

ROMAN
but Not
CATHOLIC

What Remains at Stake
500 Years *after the* Reformation

Kenneth J. Collins and Jerry L. Walls


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To the memory of Roger Reynolds
KJC

To all my friends from the Dulles Colloquium, with fond
memories of those many spirited discussions in the Union
League Club, led by Father Neuhaus and Cardinal Dulles
JLW

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JLW

ABBREVIATIONS

Bibliographic

- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. 10 vols. New York: Christian Literature, 1885–1887. Reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
- Catechism* *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994.
- JDDJ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999)
- LW Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*. Philadelphia: Fortress; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958–86, 2008–.
- NABRE New American Bible, revised (2010) edition
- NIV New International Version (2011)
- NPNF¹ *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 1st series. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. New York: Christian Literature, 1886–1889. Reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
- NPNF² *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 2nd series. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 vols. New York: Christian Literature, 1890–1900. Reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
- NT New Testament
- OT Old Testament
- PG *Patrologia Graeca*. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–86.

Miscellaneous

- | | | | |
|------|-------------------------------|----|---------------|
| § | section | b. | born |
| AD | anno Domini, year of our Lord | BC | before Christ |
| art. | article | c. | circa |

can.	canon	n(n).	note(s)
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	n.p.	no place
chap(s).	chapter(s)	n.s.	new series
d.	died	par(s).	paragraph(s)
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition	r.	reigned
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	RCC	Roman Catholic Church
EKD	Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland	repr.	reprinted
esp.	especially	rev.	revised
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and so forth	sec.	section
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is	s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word
n.d.	no date	trans.	translator, translated by
		v(v).	verse(s)

INTRODUCTION

As a historian/theologian with a particular passion for the field of Wesley studies, I (Ken) came to this work reluctantly. Producing materials that help to communicate the genius of the Wesleyan theological tradition to the spiritually hungry around the world, I have witnessed countless testimonies of genuine salvation and radical transformation of persons who now both know and love God as revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Why then should I leave this very positive and enormously satisfying work, even for a season, to take up the task of what initially looked to me like polemics?

As Jerry Walls walked the halls of Asbury Theological Seminary, at first he said, “Collins, you should write this book,” knowing, as he did, something of my background. Yes, I am a product of twelve years of Roman Catholic education. My aunt was a Mercy nun, and my older brother a Xaverian Brother for a time. However, I fled the church—that’s the right word—as a junior in high school after a particularly emotionally wrenching experience. Earlier, while I was in grammar school, I had often been physically abused by Roman Catholic brothers who had been quite creative here and even made a sport of inflicting physical and emotional pain. Though I was serious, an excellent student, and even won the religion medal in my graduating class, I, like other students at the school, received an inordinate number of blows throughout my grammar school career. One beating, for example, was so severe (on the hands with a very thick composite “ruler”) that I couldn’t even hold anything in my hands for several days. I often walked to class in fear, not knowing what would set off the brother on that particular day. By the time I was sixteen and feeling some of my teenage pushback oats, I had had enough. My thought at the time was simply this: “I need to get away from these people.”

Today, I have not the slightest twinge of resentment toward Roman Catholicism or its clergy. How can that be? Indeed, I myself often marvel at this. In fact, I am in some sense even grateful for this particular theological tradition. Again, how can that be? The answer here has much to do with grace. That is, it was no one less than the Holy Spirit, orchestrating providential grace, who not only changed my heart but also used my early, negative experiences in Roman Catholicism to bring great good out of them. In particular, the Spirit of the living Christ ultimately led me into the church that is known as the Wesleyan theological tradition, in which I have flourished for more than four decades now. If I live to be a thousand years old, I would still not have enough time to express all the gratitude in my heart for this wonderful, life-transforming journey. The riches of the Wesleyan tradition are so very considerable. In the end, I must energetically confess, it's all good, for God's grace is sufficient, and God's love is over all!

Knowing something of this history (though certainly not all its earlier gory details), Jerry Walls kept coming at me, urging me to write this book. He repeated this entreaty again and again. I politely replied, "No" in every creative way I could imagine. I thought we were finally done with the matter, but no, I was wrong. Years later when he was well ensconced at Houston Baptist University as a scholar in residence in the Department of Philosophy, Jerry asked me over the phone if I would join him in writing this book. This would be something we could do together. Again I said, "No." However, after several more efforts he was ultimately persuasive—as usual.

