

GETTING  
THE  
GOSPEL  
RIGHT

THE TIE *That* BINDS  
EVANGELICALS TOGETHER

R. C. SPROUL



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## PREFACE

IT IS AXIOMATIC that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Perhaps the oldest stratagem for military success is the ploy that seeks to “divide and conquer.”

When Christians sing together “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” it is not a vacuous exercise in maudlin celebration. The unity Christians share together is so precious that it truly does incarnate the blessing of God to us. This unity is as important as it is at times precarious. By this unity we are strengthened and mutually encouraged to fidelity to Christ and the mission He has given His church.

The loss of Christian unity at any point is tragic and destructive. When that loss threatens our unity in the gospel itself, it is catastrophic. To work toward unity in the gospel is not a matter of ecclesiastical politics; it is a matter that touches the soul of the church itself and the souls of all its members.

To seek unity in the gospel is neither a quixotic crusade nor a frivolous search; it is a matter of the most urgent priority for the Christian. All who embrace the gospel and love its content are visited by a divine mandate to preserve that unity and to defend it together. The gospel is our hope and our life, the most excellent

and sweet truth that we have. Beside it lesser theological differences pale into insignificance. In the gospel we experience the power of God unto salvation and hear not only “good news,” but the best of all possible news. This unity is so priceless that it is worth contending, fighting, and dying for. It is a family matter for the people of God who have been adopted into the Father’s house and who are loyal to the Son, who is our Elder Brother.

The truth of the gospel must be maintained for Christ’s sake and for our own. Indeed it is our eternal link to Christ and the means through which we become His in the first place. In the gospel we meet the One who is our only hope in life and death, and by the gospel we acquire a hope that will never leave us ashamed.

For many years I have been deeply concerned about the state of evangelical unity in the United States. This concern was provoked initially by the release of the document entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT)*<sup>1</sup> and by the subsequent document entitled *The Gift of Salvation (GOS)*.<sup>2</sup> Many evangelicals were sharply divided by these documents. The effort to seek unity and accord with Roman Catholics had the negative effect of driving a wedge between evangelicals who formerly were closely allied.

I am numbered among those who believe that both *ECT* and *GOS* are seriously flawed. In part 2 of this volume, I point out where I think *GOS* is seriously flawed. But despite the tensions arising from these issues, or because of them, deep discussions have taken place among evangelicals who are seeking to heal the rift engendered by this debate and to come together with a strong and unambiguous declaration of our abiding unity in the gospel, despite our differences over *ECT* and *GOS*. In February 1998 discussions took place among those who supported *GOS* and those who rejected it. These discussions included initially Charles Colson, Timothy George, John Woodbridge, John Ankerberg, Michael Horton, John Armstrong, and myself. We all agreed that what was urgently needed to restore evangelical unity was a joint statement regarding the gospel and justification by faith alone that could

reaffirm the unity that has existed historically among a wide and diverse body of evangelical Christians.

As a result of these discussions, a committee was selected to draft a document for the endorsement of evangelical leaders that would cross denominational and sectarian lines. The drafting committee included the following members: John Ankerberg, John Armstrong, John N. Akers, David Neff, Timothy George, J. I. Packer, Erwin Lutzer, John Woodbridge, R. C. Sproul, D. A. Carson, Thomas C. Oden, Scott Hafemann, Keith Davy, Maxie Dunnam, and Harold Myra. Significant input was also given by David Wells.

The drafting committee worked carefully through several drafts and emendations to produce the document, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*, that will be analyzed in part 3 of this book.<sup>3</sup> The experience was one marked by a profound spirit of congeniality and mutual respect. The agreements set forth were genuine and heartfelt, leaving the committee members with a spirit of joy and encouragement.

The document was then presented to some prominent evangelical leaders for their endorsement.

*Part 1*

CONTROVERSY  
CONCERNING  
THE GOSPEL

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## Unity and the Gospel

**B**ELIEVE IN THE COMMUNION of the saints. . . .” This affirmation is declared weekly by myriads of Christians assembled for worship in congregations around the world. It is a crucial affirmation of the Apostles’ Creed. That the *communio sanctorum* is an article of catholic Christianity, a universal article of historic Christian faith, underlines the gravity of its importance to the people of God.

