

**EVANGELICAL/ROMAN CATHOLIC
AGREEMENT ON THE
DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION
AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS
FOR GRACE THEOLOGIANS**

PHILIP F. CONGDON

Elgin, IL

On October 7, 1997, a group of Roman Catholic and Evangelical theologians met in New York City to discuss and define a common theological stand on the issue of salvation. This meeting was called to build on the foundation laid by the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium (ECT)* declaration on March 29, 1994. While the signers make it clear that they are not speaking officially for the various religious traditions which they represent, their sheer collective influence (among Evangelicals, Dr. Bill Bright, Dr. Harold O. J. Brown, Charles Colson, Rev. Max Lucado, Dr. Mark Noll, Dr. James I. Packer, and Dr. John Woodbridge; among Roman Catholics, Fr. James J. Buckley, Fr. Avery Dulles, Dr. Peter Kreeft, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, Mr. Michael Novak, and Dr. Robert Louis Wilken) makes it impossible to overlook their conclusions.¹ These were made public in a statement entitled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Gift of Salvation” (*TGOS*), published for the first time in the December 8, 1997 issue of *Christianity Today*.²

All Christians should rejoice at efforts to clarify misconceptions and increase dialogue between various religious traditions.³ At the same time, all Christians should fervently insist on faithfulness to revealed biblical truth. Unity gained at the expense of truth means defeat for

¹The numbers of evangelical leaders who endorse “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Gift of Salvation” can only be surmised, but the impact of such an esteemed group of leaders is significant. See “Evangelicals, Catholics Issue Salvation Accord,” *Christianity Today* (January 12, 1998): 61-63.

²“Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Gift of Salvation,” *Christianity Today* (December 8, 1997): 35-38 (henceforth referred to as *TGOS*).

³Roman Catholics have long sought to bring unity to the Christian Church (i.e., bringing separated communities into unity with the Pope). However, whereas these attempts were once viewed with deep suspicion by conservative

all. The purpose of this article is to respond to some critical points in the *TGOS* statement.

BACKGROUND: *TGOS* AND R. C. SPROUL'S CRITICISM OF *ECT*

The meeting on October 7, 1997, and the purpose of the resulting statement, was to respond to the strong criticism elicited by the publication of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT)*. When this original declaration was published, it was applauded for showing areas of common interest, such as abortion and education. However, it was criticized for glossing over important differences. No area caused more concern than the doctrine of justification. The conclusion of *ECT* was, "All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ." R. C. Sproul responded to this inclusive statement in his book critiquing *ECT*, entitled *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*.⁴ In it he raised a number of issues, but the essential point that galvanized his response was the failure of *ECT* to affirm that salvation was by faith *alone*, (*sola fide*). He wrote:

The word *alone* was a solecism on which the entire Reformation doctrine of justification was erected. The absence of the word *alone* from *ECT's* joint affirmation is most distressing. Had the document insisted that we are justified by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, because of Christ *alone*, it would have gone much further in securing peace and unity between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. The glaring absence of the word *alone* makes the statement totally inadequate as a rallying point for historical Evangelicalism.⁵

If this were the heart of Sproul's difficulty, he should have been

Evangelicals, they are now being embraced by many. The effectiveness of Roman Catholic efforts in this regard is notable. The encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II in 1995, *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One), embodies the Roman Catholic attempt to bring about broad church unity. (*TGOS* is no doubt a residual effect of these efforts.)

⁴R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995).

⁵*Ibid.*, 36.

⁶"Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A New Initiative," *Christianity*

pleased when *TGOS* addressed this very point. In his sympathetic assessment of *TGOS*, Timothy George writes:

Evangelicals believe that justification by faith alone is at the heart of the gospel. It is, as Luther said in 1537, “the first and chief article,” which cannot be “given up or compromised.” The language about justification in “The Gift of Salvation” echoes the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England: “We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings.”⁶

George then concludes with this assessment:

We rejoice that our Roman Catholic interlocutors have been able to agree with us that the doctrine of justification set forth in this document agrees with what the Reformers meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).⁷

MISSING THE ISSUE

The unexpected willingness of the Roman Catholic signers of *TGOS* to accede to his position may be unnerving to Sproul, since it makes it difficult for him to now not endorse this latest agreement. Others, like John MacArthur, who enthusiastically endorsed Sproul’s book, may also feel uncomfortable sharing a doctrine of justification with Roman Catholic theologians.⁸

Sproul focused his guns on the failure of *ECT* to affirm “faith alone” (italics mine), but in doing so he missed the most crucial issue. He asked, “Does faith in Christ as Savior and Lord include a trust in the biblical gospel?”⁹ That is, what is the *object* of our faith? Is there a certain content to the gospel, or could those who affirm Jesus as Savior and Lord, and at the same time require works as an additional

Today (December 8, 1997): 34-35.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Of course, both Sproul and MacArthur are uncomfortable having their view of justification endorsed by Roman Catholic leaders, but it may stem more from traditional than theological differences. See “Groups Battle over Catholic Outreach,” *Christianity Today* (March 2, 1998).