What changed my mind? The simple answer is that by this point Jerry had convinced me that I could help a large population of Christians who are currently struggling with the issues we discuss in this book. Many of these folk are evangelicals—though some are not—who have begun to look at their own communions of faith in greatly diminished ways precisely due to errors in historiography (how they read the history of the church and their own place within it) as well as in ecclesiology, that is, with respect to a proper understanding of what constitutes the church, the body of Christ. Properly motivated now to take up the cause by love for my brothers and sisters, some of whom are suffering, I came to view this whole enterprise much differently and very positively. I had this change of heart even though I realized that writing such a book would open up both Jerry and me to much criticism, even to personal attack (did I really want a round 2?). However, that also comes with the lay of the land here and reveals, once again, precisely why such a book must be written.

This work is preeminently about Roman Catholicism; it is not about Protestantism, at least not directly. Accordingly, we can save some of the Roman Catholic apologists, authors, and bloggers much wasted effort in pointing out

that we are humbly, honestly, and forthrightly aware of many of the faults and missteps of Protestant theological traditions. However, that is not our topic. Therefore, to point out repeatedly the weaknesses of Protestantism in the face of serious reflection on Roman Catholicism, as some apologists are wont to do, is in our judgment just another way of changing the conversation, even shutting it down, so that the very real problems of the Roman Catholic tradition are never actually faced. We avoid such an egregious error. Thus Roman Catholicism (and its many claims) is after all the topic of this book, and we unswervingly pursue this throughout. To be sure, this subject is well worth the focus and effort, as the unfolding of the book will clearly demonstrate. It constitutes much of why neither of us is a Roman Catholic even today.

Moreover, this book is about the official teaching of Roman Catholicism; it is not, by and large, about what contemporary Roman Catholic theologians or even what laypeople at times think. Indeed, in several instances these last two groups can differ, sometimes markedly and confusedly so, from the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, we pay particular attention to valuable resources such as the *Catechism*; Vatican II materials; historic documents of the church such as Scripture, creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian), rules of faith, and councils (Lateran, Trent, Vatican I, etc.); canons; papal encyclicals; and various practices that together make up the formal teaching of the Roman Catholic theological tradition.

Beyond this, considerable care was taken in terms of the order of the chapters and what issues would be addressed. First, this effort is by no means a systematic treatment in the sense that the book flows from the doctrine of God to eschatology and takes every step along the way. Instead, the work proceeds by essays (largely historical and philosophical) along key themes that highlight the distinct claims of the Roman Catholic Church, especially those that set it apart from other theological traditions such as Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Second, due to space limitations, even in terms of what topics are in fact treated (such as the sacraments, the priesthood, and the papacy) we could by no means be exhaustive. Indeed, entire books could be written in each one of these areas. Third, by the perspective of the Protestant Reformation, which is part of the book's vantage point, we understand this terminology very broadly to refer at times to the historic leaders and materials of the sixteenth century (to which there are many references throughout the book), but also to how Reformation Christians today participate in these living Christian traditions that are being passed along from century to century.

Authors who take three years out of their lives to dedicate themselves to a worthy writing project such as this would, no doubt, like to reach the widest audience possible. However, this goal cannot be the only consideration. Added

to this must be the concern to contextualize the essays, so that they will be carefully understood and therefore more effective in achieving their larger purpose, illumination, which means that this effort moves in a decidedly different direction than a popular account does. In the face of such a dilemma, we have tried to hold both of these considerations in tension, though we have no doubt leaned, almost by necessity (given the demands of the task), toward a more scholarly treatment.

Though Roman Catholics, of course, are likely to think otherwise, our larger argument in the book does not impugn any essential or nonnegotiable teaching of the Christian faith, but only those later additions that for many today serve as obstacles, stumbling blocks, to the proper Christian witness. Indeed, the case that we make throughout the book richly affirms what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity,” the classic trinitarian orthodoxy of the historic creeds. This judgment, of course, represents a Protestant perspective, as our critics will no doubt claim, but we receive such criticism as an opportunity to articulate the importance not only of perspective in the life of the church but also of the ongoing vitality and integrity of many Protestant theological traditions. We never have to apologize for being Protestant.

Rejecting the extreme polemics of some Protestant apologists (claiming that Roman Catholics are not Christians, and the pope is the antichrist), we affirm Roman Catholicism as a distinct Christian theological communion, though we recognize that some of the traditions and practices it has developed over the centuries may at times detract from both the power and the clarity of the gospel. Our argument then is broadly ecumenical and generous, especially since it not only acknowledges the theological differences of distinct traditions (such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) in an open and forthright way but also has the good sense not to make any one of these traditions the heart of the church. Indeed, since each Christian tradition has been a part of a prior schism (the one in 1054 readily comes to mind), no one tradition can ever be the center. Those days are long gone.

