engagement is about more than political maneuvering, especially as the trend of cultural hostility to the Judeo-Christian roots of Western civilization has accelerated. As Neuhaus has repeatedly argued, “the crisis of the ‘Naked Public Square’ is not political or institutional or legal—as important as these dimensions undoubtedly are—but theological.”¹⁵ Thus, Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft crystallizes the co-belligerents' concern for the doctrinal

roots and consequences of cultural upheaval when he writes:

When a man leaves a room, his image disappears from the mirror in that room. We are living in that split second between the disappearance of God and the disappearance of His image in the human mirror. The image is the life of our souls, our consciences. That is what our present "culture war" is about. It is not merely about getting our rights in the naked public square; it is about the salvation of the soul. It is very probably about the continued biological survival of our species and our civilization on this planet in the next millennium, for the death within will necessarily spill out into a visible death without, like oozing pus. It is certainly about eternal life or eternal death, for without repentance there can be no salvation, and without a real moral law there can be no repentance, and the culture war's Pearl Harbor is the attack on the moral law.¹⁶

Granted, Kreeft's assessment betrays a decidedly Roman Catholic vision of personal salvation, and perhaps a bit of literary hyperbole. Still, his point that cultural engagement cannot be isolated from "more important" matters such as personal piety echoes the arguments made by Henry and other early evangelical leaders against the fundamentalist charge that the church should concentrate on individual evangelism and personal morality.¹⁷ Such a refusal to provide a theological response to the pressing cultural and political issues of the day, Henry maintained, would mean nothing less than a new evangelical monasticism, which would render irrelevant any attempt to evangelize the world.¹⁸

For postwar evangelical theology, therefore, cultural engagement could not be attempted with a doctrinally frayed coalition, nor could sociopolitical ques-

tions be addressed simply in a reactionary, *ad hoc* manner on the basis of political realities alone. The ECT project of recent years would seem to have learned this lesson better than the attempts of evangelicals and fundamentalists of the 1970s and 1980s to forge a united "New Christian Right" concerned with many of the same issues. Despite the perennial demonization of the evangelical Religious Right as seeking a theocratic takeover of society, such groups often actually boasted about the lack of any theological basis for united action. Thus, Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell claimed his was "a political organization and is not based on theological considerations" while Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed contended, "This is not a vision exclusively for those of us who are evangelical or Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox or Jewish. This vision makes room for people of all faiths—and those with no faith at all."¹⁹

Without the theoretical tools to evaluate political goals *theologically*, many in the religious right were unable to articulate the priorities of their political agenda in terms of the overall scheme of an evangelical worldview. Without a comprehensive worldview theology undergirding its political action, the evangelical right sought to unify instead around public personalities, secular methodologies, or relatively shortsighted legislative goals.²⁰ Thus, the succeeding movements of evangelical conservative political engagement seemed at times to have as much internal cohesion as any other celebrity-driven political action committee. When the centrifugal personalities faded from the scene, often so did the unifying center of the movement. As the Christian Coalition's Reed laments: "In my view,

when the helicopter carrying Ronald Reagan left the Capitol grounds in 1989 following the inauguration of George Bush, we witnessed the departure of the first and last individual who could unite all religious conservatives from the national political stage."²¹

The ECT project seems determined not to make this mistake, and instead resonates with the neo-evangelical founding generation's call for doctrinal cohesion and comprehensive theological reflection. Unlike the pioneers of evangelical engagement, however, ECT leaders such as Neuhaus and Colson seek to broaden the "united action" beyond the parameters of the Reformation heritage. Thus, Colson argues, co-belligerence must be done on more than the basis of the Reformed doctrine of common grace since "while cooperation on the basis of common grace might suffice for merely political alliances among different religious communions, it cannot suffice in reestablishing Christian influence in our increasingly secular and even increasingly hostile culture."²² Since the stakes are higher than political campaigns, Colson maintains, the task of evangelicals and Catholics "is nothing less than to articulate convincingly to a culture awash in nihilism and hedonism. Neither a Baptist worldview—and I am a Southern Baptist—nor a Lutheran worldview, nor a Catholic worldview is enough to present a comprehensive, universal worldview."²³ As such, Reformed theologian J. I. Packer joins Colson in wondering if the "united and transformative witness" of the ECT movement has not achieved the kind of comprehensive worldview theology called for by earlier generations of evangelicals, going so far as to wonder whether Pope John Paul II might be the successor to evangelical