This confession has several important aspects to it. Among these is the recognition that Christians from every tribe and tongue and nation, from varied and diverse ecclesiastical communities, enjoy a unity of fellowship that is supernatural in its cause and in the reality of its very essence. A communion is a union *with* something. In this case it is a union with people. The specific people in view in the creedal affirmation are called “the saints.” The reference to “saints” is not restricted to those few extraordinary Christians who have been canonized by a specific institution or who have the title “saint” before their names, such as St. Paul, St. Peter, St. Augustine,

St. Francis, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Here the term *saint* is applied to all believers, following the nomenclature of the New Testament, in which rank-and-file Christians are addressed as “saints” or “the holy ones” (*hagioi*).

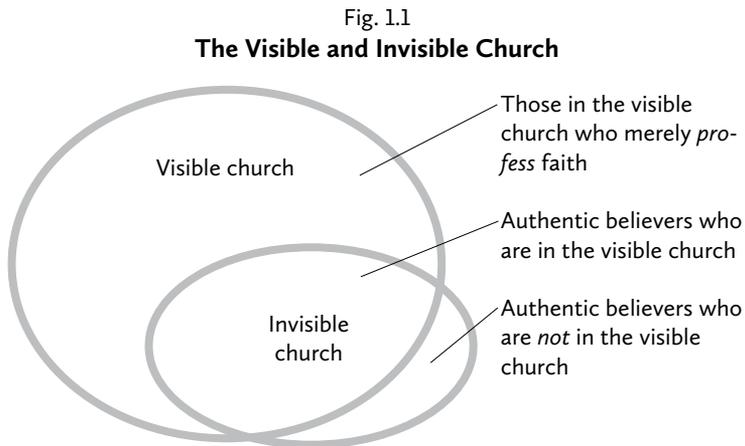
Those who are called saints in the New Testament are not so-named because they have achieved a singularly high level of righteousness or a unique degree of sanctification. They are called saints because they have been “set apart” or consecrated to a holy mission and belong to a holy fellowship by virtue of their inclusion in the body of Christ. They are the people who have been regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In a word, they are the elect of God from every nation.

### **The Visible and Invisible Church**

The distinction between the visible and invisible church of Christ owes much of its definition to the thinking of St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, who is generally regarded as the greatest theologian of the first millennium of Christian history, if not of all time. Augustine sought to expound the teaching of Christ and His apostles regarding the biblical metaphor of tares and wheat who coexist in the visible or outward congregations of Christian churches. The Bible clearly indicates that it is possible for people to make a profession of faith and unite themselves to a congregation while not actually possessing the faith they profess. Christ spoke of the facility by which people can honor Him with their lips while their hearts are far removed from Him (Mark 7:6). He warned in the Sermon on the Mount that on the last day people will say, “Lord, Lord” whom He will dismiss from His presence with the dreadful words, “I never knew you; depart from Me” (Matt. 7:23). In like manner James expounded the problem of those who declare they have faith but whose faith is moribund, yielding no fruit and displaying no works consistent with genuine saving faith (James 2:20).

Augustine's concept of the invisible church was not an ancient paradigm for an underground church or for a few loose groups of people who do not join or participate in the life of an organized church or community of believers. For Augustine the term *invisible church* refers substantially to people who are inside the visible church. It refers to those within the visible church who are the wheat rather than the tares. It incorporates all who are in Christ Jesus. There are not two separate bodies, one inside the visible institution we call the organized church, and the other outside the parameters of the institutional church. Again, the invisible church is to be found *within* the visible church. We note, however, that Augustine spoke of the invisible church's being found *substantially* within the visible church. This differs from saying that the invisible church is contained exclusively within the visible church. Augustine recognized that for various reasons at various times, some members of the invisible church may not be within the visible church.

How is it possible for a person to be in the invisible church but not at the same time in the visible church? In the first instance we can point to individuals who have the desire to unite with a



visible church but who are providentially hindered from doing so. Suppose, for example, a person is converted to Christ. On the way to join a local church, he is hit by a car or suffers a fatal heart attack and dies before he has the opportunity to do so. We think immediately of the thief on the cross who embraced Christ in his dying moments (assuming he was not a believer before that time) and received the comforting assurance from Jesus that he would soon join Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:43).