We recognize that the word “Catholic” is employed today by Roman Catholics and Protestants in much different ways than in previous centuries, and these differences reflect distinct theological traditions and ecclesiastical locations. In fact, the differing renderings of this common word epitomize a fair portion of our major argument throughout the book. Since speaking out of our respective theological traditions might, given the disputed nature of the term, appear to be triumphalism or cause a gross misunderstanding, we suggest taking the principal meanings (historically and etymologically speaking) of the unabridged and highly reputable *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as a common ground and as an authoritative resource in this disputed area.

The *OED* points out that the word “Catholic” means “general” or “universal” or even “whole,” and it was expressed much earlier in Greek by the word καθολικός and in Latin by *catholicus*.¹ The term “catholic church” was never used by either Jesus or the apostles; it made its first appearance in the writings of Ignatius during the early part of the second century, when it referred to “the *whole body* of believers.”² Much later, after the Great Schism in 1054, the word “Catholic” was used as a “descriptive epithet by the Western or Latin Church,”³ whereas the Christian East much preferred the designation “Orthodox.” It was during the Reformation in the sixteenth century that those under “the Roman obedience”⁴ began to claim the word as “its exclusive right . . . in opposition to the ‘Protestant’ or ‘Reformed.’”⁵

This brief history, along with some etymological considerations, suggests that today’s usage of the term “Catholic” by those under the authority of the bishop of Rome (which includes Roman Catholics, of course, as well as other “Catholic” communions, that is, those bodies of differing rites)⁶ actually has its origin in the polemical context of the sixteenth century, when it began to take on a *particular* meaning, one that rendered the Roman tradition itself distinct from other Christian communions. In this heated and troubled context, the word “Catholic” no longer referred, as it once had in charity and grace, to “the whole body of believers.”⁷ The realities of the second-century (ancient ecumenical) church were by now long gone. Rome, no doubt, felt justified in shifting this definition simply because, in its estimation at least, Protestants had left the “holy mother church.” Protestants, for their part, chafed under such restrictive and, in their estimation, newfangled usage.

In light of these basic historical truths, we demonstrate in considerable detail the theological and ecclesiastical trouble that emerges when any one communion insists on being the center. For one thing, the Roman Catholic

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. “catholic.”

2. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. See the discussion of this issue in Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperOne, 1994): “In addition to the Latin, or Roman tradition, there are seven other non-Latin, non-Roman ecclesial traditions: Armenian, Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian, East Syrian (Chaldean), West Syrian, and Maronite. Each of these is a Catholic church in communion with the Bishop of Rome; none of these is a *Roman Catholic Church*” (5). Our use of the term “Roman Catholic” does not ignore the reality that there is a small minority of Catholic churches in communion with Rome that are not Roman, strictly speaking. See Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan, SJ (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1914), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.xix.v.html>.

7. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 5.

Church has no greater claim to catholicity or universality than does Eastern Orthodoxy. And when these two traditions make the same or similar claims simultaneously, that's a prescription for historical and ecclesiastical confusion. The unfortunate reality, substantiated throughout the pages of church history, is that the ancient ecumenical church broke up into distinct theological traditions. We fully and unabashedly recognize this historical truth. Therefore, we most often refer to the Roman Catholic Church (instead of simply the Catholic Church) in order to avoid the confusing wordplay that does not fully acknowledge the significance of Eastern Orthodoxy, much less that of other equally Christian theological traditions such as those that make up Protestantism. Moreover, for the sake of style and also to avoid tedium, we employ the term "Rome" to refer to the Roman Catholic Church (instead of repeating RCC), recognizing, of course, that this particular tradition is in no way limited to Europe but is a global communion of faith.

Though we affirm that Jesus Christ and the apostolic testimony to him are the foundation of the church, and though we celebrate the first-century church, especially in its proclamation at Pentecost, we are not making a primitivistic argument here. We fully recognize that the church develops over time under the authority of the Holy Spirit. Such development, in the best sense of the term, is consonant with the basic truth of Scripture and with the interpretive traditions (expressed in thought and practice) that Scripture has stimulated among the faithful, such that the church is equipped by Word and Spirit to bear its testimony from age to age. Thus our chief concern, especially as we face the Roman Catholic tradition, is not to engage in primitivism but to avoid the error of anachronism, such as reading back into the first-century church later historical products (e.g., the papacy) as if they had always been there.