worldview theologian James Orr in articulating the need for a coherent, all-embracing Christian vision.²⁴

With such the case, the ECT project is right to note that dialogue on matters such as justification, Marian devotion, and baptismal regeneration are not peripheral to cultural co-belligerence. The claim to a common theological consensus, a common Christian worldview, necessitates that these theological issues must be confronted and engaged by both sides. The theological stakes are nowhere clearer than in Colson's summation of the ECT rationale for a common witness:

In sum, those who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who have experienced the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, who affirm the authority of Holy Scripture—each and all, though they understand and in worship respond to these realities differently—share more than a political or cultural agenda. They share the "one faith, one baptism, one Lord" of the Christian gospel. And they share the assumptions that proceed from faith, assumptions that form the Christian view of the world—the Christian worldview—that they must defend together.²⁵

ECT and the Failure of Evangelical Theology

The consensus celebrated by the Catholic and evangelical co-belligerents, however, is not merely an expansion of the kind of doctrinal unity sought by postwar evangelical theology. Instead, as ECT critics have noted, the "consensus" achieved by ECT dialogue partners is more often grounded in carefully-worded statements than in genuine theological rapprochement.²⁶ Indeed, rather than building upon theological developments in both communions, the ECT statements seem to claim consensus largely on the basis of the

divisions and confusions of an evangelical theological project that has fallen on hard times in last half-century.

This is illustrated perhaps most obviously by the ECT statement's capitalization on the confused state of evangelical soteriology. Even before the "Gift of Salvation" statement used the term *sola fide* to describe justification, Neuhaus contended that evangelicalism has moved beyond its Reformation heritage of claiming justification through faith alone as the article of a standing or falling church. *Sola fide*, Neuhaus observes, is "hardly representative of evangelicalism."²⁷ Instead, he argues, evangelical theology has become less Lutheran or Reformed and more Wesleyan in its soteriology. Indeed, Neuhaus assumes that John Wesley himself would have signed enthusiastically the ECT statement. "Far from being an initiative that is abrupt and premature," Neuhaus proclaims, "ECT is simply catching up, two centuries later, with John Wesley and other defining figures of world evangelicalism."²⁸

Neuhaus's contention of this shift toward Wesleyan soteriology in evangelical theology might be more persuasive if the leading evangelical figures involved in both ECT statements were not, almost to the man, leading proponents of a Reformation understanding of forensic justification on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. J. I. Packer, for instance, along with two other Protestant ECT signers responded to controversy from ECT critics by signing a statement that outlined the Reformation understanding of justification as indeed "the article by which the Church stands or falls."²⁹

Still, Neuhaus's point is not one that should be easily dismissed by evangeli-

cal theology. After all, both Roman Catholics and confessional Protestants are affirming the same language about justification, without touching the centuries-old anathemas each communion has placed on the other. The Catholic cobelligerents, it would seem, have not deemed the debate over justification to be a matter of indifference. Catholic activist Keith Fournier, who was prominent in the drafting of the 1994 statement, followed the statement with a popular book outlining the public policy implications for the principles laid out in ECT.³⁰ In the volume, published by a major evangelical publisher with a foreword by evangelical broadcaster Pat Robertson, Fournier provides a vigorous apologetic for a decidedly Tridentine formulation of justification as the infusion of grace, along with traditional Catholic defenses for the role of merit and baptismal regeneration in salvation. "God makes me just," explains Fournier of what he means by justification. "He doesn't just declare me so."³¹