A second category includes people who in their spiritual infancy mistakenly believe it is not their duty to unite with a visible church. They may remain in error for a season, even though they are truly converted.

A third category includes those for whom there is no available visible church to join. This may involve prisoners in solitary confinement, those held in concentration camps, or people who live in isolated wilderness spots remote from any body of believers.

A fourth category includes believers who have been excommunicated from the visible church. It might surprise some that this category is even included. But it must be for the following reasons. First, the person may be the victim of an unjust excommunication. That is, the church may have erred in her judgment of excommunication and cast out a member who is wheat, mistaking him for a tare. Second, the person may have justly and properly been excommunicated while in a protracted period of impenitence, even though he is truly converted. Excommunication, among other things, is a final step of discipline for church members, but it carries the hope that it will lead the person to repentance, with him being restored to full fellowship. The classic case is the incestuous man of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5:1). While in the state of excommunication, the person is to be *regarded* as an unbeliever, yet with the understanding that the church can only look at the outward appearance while God alone can read his heart.

A fifth category includes those who are in the invisible church but are united with false or apostate visible institutions that claim

to be churches. This category has posed a serious problem for the church of all ages. In antiquity heretical movements arose such as Montanism, Arianism, and Monophysitism, the leaders of which were declared heretics and banished from the visible church. Not all of these heretics went away quietly. Often they continued their false teaching and organized followers into “churches.” Some of these heretical bodies captured true believers in their fold, at least for a season. This category recognizes that a member of the invisible church may for one reason or another be enrolled in a false visible church, which in reality is not a church.

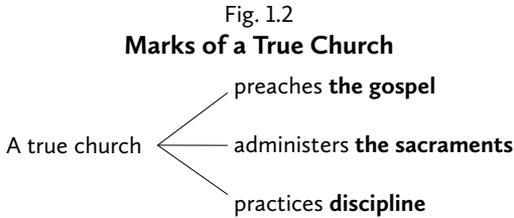
Probably at no time in church history was the question more acute than during the catastrophic upheaval of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. This resulted in the most severe fragmentation of the visible church in the history of Christendom. When Martin Luther was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, was he therefore outside the invisible church? When Protestants organized into various groups such as Baptists, Lutherans, Reformed, and Episcopalians, were these groups valid churches or false churches? And what of Rome? Many of those who left the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century did not hesitate to declare Rome apostate and therefore no longer a true church.

The issue became for Protestants not so much the question, what is *the* true church? Instead it was, what is *a* true church? Rome continued to assert that she was not only *a* true church, but *the* true church. That assertion was strongly challenged by Protestants. Again the challenge was not simply that Rome was not the true church, but that she was no longer a genuine visible church at all.

### **When Is a Church Not a Church?**

In the ensuing years following the outbreak of the Reformation, various communions and sects arose that went in widely different directions. The question of what is a sect, a cult, or a bona fide church became critical to many people who earnestly desired to be

faithful to Christ but found it difficult to discern the marks of a true visible church. Out of this conflict and the reflection it provoked came the historic Protestant view of the marks of a true church: (1) the preaching of the gospel, (2) the due administration of the sacraments, and (3) the presence of church discipline (which included some form of ecclesiastical government necessary to that end).



The first mark was conceived in terms of not only the *practice* of preaching but also its *content*. In this regard the criterion was intensely theological. The concept of the “gospel” included the content of truth that is essential to biblical Christianity. For example, the content included the major tenets of historic Christian orthodoxy such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atonement, and the resurrection. These affirmations were embodied in the classical creeds and confessions of the ancient ecumenical councils such as Nicea and Chalcedon. If an organization that rejected essential elements of historic, catholic Christianity claimed to be a church, this claim was rejected. In modern terms we ask the question, Is the Church of the Latter Day Saints a true church? Is the organization called Jehovah’s Witnesses a true church? Certainly Mormons claim to be a church. Not only that, but they claim to be a *Christian* church. Jesus has a prominent role in their religion. He is venerated and elevated to a position of honor. Mormons even speak of having a “personal relationship” with Christ. Yet both Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses categorically deny Christ’s deity. Likewise the Trinity is denied by some groups organized as churches, such as the Unitarians.