Finally, our approach is biblical, historical, theological, and philosophical, not dogmatic. We are open to learning from all Christians, including those who fundamentally differ from us. Accordingly, we read and learn even from Roman Catholic dogmatists, that is, from those authors who have already made up their minds that whatever Rome affirms is the gospel truth. This mind-set, which seems to be prevalent among many Roman Catholic apologists and bloggers, was evidenced much earlier in the writings of Ignatius of Loyola himself, who declared: "To be right in everything, we ought always to hold that the white which I see, is black, if the Hierarchical Church so decides it."⁸ Our argument is not addressed to the contemporary exemplars of this mind-set, and we are under no illusions that it would be heard by them even if it were.

KJC

8. Ibid.

My (Jerry) religious background is quite different from that of my good friend Collins. Whereas he was raised in Brooklyn, New York, I was born and raised in Knockemstiff, Ohio. Whereas he was baptized as an infant and confirmed as a Roman Catholic, I accepted Christ as an eleven-year-old in an emotional conversion experience during a revival in a small country church and was later baptized in a creek across the road from my house. Whereas he has painful memories of his religious instruction in his Roman Catholic schools, which led him to lose his faith for a time, I have warm memories of loving nurture from those formative years when I attended Bethel Chapel Christian Union Church, and my faith has never seriously wavered since my conversion experience.

I say this to emphasize that I came to my interest in the issues in this book from a very different direction. I knew very little about Roman Catholicism while growing up, and I don't recall having any particular opinions about it. Looking back, I have no distinct memories of interacting with Catholics until I went to Princeton Theological Seminary from 1977 to 1980—during which time, by the way, I first met Collins, who was a fellow student at Princeton. No doubt I had met Catholics before then, but my world was very much a Protestant evangelical one. At Princeton, there were several Roman Catholic students, and one of my professors was a Roman Catholic. Those were balmy post-Vatican II days (though I did not know much about the details of Vatican II at the time), and on the front burner was the growing sense of unity among Christians, not the issues that divided us from Rome. I do not recall any discussions or debates about the doctrines that divided us or any concern from Catholics to make an issue of them.

My first serious engagement with Roman Catholicism came when I enrolled as a graduate student in the philosophy department at the University of Notre Dame in the fall of 1984. My years there were some of the best of my life; not only am I a proud graduate of that great university, but I also recall my years there with both fondness and gratitude. During this period Notre Dame was in the process of building a great Christian philosophy department with an ecumenical composition, and the excitement was palpable. In addition to a number of serious Catholics, Notre Dame had attracted some noted Protestants, including the great Alvin Plantinga and Tom Morris, who had recently completed graduate school at Yale and was already off to a roaring start in his academic career by the time I arrived.

While I was getting a great philosophical education at Notre Dame, I was also acquiring an informal education of another sort, namely, about Roman Catholicism, at least of the American variety. In addition to faculty members, several of my fellow graduate students were committed Roman Catholics, and my conversations with them were the first I can recall in which I ever discussed

at length the differences that divide Protestants from Catholics; they not only took those issues seriously but also were eager to defend their side of the matter. Indeed, I came to realize that many conservative Roman Catholics view evangelicals as Catholics just waiting to happen, and they would love to help push us over the edge. I had numerous conversations about these issues with my Catholic friends and teachers, and I distinctly recall the parting words of one of my professors, Fred Freddoso, when I left Notre Dame: “I’m disappointed as hell you did not become a Catholic.”

But I was not done with these sorts of conversations. Several years later I had the good fortune to meet Richard John Neuhaus and to get to know him a bit. We hit it off, and he was intrigued to learn that I was a Protestant who was defending a version of the doctrine of purgatory in the book I was then writing about heaven.⁹ Shortly thereafter he invited me to join the Dulles Colloquium, an ecumenical theology discussion group hosted by him and Avery Dulles, after whom it was named. The Dulles Colloquium met once or twice a year in New York, usually at the Union League Club, and the official business of the day was to discuss a paper that had been sent to us several weeks earlier.

My participation in this group for several years was one of the great blessings and privileges of my life, for which I remain deeply grateful. One of my lasting regrets is that personal circumstances caused me to miss the last meeting to which I was invited in the spring of 2008, not knowing it was my last chance to see both Father Neuhaus and Cardinal Dulles in this life. Through the years when I was involved in the colloquium, I got to discuss matters of vital importance with some remarkable people: Gary Anderson, Jody Bottum, Shalom Carmy, Chuck Colson, Robert George, Timothy George, Paul Griffiths, Thomas Guarino, David Hart, Stanley Hauerwas, Russ Hittinger, Robert Jensen, George Lindbeck, Bruce Marshall, Gilbert Meilaender, David Novak, Michael Novak, James Nuechterlein, Tom Oden, Rusty Reno, Steve Webb, George Weigel, Robert Wilken, and many others. The group was composed of persons from a number of traditions, including Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox, Methodists, and evangelicals, as well as a few Jews.