⁹*Faith Alone*, 29.

¹⁰Ibid., 36.

qualification for salvation, be rightly termed “brothers and sisters in Christ”? He correctly insisted that the biblical position was that “we are justified by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, because of Christ *alone*.”¹⁰ If we have faith *alone* in Christ *alone*, we are saved.

But hidden in this simple statement is an even more fundamental question, which provided a “doorway to peace” between the so-called “evangelical” position and that of the Roman Catholic theologians who signed *TGOS*. This is found in Sproul’s understanding of the content of saving faith.

WHAT IS SAVING FAITH?

In *Faith Alone*, Sproul addresses the meaning or content of faith, in a section entitled “Lordship Salvation” Controversy.¹¹ Concerning the core issue in this controversy, Sproul writes:

The chief question in dispute was whether a person can be saved by embracing Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. At issue were the necessary conditions or requirements for justification. The debate did not center on merit and grace, but it did (and continues to) center on faith and works.

At the heart of the issue is this question: Does saving faith *necessarily* produce the works of obedience?¹²

The question is simply this: What is faith? Is *saving* faith a special kind of faith which includes *works*? What, if any, is the *necessary* relationship between faith and works for a person to be saved? To put this another way, Does *saving* faith, by definition, include good works, without which there is no salvation? Or, as John MacArthur puts it, Are there certain works that are indispensable to faith, what he calls “faith works,” the absence of which show unquestionably that one does not have saving faith?¹³

Sproul responds to these questions by siding with MacArthur and

¹¹Ibid., 24ff.

¹²Ibid., 25 (italics his).

¹³John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 53. Of course, just exactly what and how many “faith works” are required for one to be saved—or to have some assurance of salvation—is not identified. Any attempt to do this would

affirming the Lordship Salvation position. He states that “true faith necessarily, inevitably, and immediately yields the fruit of works.”¹⁴ What is the end result of taking this position? It creates a requirement for good works without which one cannot have any assurance that he is indeed saved and, in theory at least, without which a person is not saved. We might refer to such works as “Protestant Indulgences.” While Roman Catholic indulgences are presumed to relieve the temporal results of sins, these Protestant indulgences are presumed to relieve the temporal fear that one may not be saved because of the presence of sin. But, like their Roman Catholic kin, Protestant indulgences are destructive to salvation by faith alone.

One must ask, What good does it do to affirm that a person is saved by faith *alone* apart from works, if at the same time you affirm that faith itself *includes* works?¹⁵ What you give with one hand, you take away with the other! This reveals the theological duplicity of the classical Reformed axiom that “though justification is by faith alone, it is not by a faith that is alone.”¹⁶ By insisting on the explicit wording “faith *alone*,” yet proclaiming at the same time that “true faith” necessarily includes subsequent works, Sproul provides a huge loophole through which any synergistic doctrine, such as Roman Catholicism, can easily pass.¹⁷ Suddenly it was not so difficult for the descendants of Wittenberg and Trent to find common ground. And they have.

THE *TGOS* STATEMENT ON FAITH

set off an endless debate among “faith works” proponents from MacArthur to Roman Catholicism, and all points in between! See Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (Victor Books, 1989), 48.

¹⁴*Faith Alone*, 26.

¹⁵Redefining faith to include works is, in fact, exactly what Roman Catholics do; see Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 238. Of this kind of redefinition, the authors state, “This is a classic example of eisegesis, that is, reading into the text what is not there, indeed, in this case, the exact opposite of what is there.”

¹⁶*Faith Alone*, 26.