Those who adhere to the marks of the church as formulated by the Protestant Reformers do not accept the bodies mentioned above because, not only are they infected by theological error or heresy, but their errors and heresies involve the rejection of truths or doctrines essential to biblical Christianity. These institutions, though claiming to be churches, are regarded as false churches, sects, or cults by orthodox Christianity.

Is it then possible for a true Christian to be a member of any of these institutions? The answer must be yes. Not every member of an institution affirms everything the institution formally affirms, or denies everything the institution denies. It is possible for a person to be a member of a Mormon community and still believe in the deity of Christ, just as it is possible for a person to be a member of a visible church that affirms the deity of Christ while privately rejecting this doctrine.

As late as the nineteenth century at Vatican Council I (1870), Rome referred to Protestants as schismatics and heretics. The tone of Rome changed dramatically in our own day at Vatican II (1965), where Protestants were referred to as “separated brethren.” This was not a tacit recognition that Protestant churches are valid, but a clear affirmation that true believers can be found in institutions that have separated from Holy Mother Church.

When the Reformers declared Rome apostate and no longer a true church, they did so not because Rome denied the Trinity, the deity of Christ, His atonement, and His resurrection, all of which were deemed of the *esse* or essence of Christian truth, but because Rome condemned the doctrine of justification by faith alone or *sola fide*. The Reformers believed that *sola fide* is an essential truth of biblical Christianity. To deny this or any other essential truth would disqualify an institution from being a valid or true church. It was not as if the Reformers thought Rome was so apostate that she denied *all* the essential truths of biblical Christianity. On the contrary, they recognized that Rome retained and maintained her confession of many essential truths of Christianity.

For Luther the conviction that *sola fide* is “the article upon which the church stands or falls” was not an idle bit of bombast or a theological tilting at windmills. For him this was no tempest in a teapot or exercise in shadow-boxing. Nor could he be convinced that the whole controversy was simply a matter of an unfortunate or tragic misunderstanding among the parties involved. If ever a theological controversy received close and detailed scrutiny about what was being confessed and denied by the disputing parties, it was the controversy over justification.

If the church’s condemnation of Arius was not based on a misunderstanding, it is even more certain that Rome’s condemnation of *sola fide* was not based on a misunderstanding. To be sure, during the course of the controversy, as in the case of most such controversies, misunderstandings did occur, and at times they seemed to abound. Even a cursory reading of the canons of the sixth session of the Council of Trent reveals that, though there were still issues clouded by misunderstanding, the essential point of disagreement was not missed by either party.<sup>1</sup>

For Martin Luther and later John Calvin, the normative status of *sola fide* is crucial to the question of a true church versus an apostate church. They reasoned that *sola fide* is *essential* to the biblical gospel. When an essential truth of the gospel is condemned, the gospel itself is condemned with it, and without the gospel an institution is not a Christian church. This is simply another way of saying that the gospel is an essential, if not *the* essential, of biblical Christianity, and that it is the first mark of the church.

Rome was convinced that the gospel Luther and Calvin taught was a false gospel. That is precisely why Rome condemned *sola fide*. If it were correct, then its claim to be a true church and also *the* true church is vindicated, and it would be Luther, Calvin, and Protestants who were involved in apostate bodies. On the other hand, if Rome was wrong in condemning *sola fide*, it was condemning itself to apostasy.

If Rome is not a valid visible church, is it possible that within its membership there are Christians, members of the invisible church? Surely the answer to this question must be yes. It is not only possible, but highly likely, especially in light of the cross-communication between Protestants and Catholics in our day, that there are multitudes of people within the Roman Catholic communion who belong to Christ and are a part of His mystical body, the church, if only in its invisible corporation.

