

RESPONSE TO
"EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS TOGETHER"

1995. n. 228. 23-49. 5

5. That Overture 19 be answered in the affirmative as amended and communicated to the signers of the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. *Adopted as amended*

OVERTURE 19 From the Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest
(as amended)
Response to "Evangelicals and Catholics Together"

Whereas, the Presbyterian Church in America is bound by the Word of God as its sole source of faith and life ("*Sola Scriptura*" – 2 Timothy 3:16; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.1-10); and,

Whereas, this church as part of the Body of Christ has been given the sacred responsibility to proclaim the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20) and has the solemn charge to guard the gospel (2 Timothy 1:8-14), not seeking the pleasure of men but of God (Galatians 1:6-10); and,

Whereas, at the very heart of the gospel lies the crucial doctrine of Justification by Faith alone by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ ("*Sola Fide*", "*Solo Christo*" – Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26; 5:1-21; WCF 11.1-6); and,

Whereas, this church should desire to have no fellowship with those who pervert the gospel but rather expose them (Galatians 1:9; 5:7-12; 2 Corinthians 11:1-16); and,

Whereas, the official Roman Catholic doctrine is a perversion of the biblical gospel of justification *sola fide*; and,

Whereas, the Presbyterian Church in America recognizes that there have always been in the Roman Catholic Church those who have a living faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and we have hopes that their number is growing; and,

Whereas, the Roman Catholic Church is not today monolithic in its adherence to Tridentine theology, many Catholic authorities having embraced diminished views of the Bible as the Word of God and Christianity as a supernatural Faith, while some have embraced a more biblical theology; and,

Whereas, the theological ignorance, confusion, and indifference in Evangelical Protestantism is, in many respects, a reproach to the Lord Jesus Christ; and,

Whereas, the doctrine of Justification by Faith is widely misunderstood and misapplied in Evangelical Protestantism as well as in Roman Catholicism; and,

Whereas, certain influential leaders in the Evangelical world have recently signed the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* which clearly suggests that Roman Catholics by virtue of being Roman Catholics are to be considered brothers and sisters in Christ, and suggests, therefore, that the dispute between the churches of the Reformation and Roman Catholicism concerning the doctrine of Justification by Faith is immaterial;

Therefore, the Twenty-Third General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America adopts and directs to be sent to the signatories the following statement in response to *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*:

The Presbyterian Church in America remains fully committed to the Reformed doctrine of Justification by Faith as expressed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* ([Chapter 11](#)) and *Catechisms* (LC 70, 71, 77; SC 33). We reaffirm our intention to proclaim this doctrine to the world and restate our disagreement with any and all doctrinal formulations that fail to uphold the truths of the Protestant Reformation in this most important matter. We further declare that our understanding of justification is not compatible with the teaching of the official Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, we maintain that Biblical unity must be grounded in fidelity to the teaching of Holy Scripture regarding the Person and Work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian Church in America continues to believe that Holy Scripture specifically and emphatically condemns any form of the idea that human works contribute to a sinner's justification before God, a conviction to which J. Gresham Machen gave timeless expression in his summation of the teaching of the Apostle Paul in the *Epistle to the Galatians*:

"What was it that gave rise to the stupendous polemic of the Epistle to the Galatians? To the modern Church the difference would have seemed to be a mere theological subtlety. About many things the Judaizers were in perfect agreement with Paul. The Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah; there is not a shadow of evidence that they objected to Paul's lofty view of the person of Christ. Without the slightest doubt, they believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed, moreover, that faith in Christ was necessary to salvation. But the trouble was, they believed that something else was also necessary; they believed that what Christ had done needed to be pieced out by the believer's own effort to keep the Law. From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight. Paul as well as the Judaizers believed that the keeping of the law of God, in its deepest import, is inseparably connected with faith. The difference concerned only the logical -- not even, perhaps, the temporal -- order of three steps. Paul said that a man (1) first believes on Christ, (2) then is justified before God, (3) then immediately proceeds to keep God's law. The Judaizers said that a man (1) believes on Christ and (2) keeps the law of God the best he can, and then (3) is justified. The difference would seem to modern "practical" Christians to be a subtle and intangible matter, hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large measure of agreement in the practical realm. What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law, even including the unfortunate ceremonial observances! Surely Paul ought to have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity.

"As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he (and others) did nothing of the kind does the Christian Church exist today. Paul saw very clearly that the difference between the Judaizers and

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himself was the difference between two entirely distinct types of religion; it was the difference between a religion of merit and a religion of grace. If Christ provides only a part of our salvation, leaving us to provide the rest, then we are still hopeless under the load of sin. For no matter how small the gap which must be bridged before salvation can be attained, the awakened conscience sees clearly that our wretched attempt at goodness is insufficient even to bridge that gap. The guilty soul enters again into the hopeless reckoning with God, to determine whether we have really done our part. And thus we groan again under the old bondage of the law. Such an attempt to piece out the work of Christ by our own merit, Paul saw clearly, is the very essence of unbelief, Christ will do everything or nothing, and the only hope is to throw ourselves unreservedly on His mercy and trust Him for all.

"Paul certainly was right. The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ". (*Christianity and Liberalism*, New York: Macmillan, 1923, p. 23-25.)

The Presbyterian Church in America acknowledges with sadness that the failure rightly to understand and emphatically to proclaim the doctrine of Justification by Faith alone is a sin to be found among Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. We confess, with shame, the complicity of Protestantism in the theological deterioration of Christianity.

The Presbyterian Church in America humbly acknowledges that Justification is not by faith in a doctrinal formulation but by faith alone in Christ the Redeemer and so it has often happened that people who have a living faith in Christ as their Savior have a most imperfect understanding of that faith and of the way in which salvation comes to them through it. With gratitude to God we gladly welcome certain developments in Roman Catholicism, especially those that have made Holy Scripture a more important part of the faith and piety of many Roman Catholics. We acknowledge that God, in his all-wise providence, has been pleased to put his loved ones in many communions whose doctrine we find unbiblical, even heretical, in important ways.

The Presbyterian Church in America commends the Roman Catholic Church for its principled opposition to some of our national sins and believes that it is altogether proper for the members of this church to be co-belligerents with Roman Catholics in these social and political endeavors.