By contrast, contemporary evangelical conviction on the issue seems almost hopelessly muddled. This is seen, for instance, in the presidential address at the 2000 meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, a speech that sought to distance the fastest growing wing of the global evangelical coalition from the Protestant understanding of justification. In the address, Pentecostal theologian Frank D. Macchia declared:

When I first read the Catholic response to the Reformation in the Council and Decrees of Trent, my heart was "strangely moved." I found there much that had been missing from the shallow well of the forensic model. Here was an attempt to view justification as something

that God not only declares but God does. God makes us right with the divine life by a justice that redeems and heals. The Italian Pentecostal Church of my youth which leveled so many anathemas against the Catholic Church would have been surprised to discover that in some ways their understanding of the New Testament texts that speak of justification was actually closer to Trent than to certain Reformers.³²

Such sentiments are hardly relegated to Pentecostal/charismatic evangelicalism. In more recent years, a growing “reformist” wing of evangelicalism has pressed to abandon the evangelical commitment to a Reformation soteriology based on substitutionary atonement and forensic justification. Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow, for instance, argue that their “family room” model of salvation is closer to post-Vatican II Catholic soteriology than to the traditional Protestant “courtroom” model of a sinner declared righteous on the basis of the sacrificial death and imputed righteousness of Christ.³³ With such the case, evangelical theology would do well to consider Father Neuhaus’s alarming observation that it is evangelicalism that has moved closer to the Vatican on the doctrine of salvation; not the other way around.

The ECT documents add to the confusion here by continuing the American evangelical establishment’s failed attempt to create consensus through vaguely worded manifestoes, rather than through the difficult work of dialogue with a view toward genuine theological unity. Packer, for instance, argues that the first ECT document surmounted the thorny soteriological debate because “ECT lets go Protestant precision on the doctrine of justification and the correlation between conversion and new birth, just as it lets

go the Roman Catholic dogmas of baptismal regeneration and the sacramental structure.”³⁴ One might wonder how the doctrine of salvation could even begin to be addressed by a Roman Catholic without setting forth a doctrine of the sacraments since Catholic soteriology is, by definition, sacramental. Likewise, one might wonder how an evangelical can attempt to claim common cause on salvation without a common understanding of perhaps the most highly emphasized doctrine of a postwar evangelical movement steeped in the Billy Graham crusades—the new birth.

The shaky nature of this theological consensus is only further exemplified in the way in which both sides describe the “unity” they seek to find in the ECT project, even as both sides point to Jesus’ prayer “that they may be one” (John 17:11). But what, ultimately, would this unity look like? For evangelicals, it would seem that the unity is a theologically informed cooperation, along the same lines as the parachurch networks to which they have long ago grown accustomed. Evangelical ECT proponents resonate with the “ecumenism of the trenches” concept, at least in part, because evangelicalism itself was an “ecumenism of the trenches” against the hostile denominational bureaucracies of liberal mainline Protestantism.

Richard John Neuhaus, in his presentation at Beeson, however, projected a very different vision of what the ultimate “unity” of the ECT project should be, a vision informed by a full-orbed Catholic understanding of the church. “It all has to do with ecclesiology, finally, as to the problem addressed,” Neuhaus remarked. “And the problem addressed is the scandal of Christian division.”³⁵ In light of

Jesus' prayer, Neuhaus argued, the unity desired by the ECT project must be much more than networking, but must be a *visible* unity, "so that the world may see and believe that I am sent by you" (John 17:21). The question of Christian unity, for Neuhaus, therefore centers on a truth-claim about the nature of the church:

Did [Christ] intend to establish a Church? This is a very basic question. Did He intend, as the early Christian community had no doubt whatsoever that He intended, designate twelve pillars, apostolic pillars of that Church? Did He intend a continuing community that would be defined by its proclamation, by its prayer, by its life, but by its communion with the apostles? And did He intend that of the apostle Peter be given the commission to strengthen the brethren? And did He intend that this would continue through time, and that there would be successors to these apostles, and successors to Peter?³⁶

And so Neuhaus defines what he means by the "visible, palpable" unity he seeks, and of which ECT is, he hopes, a beginning. Thus, Neuhaus posed the question to the participants at the Beeson conference as to the Catholic goal of ECT:

Crystal clear. It is full communion among all Christians. Full communion means that we would be together at the altar, at the source and summit of the church's life. It would require our agreement in the unity of faith, our agreement in the unity of the liturgical ritual enactment through the centuries in all of its diversity, of that faith as it is both prayed and believed. And it would require being in communion with Peter, the Bishop of Rome; the 264th exerciser of the Petrine ministry.³⁷

Such is certainly understandable in light of Neuhaus's Catholic ecclesiology. He dismisses the evangelical talk of

"churches" by arguing, in continuity with historic Catholic teaching that Christ and the church are co-terminus. "Church has no plural, just as Christ has no plural," he told the Beeson gathering. "There is only one Christ, who is the Head, and therefore there can only be one Body, the church."³⁸ This understanding of the church therefore roots itself in Neuhaus's still robustly sacramental view of salvation. "For the Catholic, the act of faith in Jesus Christ and the act of faith in the church is one act of faith," he asserted.³⁹ Christian unity for the ECT-supportive evangelical might be evangelicals and Catholics "accepting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ." But, the question must be asked what, ultimately, is the goal of this unity. For Father Neuhaus, it would seem to be, among other things, evangelical submission to the Petrine authority of the Pope and submission to the Eucharist as the continuing sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Again, this doctrinal understanding of Christian unity should come as no surprise to anyone who has read the catechisms of the Roman Catholic Church. Nonetheless, this vision is sharply at odds with the most basic foundations of evangelical soteriology and ecclesiology. This claim to theological consensus therefore can only be described with the words Catholic theologians have used historically to deride the Protestant understanding of justification through faith alone in Christ alone. It is a "legal fiction."

And so, on these central issues, the evangelical and Catholic participants of the ECT project seem to be working from very different presuppositions and toward two very different goals. Perhaps not surprisingly, these central issues are the very matters that constituted the Ref-

ormation churches' break from Rome in the first place. Until both sides can transcend this problem, the ECT project will be saddled with one of the most unfortunate legacies of contemporary evangelical theology. After all, American parachurch evangelicalism has a long track-record of attempting to base theological consensus on *ad hoc*, doctrinally minimalist statements, ranging from "The Fundamentals" at the turn of the twentieth century to "An Evangelical Celebration" at the turn of the twenty-first, a document several participants at the Beeson conference dubbed "evangelicals and evangelicals together."⁴⁰ While evangelical refusal to divide over secondary matters such as eschatological timetables served the movement well, it might also be argued that this skittishness over doctrinal precision for the sake of cooperation is what has led to an evangelical movement so theologically anemic that the Evangelical Theological Society now finds itself in a perennial dispute over whether God knows the future.⁴¹

ECT and the Future of Evangelical Theology

If indeed the ECT project shares characteristics of both the best and worst aspects of contemporary evangelical theology, what then are the implications for the future directions of conservative Protestant theological and cultural engagement? Positively, the ECT documents model for evangelical theology what at least some strands of Roman Catholicism has always seemed to know: that matters of social, cultural, and political engagement cannot be severed from the task of theological scrutiny. There are helpful signs of such a theologically rigorous evangelical engagement in, for

instance, the cultural activism of the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC's nineteenth century legacy of an understanding of the "spirituality of the church," which sharply divided the "spiritual" matters of redemption and piety from "secular" matters of state and culture, proved costly to the spiritual health of the denomination as the churches largely refused to raise a prophetic voice against slavery, racial segregation, and other social evils. The current SBC leadership seems, however, to recognize that matters of human life, liberty, and dignity are indeed theological matters. Thus, the SBC (to no small criticism from its dissident left wing) has addressed matters such as racism, family deterioration, and the encroaching "culture of death" in its confessional statement, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. This is precisely the kind of "uneasy conscience" the postwar generation of evangelical theologians sought to awaken.