### **When Must a Believer Dis-Unite?**

A question that vexes many earnest Christians is this: When must they leave the fellowship of a visible church? The question is exacerbated in our times by the casual and cavalier manner in which Christians engage in “church-hopping,” moving from one denomination to another. It is exacerbated in the other direction by the premium placed on church unity, guarding it at all costs regardless the loss of purity and truth. Some churches require their pastors to take a sacred vow to work for the peace, purity, and unity of the church. But if the church becomes impure in its doctrine or its practice and the pastor earnestly seeks to purify the church, he is almost always accused of disturbing the church’s peace and unity. Such was the fate of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, who discovered that to preserve all three equally, peace, purity, and unity, is a “mission impossible.”

In reality churches often lapse into states of corruption and grievous error. To abandon a church because of minor impurities is to lack charity. No church is perfect in its purity, in either doctrine or practice. Patience and charity are called for when the church falters. Yet there is a point at which the believer not only may but must leave the communion of a visible church. That is when the church becomes so corrupt that it enters a state of apostasy. Apostasy occurs when a church denies an essential truth of the Christian faith. If, for example, the church denies the gospel

or abandons the sacraments, it ceases to be a true church and the believer is obligated to withdraw from it.

There are circumstances when believers acknowledge that their communions have become apostate but insist on remaining within them in order to work for their restoration or reformation. These sentiments are indeed noble but often leave the believers in a state of chronic conflict.

Inseparably related to the unity that believers enjoy by virtue of their inclusion in the invisible church is the unity that serves as the very basis for inclusion in that church, namely, our union with Christ. With respect to our personal relationship with Christ, the New Testament makes use of two vital prepositions: *in (en)* and *into (eis)*. In the biblical call to faith we are summoned to believe “into Christ.” When we exercise such faith, we become “in Christ” and Christ is in us. Though being in Christ is intensely personal and individual, it is never individualistic. Every individual who is personally united to Christ is at the same time personally united with every other person who is in Christ. This comprises the fullness of our mystical union with Christ and defines the reality of the communion of saints. The individual believer never lives in isolation but is always incorporated. A true Christian may be described as a Christian, Incorporated. We are incorporated because we are immediately placed within a corporate organism, the *vere corpus*, or the true body of Christ. The church then is not merely an organization; it is a living organism, made up of its various vital parts.

When the New Testament uses the metaphor of the body to describe the church, it speaks of a unity in diversity. The human body is composed of various parts that individually and together are functionally necessary to the health of the whole. The eye is as vital as the ear, though performing different functions. In the church there are different tasks and different gifts, all of which are vital to the church’s well-being and are necessary for fulfilling its mission.

Beyond the diversity of gifts and functions in the church, there are other points of diversity. The church is made up of people,

and people are different in a multitude of ways. People from all sorts of backgrounds, ethnic and socioeconomic, are bonded together in the church. All the diversity of human personality is represented. The church has people who are extroverted and introverted. Some are loquacious, while others are taciturn. In addition the church is composed of people who are at vastly different points in their spiritual pilgrimages and at widely diverse levels of personal sanctification.

There is a common goal of conformity—to the image of Christ. We are all called to imitate Him, seeking His mind and obeying His rule. In this sense there is a call to uniformity. But this is not a drab, colorless uniformity that forces people into molds that rob them of their individuality. That sort of uniformity is not redemptive but dehumanizing. The goal of Christian sanctification is not the loss of personality or individuality such as promised in religions that seek the absorption of the self into some world-soul, by which the self is engulfed by the whole and swallowed up in oblivion. For the Christian this union with and conformity to Christ enhances his personal self, not annihilates it. The church is the ultimate embodiment of the motto *e pluribus unum*.

### **Christ's Prayer for Unity**

In any discussion of Christian unity or of ecumenical aspirations, Christ's high-priestly prayer for unity in John 17 comes to the forefront. Our Lord prayed that His people might be one in a way that parallels the Son's unity with the Father (v. 20–23). Obviously this does not entail a prayer for substantial ontological unity such as that enjoyed by the Godhead. But it surely encompasses an analogical unity of purpose and mission among Christ's disciples such as is found in the union of purpose and mission displayed between the Father and the Son, as well as the Holy Spirit. The trinitarian God never works at cross purposes (no pun intended) with Himself.