¹⁷In the ongoing discussion over *TGOS*, this issue has repeatedly come to the forefront. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, comprised of a number of respected evangelical leaders, including R. C. Sproul, (whose opposition to *ECT*, and subsequent book, led to the *TGOS* statement!), James Montgomery Boice, and Alistair Begg, has released its own response to *TGOS*,

In *TGOS*, the signers affirm the following: “Faith is not merely intellectual assent but an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life. We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).”¹⁸

At the outset, it must be noted that it is no small matter when Roman Catholic theologians accept a doctrinal tenet that is specifically tied to “Reformation traditions.” It should also be noted, however, that these “traditions” are the conclusions of the Westminster Assembly, which met from 1643-49, and are not specifically drawn from the actual reformers themselves.¹⁹ While this may seem to be a minor point, modern scholarship has revealed a distinct evolution in doctrine

entitled “Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals.” Their complaint with *TGOS* is that it makes no mention of “imputed righteousness” as opposed to the Roman Catholic concept of “infused righteousness” (also called “transformative” or “effective” righteousness). Notably, this difference has to do with faith and works. *Imputed righteousness* means that the righteousness of Christ is freely credited to our account by faith alone apart from any merit or good works on the part of the believer. *Infused/transformative/effective righteousness* means that there is some participation of works by the one who believes and receives the righteousness of Christ. It is precisely at this point that the Classical Reformed view of justification, reflected in Lordship Salvation, irreparably blurs the truth. As Mark Seifrid recently observed, “It is true that recent biblical scholarship has tended to obscure the distinction between ‘imputed’ and ‘effective’ righteousness. Whether it has rightly done so is another matter.” (See “The Gift of Salvation”: Its Failure to Address the Crux of Salvation, *JETS* 42:4 [December, 1999], 681. Unfortunately, Seifrid’s own attachment to the *Reformed* Evangelical connection of faith and works renders his own criticisms of *TGOS* confusing and contradictory. For example, he affirms that justification is by faith alone, yet later writes, “I hardly need to repeat the traditional Protestant elaboration, that good works follow this faith necessarily.” Are works necessary, or are they not?) Frustrated Evangelicals are left to ask whether Sproul and others in his alliance include works or not—whether righteousness is in their view truly imputed or infused. The answer is anything but clear! See “Evangelical, Catholic Document Under Review,” *Moody* (May/June, 1998): 40-41. Also, “Evangelicals, Catholics Issue Salvation Accord,” *Christianity Today* (January 12, 1998): 61-63.

¹⁸*TGOS*, 36.

¹⁹This fact is explicitly stated by Timothy George (a signer of *TGOS*) in his

from the time of the writings of the Reformers to the writing of the Westminster Confession.²⁰ It might therefore be more accurate to call *TGOS* an alignment of Roman Catholics and *Reformed* Evangelicals.

Having said this, we return to the definition of faith in *TGOS*. It is immediately clear that the writers are in agreement with the Sproul/MacArthur/Lordship Salvation view of the meaning of saving faith. We first encounter a pejorative reference to “mere intellectual assent,” followed by an affirmation that faith is “an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life.” As often occurs in attempts to define faith, the writers have “beaten all around the bush” without making any clear statement of meaning. While they are quick to say what faith is *not*, they have a more difficult time telling us what faith *is*. Instead, they quickly leap to the safer (and less precise) confines of what faith *involves*. This information may help us determine what they understand faith to mean, but it is nebulous at best. After all, could we not say that *love* is an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life”? What about *hope*? Or *joy*? The benefits of this kind of definition are limited, to say the least.

However, since this is what we are given, let us examine it. Clearly, of primary importance to the writers is the desire to distance themselves from the idea that faith is “merely intellectual assent.” Instead, they suggest that while there is a kind of faith that is “merely intellectual” (involving only the mind), the kind of faith that saves involves two further elements, the will, and the affections (thus “issuing in a changed life”). But does faith actually include these elements?

DOES FAITH INVOLVE THE WILL?

article including the *TGOS* statement (“Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A New Initiative,” *Christianity Today* [December 8, 1997]: 34-35).

²⁰See R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

²¹MacArthur’s interpretation of John 3:14-15 is a classic expression of

Saving faith is often seen as being active and volitional—that is, it is something we *do*, and something we *choose* to do.²¹ If this is so, then faith is certainly an act of the will. But there are sound reasons to understand saving faith to be passive and inescapable—that is, as something which we come to possess, not by choice, but by being persuaded, after hearing the Good News, that what God has said in His Word is true.

