

## **My Review of *Is The Reformation Over?***

**By Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom**

Revised February 27, 2007

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Pastoral ministry in a predominant Roman Catholic culture has sensitized my soul toward these dear people and sharpened my insight into their religious system. Therefore, I was compelled to read *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* by Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom (Baker, 2005).

Noll and Nystrom have produced a work that indicates a good understanding, actually a breadth of knowledge, of the issues, particularly the changes and dialogues of the last 50 years. Their organization and presentation of material is easy to follow. A serious student of this subject will benefit from reading this book.

I agree with their assessment of a number of weaknesses within Evangelicalism.

Evangelicalism is torn by debates over how much contemporary cultures can be accommodated in authentic gospel witness. It is riven by old theological controversies and new battles as well, such as how much cooperation is possible with Roman Catholics. It is threatened with therapy substituting for the gospel and entertainment posing as worship. (Noll. p. 250)

They seem to correctly identify the, or at least a, major difference between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals to be a difference in understanding of the nature of the church. This is helpful, for often in such a discussion we quickly become dominated by one lesser specific issue or another, such as the Mary debate.

As I read the book I began to wonder what was motivating the authors to present agreements between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals in the most favorable light and seemed to minimize the disagreements. As an example they say, "Baptism and other sacraments hint at differing conceptions of the church" (Noll and Nystrom, p 145). I would say they shout aloud at the differences.

It appears that they are motivated by their understanding of the prayer by Jesus Christ in John 17:11 "that they may be one as We are." (prayer usually understood to speak of the unity of believers). Of course there are different interpretations about the kind of unity Christ has in mind here. Note this statement by the Noll and Nystrom:

Asking whether the Reformation is over may not even be the most pertinent question. It may be more to the point to ask other questions: Is God truly going to draw people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation—and major Christian tradition—to worship together the lamb who was slain? Can he really make of them—all these tongues and

peoples and traditions (perhaps a reference to passages such as Revelation 5:9 and 7:9) — a single kingdom united in the body of his Son Jesus Christ? (p. 251)

Also they write, “Because of this prayer (John 17:20-21) and the many other scriptural injunctions to Christian unity, believers must never rest with relativistic acceptance of Christian fragmentation” (Noll and Nystrom, p. 247). Another one, “Many evangelicals, though aware of continuing theological differences, are ready, as a response to Christ’s prayer for unity among his people, to partner with Catholics on many fronts” (Noll and Nysrom, p. 192). The authors seem to imply that this is a good and proper attitude. Also it seems that Noll approaches to be dominated by postmodern interpretive methodology.

It appears that the authors believe the direction of current dialogue is healthy and movement toward unity is desirable. I have **grave concerns about the implications and direction of the book**. There is indeed the danger of a “hoped for” unity based on wishful thinking rather than solid biblical truth.

Noll and Nystrom repeatedly refer to Roman Catholics as our brothers and sisters, “his disciples,” “are Christians together,” “Christian believers, whether Catholic or Evangelical,” and so forth. My grasp of the biblical grace gospel and the understanding of what most Roman Catholic people understand and believe lead me to a different conclusion. When they discussed the 1994 Catholic Catechism on pages 115-150 of their book, why did they not include this statement:

Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, **we can merit** (emphasis mine) for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, **and for the attainment of eternal life.** (emphasis mine) (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City, 1994, page 487).

Contrary to what some Roman Catholic leaders may say (and even believe) the official Roman Catholic view of salvation does not appear to agree with the common evangelical understanding of eternal life by grace alone and faith alone. This clearly expressed by R. C. Sproul in his book *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995).

At the Roman Catholic lay level, for the most part, it is quite clear the biblical description of justification as found in Galatians 2:16 is not understood. The authors even quote Peter Kreeft, Professor at Boston College and a convert to Roman Catholicism from Dutch Reformed Calvinism. Kreeft spoke of losses he felt after he converted from His evangelical roots. In particular Kreeft noted that a serious concern for truth was missing among many Catholics. Kreeft wrote:

“ . . . well over 90% of the students I have polled. . . . Expect to go to heaven because they tried, or did their best, or had compassionate feelings to everyone, or were sincere. *They hardly ever mention Jesus*” (Emphasis mine). (cited by Noll and Nysrrom, page 202).