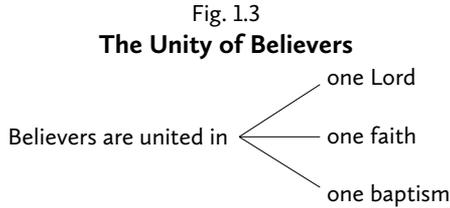
Never is there a hint of conflict or fragmentation within the Godhead. The unity that exists there is eternally perfect and incapable of either augmentation or diminution. But such conflict and fragmentation does exist among us. Does this mean that the intercessory prayer of Christ has failed or been rendered ineffectual? Surely we can never assume that our Priest has failed us or that His intercessory work has been impotent. Christ's prayer for unity has an "already" and a "not yet" dimension to it. True unity already exists in the invisible church and is enjoyed in the here and now of Christian experience. There remains an eschatological hope whose fulfillment is certain for the saints in heaven, but unity among believers already exists in our mystical union with Christ.

This union indicates that we share one Lord. The New Testament, however, speaks of a threefold unity we are to seek, including "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). Of these three the second seems to be the greatest obstacle to ecumenical unity among adherents of various Christian communities.

What is the meaning of "one faith"? The term *faith* in the New Testament is multifaceted. Faith may refer to the individual's act of believing, or it may refer to that which is believed, the content of that faith.

In contemporary terms Christians are believers. They believe essentially in the same God and in the same Christ, but they often differ widely regarding the full content of their doctrinal affirmations. In Christian nomenclature the term *faith* refers specifically to the doctrines or creeds espoused by believers. We sometimes speak of the "Christian faith"—indicating the sum and substance of our creedal affirmations. It is not by accident, for example, that the Apostles' Creed begins with the word *credo*, "I believe . . ."

In the second Evangelicals and Catholics Together initiative, *The Gift of Salvation*, one point of agreement reached by the participating Roman Catholics and evangelicals is that saving faith involves more than mere intellectual assent.<sup>2</sup> Surely this reference to intellectual assent has in mind the Reformers' exposition of the



nature of saving faith, that this faith has at least three essential elements, *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. The second of these, *assensus*, refers to the believer's intellectual assent to something. But mere intellectual assent to certain truths is not enough. A bare intellectual assent to doctrine falls short of *fiducia*, a personal trust, which is necessary for justification.

Though the signatories of GOS agreed that saving faith involves *more* than mere intellectual assent, we must assume that they also tacitly agreed that saving faith does not involve *less* than *assensus*.

We have given a more full exposition of the elements of saving faith in the book *Faith Alone*.<sup>3</sup> For now let me repeat that these elements include aspects that are *necessary conditions* for justification, which in isolation from *fiducia* do not meet the level of *sufficient condition*. That is, though *notitia* and *assensus* are *necessary* for salvation, they are not enough to gain salvation.

To get to the problem of unity, we must look not only at the questions of assent and trust (*assensus* and *fiducia*) but also to the first element, *notitia*.

*Notitia* or, as it is sometimes described, *notae* refers to the content of faith, the data understood and affirmed by the mind. This simply means that saving faith has content. In believing, there must be something that we believe. Faith does not exist in a vacuum, or perhaps more accurately as a vacuum. A vacuous faith is an oxymoron.

The *notitia* contains the essential truths of the Christian faith, such as the existence, nature, and character of God, the person and work of Christ, and the nature of the gospel.

With respect to the latter, before we can believe the gospel we must have some idea of its content. Before we can have unity in the gospel, we must agree to what the gospel is.

The same may be true about God and Christ. For example, if a person “believes” in Christ in the sense that he affirms that Christ was merely a great human teacher of ethics who died as a moral example of the virtuous man, whose virtue is to be imitated by His followers but who offered no atonement, and who stayed dead without resurrection and ascension, is this “faith” in Jesus saving faith? Here the *notitia* of such faith falls short of biblical faith and leaves us with a gospel that is not the biblical gospel.

How one understands the person and work of Christ is critical to unity of faith and unity in the gospel. If we differ among ourselves at essential points regarding these matters, we have not achieved the unity of faith of which the Scriptures speak.

As we have seen, evangelicals and Mormons do not share a unity of faith because they differ radically concerning the person of Christ. Such a problem does not exist (in the essentials) between Rome and evangelicalism.