Similarly, the ECT project offers the possibility that evangelical theology might begin the process of constructing a distinctively evangelical public philosophy, a deficiency the ECT project underscores. It is not in error, after all, that Neuhaus spoke of President George W. Bush "listening carefully" to the Pope. In fact, it would seem that President Bush might more accurately be described as listening carefully to Father Neuhaus, a development for which conservative evangelicals should be grateful. Evangelical theology should not allow concerns over ECT to force them into an intellectual isolationism from our cultural allies in the Catholic communion. Still, it should be disconcerting for evangelicalism, a movement formed at least in part to engage the world politically and socially,

that the theoretical foundations of contemporary evangelical public engagement are not found in Reformation political thought or evangelical theology, but instead from a vibrant Catholic intellectual movement. As the *New Republic* magazine has noted of projects such as ECT, “evangelical reliance on Catholics isn’t simply a function of goodwill; it’s a function of need.”⁴² This is because, the magazine perceives, Catholic neo-conservatives such as Neuhaus and Michael Novak, unlike many contemporary evangelical culture warriors, have seen “their project as theological as well as political.”⁴³

The prospects for such an evangelical renaissance are called into question, however, by the evangelical theological ambiguities highlighted in the ECT process. Evangelical theology will never be able to dialogue with Roman Catholic thinkers on the question of religious liberty without a serious discussion of basic theological differences of ecclesiology and the biblical mandate of a separation of the church and the state. The evangelicals of 1960 were perhaps motivated by bigotry when they laid out doomsday scenarios of the Pope running the White House through John F. Kennedy. They were also, as Father Neuhaus points out, a bit naïve as to the depth of Kennedy’s Catholicism. Even so, there is within the Protestant historical memory of several bloody attempts at Constantinian church/state alliances, which were motivated far too often by basic Catholic theological understandings of the nature of the church.⁴⁴ Until evangelical theology overcomes its fear that ecclesiological distinctives might imperil the parachurch coalition, these theological discussions may never get off the ground.

Nonetheless, the most pressing need

for evangelical theology to continue its dialogue with Roman Catholicism is the shoring up of its own understanding of soteriology. It is difficult to see how evangelical theology can craft a coherent understanding of the justice of God in the public ordering of society if it cannot articulate a coherent understanding of the justice of God in the forgiveness of sins (Rom 3:26). Some argue that evangelicals simply need to overcome their populist legacy of the “sawdust trail” of crisis evangelism. S. M. Hutchens, for instance, contends that confessional Protestant opposition to ECT springs less from the sixteenth-century disputations than from the twentieth-century crusade tents: “When these appeal to justification by faith alone they are appealing to the revivalist soteriology of the evangelical masses, who associate the doctrine with their belief that once one has a punctiliar conversion experience, one’s soul is eternally secure.”⁴⁵ Still, whatever the inadequacies of some streams of evangelical revivalism, the essential message of sin, a finished atonement, and once-for-all justification is very much in continuity with the point of the Protestant Reformation and, more importantly, with the gospel proclaimed by the apostles and Jesus Himself.⁴⁶