The paper topics covered a wide range of theological and moral issues and often dealt with matters of ecumenical concern. After the formal session, conversation continued more casually over dinner. Then we usually retired to the bar to continue to talk until bedtime. Occasionally a few of us were invited to Neuhaus’s apartment for drinks and conversation. Not infrequently these

9. Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). I report that Collins does not share my views about the viability of a Protestant doctrine of purgatory. He rejects the doctrine.

more informal talks centered on issues dividing Protestants and Catholics, with Neuhaus leading the way in making the case for Rome with his characteristic wit, charm, and ecumenical sensibilities. In these discussions with Neuhaus and other members of the group, I regularly defended the Protestant view.

In retrospect, I suspect that the unofficial agenda of the Dulles Colloquium—and I say this with all due affection—was to be a Catholic Conversion Club, particularly with the aim of converting Protestant intellectuals to Rome. (Indeed, I cannot help but wonder if part of the reason I was invited to join the group was that Neuhaus thought I might be ripe for conversion to Rome since I was defending the doctrine of purgatory.) In any case, when I joined the colloquium, a number of the members of the group were evangelicals, Anglicans, Lutherans, and so on who later converted to Rome. I cannot read their minds, and I cannot speak for them, so I will not presume what role, if any, their participation in the Dulles Colloquium might have played in their conversion. But I will say that in my experience, the dynamics of the group encouraged conversion to Rome. Indeed, the same might be said for the highly regarded magazine *First Things*, which Neuhaus founded. Rusty Reno, a convert from the Episcopal Church and the current editor of *First Things*, commented playfully on the matter as follows in an issue of the magazine featuring two articles by Protestants.

On the topic of Catholic triumphalism: Not a few Protestant friends complain that *First Things* is a Catholic party with a few Protestants and Jews invited. That always makes me wince, because it's not altogether false. After all, the magazine was begun by a man who had just published a book titled *The Catholic Moment*. But I hope the two forceful essays about Protestantism in this issue convince readers that it's not altogether true. . . . There's no requirement that one kowtow to Catholicism.¹⁰

Reno's somewhat whimsical comment accurately conveys my experience as a participant in the Dulles Colloquium for several years. Certainly there was no requirement to "kowtow to Catholicism," but the claim of Rome to be the one true church was promoted, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in humorous flourishes, but always with urbane sophistication. But then, what else should one expect in a group named after, and attended by, a distinguished Roman Catholic cardinal and led by a famous Lutheran convert to Rome?

So in one sense the experience was deeply and richly ecumenical, but it also vividly showed the limits of Roman ecumenism. A few times the Protestants among us attended Mass with our Catholic friends, and it always struck me

10. Reno, "While We're At It," *First Things*, August/September 2014, 69.

how odd it was that we had more genuine Christian unity and fellowship around the dinner table than we did at the table of the Lord. The welcome that was extended to those of us who did not regard Rome as the one true church only went so far: we watched from a distance when our Roman Catholic brothers shared the sacrament of Communion.

These sorts of experiences have generated my interest in the issues of this book and led me to think that it needed to be written. I also share these experiences to emphasize that my experiences and interactions with Roman Catholics have been overwhelmingly positive for the most part. In the past several years, I have had further positive interactions with Roman Catholics, partly because of further work I have done on purgatory. (Indeed, because of this work, not infrequently it has been assumed that I *am* a Roman Catholic!) Since my earlier discussion of the doctrine in my book on heaven, I have written a whole book defending an ecumenical version of the doctrine, the first book-length defense of purgatory ever by a Protestant, so far as I know.¹¹ I hope this also shows that I am not automatically critical of a doctrine just because of its Roman Catholic pedigree or associations. To the contrary, it is always my aim to weigh doctrinal claims on their biblical, theological, and rational merits, regardless of their ecclesial connections.

I should frankly say that I have never been seriously tempted to convert to Rome, although I have obviously pondered it, as indicated by the experiences described above. Somewhat ironically, that is part of why I wanted to write this book with Collins. In recent years we have heard from lots of evangelicals who have converted to Rome. (Most of them, it seems, feel they need to write a book or at least contribute an essay to one of those collections of conversion narratives that are so popular among Catholic apologists.) I thought it might be helpful for the many persons who are struggling with these issues to hear from persons who have thought about them carefully but have not converted to Rome. We have heard from lots of people who have read John Henry Newman's famous essay on doctrinal development and found his arguments compelling. I thought it might be helpful to hear from persons who have read Newman but found his arguments deeply confused and his conclusions badly overstated.