This observation by Kreeft largely agrees with a survey I did in 1993 regarding what Roman Catholics believed about salvation. Only 15% believed Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. This statement by another convert to Roman Catholicism summarizes what she believes. “Jesus died to open the doors of the kingdom that I might get there by faith plus good works, perhaps by way of purgatory.”

So where is the “same salvation” that the authors (and the March 1994 Evangelical and Catholics Together Accord) say Evangelicals and Catholics understand and possess?

If one is to seriously entertain the question, “Is the Reformation over?” another major category of concern relates to several “truths” one would need to accept in order to answer the question in the affirmative.

First, regarding the Pope, one would need to accept that we all should return to the primacy of the bishop of Rome, the Pope. In other words the Pope would need to be accepted as your “head of the Church” as the vicar of Christ, etc. *Within the Roman Catholic hierarchy there is no serious thought given to discontinuing the papal office.*

The Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) issued *The Final Report of the Anglican/Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission* (the full statement may be accessed at [www.prounione.urbe.it/diaint/arcic/doc/e\\_arcic\\_final.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/diaint/arcic/doc/e_arcic_final.html)<sup>this</sup>). This joint statement declared, “it seems appropriate that in any future union a universal primacy such as has been described (the see of Rome-the Pope) should be held as that see. . . . A universal primacy will be needed in a reunited Church and should appropriately be the primacy of the bishop of Rome” (cited by Noll and Nystrom p. 88). Furthermore “for Roman Catholics reconciliation with the see of Rome is a necessary step towards the restoration of Christian unity” (Noll and Nystrom, p. 96). Clearly, the obvious goal is for all Protestants to come back under the Pope’s authority.

Second, Papal infallibility would need to be accepted and this means, among other things, that he has been prevented by God from teaching error on matters relating to salvation (Noll and Nystrom, p. 96).

Third, regarding authority Roman Catholics believe, “The Church has the authority to interpret scripture and that interpretation is also authoritative” (Noll and Nystrom, p. 96). “The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and the bishops in communion with him” (Noll and Nystrom, p. 132).

Fourth, regarding baptism, the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “baptism confers justification, in fact, the baptism is uniquely necessary for salvation. . . . it removes original sin, puts sin to death, imparts forgiveness of sin, and makes recipients into children of God” (Noll and Nystrom, p. 139).

Fifth, regarding sacraments, “For Catholics, valid sacraments [including baptism which for them “confers justification”] always retain a connection to ordination, which leads back eventually to the pope” (Noll and Nystrom, p. 113).

Finally, my following summation is not from the heart of a Pharasaical self-righteous legalist or an irrational prejudiced “anti-Catholic.” Even though there are changes of a certain kind within the Roman Catholic Church, the question “Is the Reformation over?” is extremely premature. Also, even though there are individual Roman Catholic people who seem to be authentically Christian, the hierarchical Roman Catholic system and the official theology of that system is seriously flawed and is the dominant influence on the Catholic layperson at the parish level. In my view, a more appropriate question would be the issue raised by Michael Horton in *Christianity Today* (July 18, 1994) in an article entitled, “Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue.” The question is: In its present confession, present official theology, is

the Roman Catholic Church an acceptable Christian communion, or is it authentically Christian? Does their concept of the Church and salvation really agree with that established by Jesus Christ and expounded by the Apostles Peter and Paul?

The destiny of many (most) of the one billion Roman Catholic people world wide is at stake. With a sad and concerned heart I take this as a most serious issue.

When the Roman Catholic hierarchy authoritatively, decisively, and convincingly renounces papal primacy and infallibility, the authority of Tradition alongside (above?) Scripture, the interpretive authority of the Magisterium, the Immaculate Conception, bodily assumption and co-mediatrix (co-redemptorist) role of Mary, salvation through the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church and meriting the attainment of eternal life, I would consider approaching the discussion table.