With such the case, the evangelical “uneasy conscience” cannot afford to ignore the mandate to join with Roman Catholics and others in the naked public square. At the same time, however, the evangelical conscience will grow uneasier yet if it is not honest about the convictions that make it evangelical in the first place. This means that, if evangelicals believe what they claim to affirm about the gospel, they must recognize the implications of their soteriology. If salvation means that

the sinner must abandon all hope of being found righteous through anything within himself, and must cling solely to an external righteousness accomplished by the one Mediator between God and humanity, then evangelicals must sadly conclude that the official teaching of the Catholic Church teaches another way of salvation. Father Neuhaus models this kind of candor to evangelicals when he announces his prayer that the “sawdust trail” will lead ultimately to Rome. Evangelical theology must respond that our prayer is to see our Roman Catholic co-belligerents join us, not only on the picket line, but in the baptistery as well. If evangelical theology loses this, then, whatever else is gained, there is not much of a “sawdust trail” left to discuss.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Richard John Neuhaus, “The Meaning of Christian America” (address given to the “Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail: Evangelical Conversations” symposium, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, AL, 2 October 2001. Audiocassettes of the conference are available from Beeson Divinity School.
- ²“Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, ed. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus (Dallas: Word, 1995) xv-xxxiii. This statement was followed in 1998 by another document, this one more narrowly focused on soteriology. “The Gift of Salvation,” *First Things*, January 1998, 20-23.
- ³“Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” xxiv.
- ⁴The first ECT statement notes: “We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.” “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” xviii. The second statement goes even further to assert: “We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).” “The Gift of Salvation,” 21.
- ⁵Charles W. Colson, “The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War in Protestant Perspective,” in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, 38.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “The Catholic Difference,” in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, 178.
- ⁸Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947). As the editor of the Billy Graham Association’s *Decision* magazine would put it: “The book dropped like a bomb into the peaceful summer Bible conference atmosphere of the postwar evangelical community.” Sherwood Eliot Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 47.
- ⁹For an analysis of the mediating position of Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience* between the options of Protestant fundamentalism and Social Gospel liberalism, see Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 138-45.
- ¹⁰Henry, *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 48-57.
- ¹¹For a fuller treatment of this, see Russell D. Moore, “Kingdom Theology and the American Evangelical Consensus: Emerging Implications for Sociopolitical Engagement” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, forthcoming). This study claims that the seem-

ingly insurmountable differences within the postwar evangelical coalition on matters of eschatology, soteriology, and ecclesiology have largely been resolved in recent years by a growing rapprochement within the dispensationalist and covenantalist wings of evangelicalism.

¹²Carl F. H. Henry, "The Vigor of the New Evangelicalism," *Christian Life*, March 1948, 38.

¹³Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982) 68-69.

¹⁴*Christianity Today*, for instance, noted the Supreme Court's seismic legalization of abortion by blankly reporting that the decision "brought, as expected, immediate response from the nation's Roman Catholic leaders." "Abortion Decision: A Death Blow?" *Christianity Today*, 16 February 1973, 48.

¹⁵Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) xii.

¹⁶Peter Kreeft, *Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the Culture War* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996) 20-21.

¹⁷One such voice was that of Henry's fellow neo-evangelical theologian Bernard Ramm who argued that the biblical injunction for evangelicals is simply "but to (1) evangelize, and (2) keep my spiritual life at the right level." Bernard Ramm, "Is Doctor Henry Right? No!" *United Evangelical Action*, 15 July 1947, 16.

¹⁸To those who wished to jettison political engagement for an exclusive emphasis on personal evangelism and piety, Henry said the following: "Perhaps, despite all that

I have said, somebody here is looking for a bomb shelter in which to propagate the evangelical faith. If so, let me propose a change on your reading list: retire your Bible to the Smithsonian Institute and get a copy of the Dead Sea Scrolls instead. The Essene caves are waiting for you. You won't have to worry about the world outside. You won't have to worry about neo-evangelicals. You won't have to worry about anything. And in A. D. 4000 some roving archaeologists from Mars may discover in those Judean hills that, during the great crisis of the twentieth century, Saint Kilroy slept here." Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco: Word, 1966) 50.