I also want to reiterate that this book aims to be ecumenical in the best sense of the word. We very much agree with Kevin Vanhoozer that the "only good Protestant is a catholic Protestant—one who learns from, and bears

11. Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things That Matter Most* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

fruit for, the *whole* church.”¹² Indeed, we believe that challenging the exclusive claims of Rome is essential to true catholicism and for advancing deeper unity in the body of Christ. While committed Roman Catholics no doubt believe that promoting their exclusive claims is necessary to their very identity, we aim to show a better way forward.

JLW

For any curious souls who want to know, as well as our critics, this is how the authors cooperated: They cowrote the introduction. Kenneth Collins wrote chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, 9–12, 15–19, and the conclusion. Jerry Walls wrote chapters 1, 4, 5, 8, 13, 14, and 20.

12. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 33 (emphasis original).

1

What We Have in Common

Despite what our title may suggest, we intend this to be a deeply ecumenical book that will ultimately serve the cause of Christian unity. True ecumenism requires forthright and respectful acknowledgment of differences, but even more important, it proceeds from a hearty recognition and appreciation of the more important common ground we share by virtue of our common commitment to classic creedal Christianity. While this book is concerned primarily with exploring honest differences, we never want to lose sight of that common ground. So although this will be the shortest chapter in the book, it is only so because there is no need to belabor points where we agree. Still, we want not only to recognize but also to celebrate the profound fellowship that unites all persons whose hearts and minds have been captured by the incomparably beautiful truth definitively revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Creeds and the Hierarchy of Christian Truth

Let us begin by declaring that we share a commitment to the classic creeds: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian. The core doctrines summarized in these classic creeds provide the fundamental framework for the Christian faith as professed by Eastern Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic churches, and the churches of the Protestant Reformation.¹

1. The *filioque* clause of the Nicene Creed is not accepted by Eastern Orthodox churches.

Our agreement with the classic creeds is only one aspect of our shared heritage of classic patristic theology. With Roman Catholics, we look to the early centuries of the church and the fathers for seminal theology and doctrinal guidance. Indeed, we also find much to agree about in classic medieval philosophers and theologians, to whom we also look for inspiration and Christian wisdom.

The pivotal role of the creeds is reflected in part 1 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which deals with “the profession of faith” and articulates that profession by expounding the Apostles’ Creed, supplemented by numerous references to the Nicene Creed. As the *Catechism* states, “Communion in faith needs a common language of faith, normative for all and uniting all in the same confession of faith.”²

The exposition of the Apostles’ Creed in the *Catechism* is powerful, demonstrating the fact that orthodox Christians of all traditions are indeed united “in the same confession of faith.” This is hardly to suggest that evangelicals and other Christians in the Reformation tradition will agree entirely with part 1 of the *Catechism*. They surely will not, and Protestants who read through it will likely find it an ambivalent experience, for they will disagree at a number of points while profoundly resonating at many others.

Indeed, where they disagree, they will often judge that points of dispute represent instances where the Church of Rome has overreached and made claims that have greatly harmed the cause of Christian unity. For instance, when it expounds the Nicene affirmation “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church,” the *Catechism* advances claims for the Church of Rome that are at the heart of some of the most fundamental differences separating Rome not only from Reformation Christians but also from Eastern Orthodox Christians. Moreover, the modest, clearly biblical, and creedal claim that Christ was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” occasions in the *Catechism* a statement and defense of Marian doctrines that Reformation Christians typically reject because they see no support for them in Scripture. Protestants will be similarly skeptical of the attempt to situate within the affirmation “I believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints” the doctrine of Mary’s bodily assumption. Most will find it extravagant, to say the least, to claim that she has been “exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords, and conqueror of sin and death.”³

2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), par. 185.

3. *Ibid.*, par. 966.

These and many other issues and points of disagreement will be taken up in more detail below, but for now they are not our concern. Here is what we want to emphasize now. Despite these differences, which indeed are significant, as we shall argue, the common ground we share is far more important than any disagreements that distinguish and even divide us. As C. S. Lewis observed, the convictions we share are so profound and far reaching that they divide us “from all non-Christian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all.”⁴ Indeed, compared to the chasm that separates us from non-Christians, we might even say that our differences are a mere gully. To be sure, some gullies are fairly wide and difficult to cross, but they are nothing compared to the chasm that separates orthodox Christians from non-Christians.