A primary reason for coming to this conclusion grows out of the common, or non-theological meaning of the term. A simple illustration will suffice.²² Let us suppose we are talking with a person who *believes* that Elvis is alive. This person *believes* strongly that Elvis lives, and wants us to *believe* it, too. He presents evidence for his “faith”—rumors of sightings, first-person testimonials from the tabloid press, unanswered questions surrounding Elvis’ death and burial, etc. However persuasive his argument, one thing is certain. Whether or not you *believe* Elvis is alive has nothing to do with your will. The only question is, Are you persuaded? If you said, “I *choose* to believe that Elvis is alive,” the question would still remain, “But do you *believe* he is alive?” You are either persuaded by what you have heard that it is true, or you are not. You either believe it or you don’t. If you are persuaded, you cannot genuinely “choose” to not believe; and if you are not persuaded, you cannot somehow “will” yourself to believe. The only question is one of evidence: As you freely examine it, do you believe it, or not?

The same is true of biblical faith in the gospel. We are either persuaded or we are not. We either believe or we don’t. The exercise of the will is involved in our openness to the gospel message (we must be willing to listen; cf. Rom 10:17), but faith is simply the persuasion that the gospel message is true.

One reason many assume that the will is part of saving faith is the use of the imperative (with the verb *pisteuō*) in salvation contexts.

this idea: “In order to look at the bronze snake on the pole, they had to drag themselves to where they could see it.” See John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 46. Obviously, if saving faith is accurately expressed in such terms, then it surely involves the will (and works!). Notably, Scripture records only the need to *see* the bronze serpent in order to be saved, not the misleading idea of “dragging oneself.”

²¹I am indebted to Zane Hodges for this illustration.

²²See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand

Indeed, a key issue in the discussion of what “faith” is depends on how the word is used. If *pisteuo* (or any verb, for that matter), when used in the imperative, invariably implies a willful action, then the will certainly is included in saving faith. But is this so?

Perhaps no salvation text is better known than Paul’s admonition to the Philippian jailer: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Here the verb *pisteuo* is in the imperative. One way to read this kind of statement is as a command: “Believe this!” If this is understood, then the person addressed is being told to do something—namely, to believe. But to say that the imperative *requires* this understanding is false. Indeed, as we have already shown, a command to “believe” something is inherently absurd, since to truly believe something requires an inner persuasion that that which is being believed is true.

Instead, the call to believe in Acts 16:31 seems to represent what is called a *conditional imperative*.²³ This use of the imperative functions like the protasis in a conditional sentence, and the following result functions like the apodosis. Taking into account the injunctive force of the imperative, the meaning of Paul’s admonition in Acts 16:31 becomes something like this: “*If* you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (and I hope you do), *then* you will be saved.” The imperative is therefore not a command to exercise the will, but an acknowledgment of a fact—that those who believe in Jesus (and Paul hopes the jailer will join their ranks!) have eternal life.²⁴

What of those passages in which the imperative of *pisteuo* is not conditional? An example of this is Jesus’ call to “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In these cases, the imperative is effectively an appeal to the audience to consider what has been presented, and to weigh what has been seen and heard.²⁵ The speaker is entreating the listeners to believe, but the implicit call is to consider the merits of the gospel of Jesus Christ since, if they do this, they will become persuaded

Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 489-92.

²⁴Of the fifteen uses of *pisteuo* in the imperative mood in the New Testament, Mark 11:24, Luke 8:50, and Acts 16:31 appear to have this usage.

²⁵Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), 276-82.

²⁶See Wallace, 487-88, and his discussion of the *Request Imperative*. The

of its truth—and believe.²⁶ With apologies to Josh McDowell, the biblical writers and evangelists said, “Here is evidence that demands a verdict! Don’t ignore it; consider it, honestly examine it, and if you believe it, you will be saved.” Faith *does* come by hearing (Rom 10:17), or by seeing (cf. John 10:38; 14:11)—and it is *that evidence* which all unbelievers are responsible to consider.

DOES FAITH INVOLVE THE AFFECTIONS?

Having concluded that the will is not part of faith, we can move on to the other element in the *TGOS* definition of faith, that being “the affections.” An object of our “affections” is something we love and desire. We can feel affectionate toward a person; we can even have these feelings for a pet, or inanimate objects, or something with sentimental value. The question remains, What does affection have to do with faith? Feelings vary greatly in conversion experiences—from sadness for our sins and the price that Christ had to pay, to joy at the freedom we have in Him. What kind of feelings authenticate faith? How many different feelings are needed? And how much “affection” must a person feel for his or her faith to be real? It is inconceivable that a person would experience the same “affection” toward Christ at conversion that he might realize later, after coming to a deeper realization of his own sinfulness and the price paid by Christ on the cross.