¹⁹Jerry Falwell, "An Agenda for the 1980s," in *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987) 113; Ralph Reed, *After the Revolution: How the Christian Coalition is Impacting America* (Dallas: Word, 1996) 18.

²⁰Thereby causing some evangelical theologians such as Henry to recoil in horror at the perception of evangelical political activists "hurriedly attaching Christian identity to specific legislative proposals such as a balanced-budget amendment or line-item veto." Carl F. H. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* (Nashville: Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1996) 53.

²¹Ralph Reed, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of Ameri-*

can Politics (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 112. Former Moral Majority organizer Cal Thomas likewise recounts his disaffection at the personality-driven politics of the 1980s, anchored first to disappointment with evangelical President Jimmy Carter, who turned out to be hostile to evangelical concerns, and then with Reagan, whose legislative achievements on cultural issues were not as far-reaching as evangelical political activists had hoped. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 11, 22.

²²Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 38.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴J. I. Packer, "On from Orr: Cultural Crisis, Rational Realism, and Incarnational Ontology," in *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox in Dialogue*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997) 155-176.

²⁵Colson, "The Common Cultural Task," 38.

²⁶See, for instance, elsewhere in this same journal R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Standing Together, Standing Apart: Cultural Co-belligerence Without Theological Compromise."

²⁷Richard John Neuhaus, "The Catholic Difference," in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, 210.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 211.

²⁹J. I. Packer, "Crosscurrents Among Evangelicals," in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, 157-159.

³⁰Keith Fournier, *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994).

³¹Ibid., 213.

³²Frank D. Macchia, "Justification and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Reflection on the Doctrine by which the Church Stands or Falls," *Pneuma* 22 (2000) 5.

³³Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994) 28-30.

³⁴Packer, "Crosscurrents Among Evangelicals," 167.

³⁵Richard John Neuhaus, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together Forum" (address given to the "Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail: Evangelical Conversations" symposium, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, AL, 3 October 2001). Audiocassettes of the conference are available from Beeson Divinity School.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰The latter document, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration," was signed by a coalition of evangelicals ranging from Calvinist R. C. Sproul to Wesleyan Thomas Oden to church growth leader Bill Hybels. Still, even it did not avoid controversy within the evangelical movement. Biblical scholar Robert Gundry, for instance, points to the forensic justification language in the document as representative of Reformed theological hegemony within American evangelicalism. Robert H. Gundry, "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,'" *Books*

and Culture, January/February 2001, 6-9. See also Thomas Oden's reply to Gundry, "A Calm Answer," *Books and Culture*, March/April 2001, 12-13. For expanded commentary on the "Celebration" statement, see John Akers, John Armstrong, and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *This We Believe: The Good News of Jesus Christ for the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

⁴¹For the doctrinal foundations of the "open theism" debate and its relevance for evangelical authenticity, see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

⁴²Franklin Foer, "Spin Doctrine," *New Republic*, 5 June 2000, 20.

⁴³Ibid., 18.

⁴⁴Nor should it be thought that Catholic social thought has decisively settled the issues of religious liberty and church/state separation. A recent, very provocative work by a brilliant Catholic legal theorist combines confessional Catholicism with the postmodernism of Stanley Fish to call into question the very concept of "religious liberty," arguing that the idea rests on the untenable presuppositions of Enlightenment liberalism and Baptist populism. Kenneth R. Craycraft, Jr., *The American Myth of Religious Freedom* (Dallas: Spence, 1999).

⁴⁵S. M. Hutchens, "A (Somewhat) Protestant Response to Richard John Neuhaus," in *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, 65.

⁴⁶This debate did not materialize with the ECT discussions. The "Evangelical Affirmations" statement laments

the fact that "some have declared that several evangelical doctrines are theologically innovative and do not represent the central traditions of the Christian church." This statement, drafted by a broad coalition of evangelical leaders, sought to refute this claim, along with the similar suggestion that evangelicalism "suddenly" arose from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivals. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, eds., *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).