Consider the core of beliefs we share and how these beliefs are radically at odds with various non-Christian beliefs, starting with the fundamental confession “We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” The notion that we and our world are creatures, that we owe our very existence to an almighty God who sovereignly chose to give us life and being, separates us profoundly from various atheistic and secular views contending that we are the product of entirely accidental, natural causes that did not intend for us to be here. The conviction that God almighty is a Father, not merely a powerful Lord, is an immediate indication that the purpose for which we exist is full of meaning and positive significance.

So the difference between belief in such a God and unbelief is far from a merely theoretical issue. Rather, it is deeply practical and has enormous existential implications. The *Catechism* summarizes these implications in a series of pithy statements: “It means coming to know God’s greatness and majesty. . . . It means living in thanksgiving. . . . It means knowing the unity and true dignity of all men. . . . It means making good use of created things. . . . It means trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity.”⁵

We can hardly exaggerate the difference in worldview between believing that all existing things are here by virtue of the purposeful actions of a Father almighty and believing that the blind forces of nature somehow generated us. This fundamental difference of conviction, moreover, is at the heart of many national as well as global conflicts in our world today. Protestants stand firmly united with Roman Catholics in sharing a worldview that starts with belief in God the Father almighty.

4. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), xi.

5. *Catechism*, pars. 223–27. Each statement is supported by a passage from Scripture or a quote from a classic theological source.

But much more is involved in the fact that the creeds call God “Father,” and this brings us to the very heart of distinctively Christian doctrine. The doctrine that God is the creator of all that exists besides himself is shared by Jews and Muslims and many other theists. But for Christian theists, the Father is the First Person of the Trinity, and this extraordinary doctrine divides them from other theistic believers. The *Catechism* comments on the absolutely pivotal nature of this doctrine as follows: “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the ‘hierarchy of the truths of faith.’ The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men and ‘reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin.’”⁶ The doctrine of the Trinity is singled out as “the most fundamental and essential teaching” in a hierarchy of truths. That some doctrines have this status is significant in terms of highlighting common ground between Roman Catholics and Reformation Christians. It is particularly these doctrines that are essential to Christian identity, and it is these doctrines that ground genuine fellowship.

The shared commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity is a common faith in the story of human salvation. Again, certain differences of understanding cannot be ignored, but more important is this central fact: we agree that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God who was born of the virgin Mary and who died and rose again to provide salvation for the human race.

So agreement that God is a Trinity is far more than a matter of agreeing on a speculative theological claim. It is agreement on the fact that human beings are sinners estranged from their Creator, who stand desperately in need of salvation. It is agreement that faith in Christ is necessary for our sins to be forgiven, but that we cannot exercise that faith by our own power. Here we rely on the Third Person of the Trinity, the last of the three to be revealed in the history of salvation, yet the one whose saving action in another sense is first. “Through his grace, the Holy Spirit is the first to awaken faith in us and to communicate to us the new life, which is to ‘know the Father and the one whom he has sent, Jesus Christ.’”⁷

We share, moreover, a common hope for the ultimate end of the human story. We anticipate the resurrection of all persons and the final judgment, after which all persons will either enter eternal joy in the presence of God along with others who have been redeemed or experience eternal separation from God if they have rejected his offer of salvation.

6. *Ibid.*, par. 234, quoting *General Catechetical Directory*, pars. 43, 47.

7. *Catechism*, par. 684.

In short, we share convictions that profoundly unite us in heart and mind against the secular worldview that predominates in much contemporary culture. We share a distinctive version of the human story, and we agree that the central events that illumine the story are found in the self-revelation of the Triune God and his acts to provide salvation to his fallen children through the death and resurrection of his Son. And we anticipate a future that will bring the story to a glorious end.

It would be incomplete, if not misleading, however, to leave the impression that what Reformation Christians and Roman Catholics share is only theological or doctrinal. We also share important moral and social commitments, many of which are under pressure in contemporary culture from the forces of secularism. Roman Catholics have consistently been outspoken advocates for justice issues, the right to life, and traditional views of marriage, and we deeply appreciate the important role they have played in these matters. Evangelicals and many other Protestants gratefully join hands with Roman Catholics in support of these vital spiritual and moral values.

Mere Christianity and the Center We Share

Many evangelicals and other Reformation Christians will instinctively respond positively to these lines of thinking in no small part because they have been schooled to think of ecumenical relationships in terms of what C. S. Lewis famously called “mere Christianity.” Lewis was likely the most influential Christian writer of the twentieth century, and his appeal shows no sign of waning as we move well into the twenty-first century. Lewis, of course, was a Protestant from Northern Ireland and a loyal member of the Church of England, but his influence is hardly confined to his fellow Protestants. Certainly he has been, and remains, especially popular in evangelical circles, but he also has a wide following among Roman Catholics.