Imagine for a moment a person who was adopted as an infant, who is now grown up, and has been searching for years to find his birth parents. One day, he is informed that they have been found. While he *believes* this and looks forward to meeting them, he doesn’t know much about them. What were the circumstances of his birth? Why was he put up for adoption? After meeting them, he learns that they gave him up at birth instead of aborting him, and the awareness of the price they paid in carrying him to term instead of ending his life before birth fills him

implicit nature of a command/request to “believe” is similar to other biblical commands to “rejoice” or to “love.” Jesus’ command to “love the Lord your God” (Matt 22:37) is a request for His followers to consider God’s great love for them. We truly love God only when we recognize that He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

²⁷Robert Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory of Love,” *Psychological Review* 93 (1986): 119-35. For a brief and practical discussion of this breakdown, see

with gratitude. Did he really believe that they were his parents at the first? Of course. Did the amount of affection he felt toward his parents have anything to do with whether or not he *believed* in them? Of course not. Affections are a result of growing knowledge and appreciation for what someone has done for us, and have nothing to do with faith.

THE WILL AND THE AFFECTIONS IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Where *do* the will and the affections enter into the equation of salvation and faith? I submit that they are two parts of a growing Christian's relationship with Jesus Christ. The New Testament presents us with the picture of Christ as the Bridegroom, and all those who are His in this age as the bride. Obviously, the heavenly Bridegroom loves His bride—He died for her! His love cannot increase; it is already infinite. But the Spirit draws believers into an ever-deepening experience of love and devotion to our heavenly Bridegroom. We call this *progressive sanctification*—becoming more like Christ, growing in grace.

What makes up this love in which we grow? Robert Sternberg, a Yale University psychologist, suggests that human love involves three elements: passion, intimacy, and commitment.²⁷ While passion refers to the physical expression of human love which doesn't enter into a spiritual relationship, the other two elements, intimacy and commitment, do.

The element of "the will" corresponds to *commitment* in Sternberg's model. Rather than being a part of saving faith, the will becomes affective once we have believed, when we have the capacity to "will" to follow Christ, obey Him, and serve Him. This capacity does not exist before one believes, and to include it in saving faith leaves the unregenerate sinner in an impossible position of being required to *do* something of which he is incapable. Similarly, the idea that saving faith includes a "willingness" to persevere in the spiritual life is impossible.²⁸ The battle of the Christian life is real, and involves the exercise of our

Less Parrott III and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Marry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 33-36.

²⁸MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 78, 87.

²⁹Earl D. Radmacher, "First Response to 'Faith According to the Apostle

wills; but we must never confuse that struggle with the free gift of salvation.

The element of “the affections” corresponds to *intimacy* in Sternberg’s model. Again, rather than having anything to do with saving faith, this describes the emotional side of a growing relationship. Just as intimacy should grow over the course of a marriage, so too in a growing relationship between the Christian and the heavenly Bridegroom there will be an increase in these “affections.” But any attempt to make affections a part of saving faith are misplaced. Saving faith is being persuaded that what God in love did for me through His Son Jesus Christ is true. As we recognize and respond to His love, we in turn come to love Him more and more.

A NEW DISTINCTION IN CHRISTIANITY?

If the Roman Catholic-*Reformed* Evangelicals union stands, then we are witnessing, and helping to define, a new division with Christendom. For half a millennium, the most obvious division has been between those who followed Reformation teaching and those who held to Roman Catholic dogma. Now, it seems, the “road back to Rome” to which Radmacher alluded a decade ago is proving prophetic.²⁹ Galling as it may be to Lordship theologians and their kin—Classical Reformed theologians, they now find themselves in league with Roman Catholicism. What has been shrouded by animus for centuries has now been exposed by a modern *Pax Romana*.

On the other side are those who hold to faith as nothing more or less than faith, having nothing to do with works—or, to be precise, the will, affections, or a changed life—but being the persuasion that when Jesus offered eternal life to those who believed in Him, He spoke the truth. These alone have assurance of eternal life, resting as it must on faith alone, and *not* “a faith that works,” or any other such amalgam of human faith with human efforts. We may expect, as has occurred before in church history, that those who insist on human effort will misrepresent those who gladly offer the gift *absolutely free*. But may

James’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.,” *JETS* 33:1 (March, 1990): 40-41.

we always stand firm, knowing that our faithfulness is gaining for us *not* eternal life, but eternal *rewards*, when we finally meet our Savior.