We think the enormous ecumenical appeal of Lewis is another telling way to see the fundamental core of agreement between Protestants and Roman Catholics.⁸ Indeed, it is not uncommon for Roman Catholics and Protestants to come together and work on various projects under the banner of “mere Christianity,” and both of us have participated in such efforts.

Lewis clearly wrote his classic book with the goal of articulating an account of the faith that Roman Catholics could identify with, even though the book

8. We could have made the same point by examining any of the classic Protestant confessions of faith and highlighting the fundamental doctrines they all share. We chose to look at Lewis because of the wide familiarity with his book among Roman Catholics as well as Protestants.

does not in any way affirm a Roman account of authority, the sacraments, Marian dogmas, and the like. In the preface Lewis reports that he sent the original manuscript of book 2, *What Christians Believe*, to four clergymen, one of whom was a Roman Catholic. (The other three were Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian.) Although it is obvious that no single ordinary clergyman can claim to speak for his entire church, Lewis took it as evidence that he had succeeded in his goal when only two of the clergymen had minor quibbles. The Methodist thought he had not paid enough attention to faith, and the Roman Catholic thought he had gone a bit too far in playing down the importance of particular theories of the atonement. Still, what is remarkable is the fact that millions of Christians of various traditions have recognized in Lewis's pages a faithful account of the heart of the faith they confess.

Although Lewis is by far the most famous person to use the term "mere Christianity" to refer to the heart of the faith, he did not invent the term. As he states in his preface, he borrowed the language from Richard Baxter, a Puritan theologian who lived in the seventeenth century (1615–91). In the eighteenth century, one of Lewis's earlier Anglican compatriots attempted to spell out common ground with Roman Catholics, namely, John Wesley, in "A Letter to a Roman Catholic."⁹ But the more important point here is not merely who coined the term but rather that the notion of a core of common ground that is the very essence of the faith is something Christians have recognized for generations. Indeed, Lewis emphasizes that it long antedated him and that there is something objective about it, explaining, "For I am not writing to expound something I could call 'my religion,' but to expound 'mere' Christianity, which is what it is and what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not."¹⁰

We can also see this reality in the often-observed fact that orthodox Christians of different denominations and theological traditions recognize more real fellowship and unity with each other than they do with liberal members of their own churches. Conservative Presbyterians and Roman Catholics, say, have much more in common with each other than they do with members of their own churches who play fast and loose with the creedal doctrines. Again to cite Lewis: "It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests that at the centre of each there is a something, or a Someone, who against all the divergencies of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice."¹¹

9. *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 10:80–86.

10. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ix.

11. *Ibid.*, xii.

Lewis made a similar point in a letter to one of his Roman Catholic correspondents from America. “I believe we are very near to one another, but not because I am at all on the Rome-ward frontier of my own communion. I believe that, in the present divided state of Christendom, those who are at the heart of each division are closer to one another than those who are on the fringes.”¹²

Notice particularly Lewis’s point that the center of Christian faith is recognized and defined by a “Someone” who is at the heart of true faith, namely, the trinitarian God whose Son became incarnate to save us from our sins. Those who have faith in Christ discern the essential truth of their faith because they have encountered him and have learned how to recognize him. As Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Those who know Christ because they are known by him instinctively gravitate to the center where his voice is most distinctly heard.

By now it will be apparent that we reject the attitude of some evangelicals who do not consider Roman Catholics true Christians or doubt that they have genuine faith. We forthrightly affirm our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters as full members of the body of Christ, and we celebrate our common convictions that unite us as the family of God. While “the memories of mutual persecution” that Lewis references can hardly be swept under the rug or ignored, we rejoice in the fact that believers in our respective churches have repented of many of these sins of the past and seek to move forward in love as fellow believers whose agreements matter far more than our disagreements.

To be sure, this “mutual persecution” of the past has even included mutual anathemas. Official Roman Catholic teaching in the past has taught that Protestants cannot be saved, and many Protestants have returned the favor. In contrast with this unhappy history, official Roman Catholic teaching today takes a more ecumenical stance toward Christians in other traditions. While lamenting and condemning schism, that teaching now recognizes Protestants as brothers and sisters in Christ.

However, one cannot charge with the sin of the separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from such separation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers. . . . All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be

12. Lewis, *Yours, Jack: Spiritual Direction from C. S. Lewis*, ed. Paul F. Ford (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 190.

called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church.¹³

While Reformation Christians may regret that this acknowledgment is still qualified, the fact remains that the recent changes in Roman Catholic thought have helped to engender much true ecumenism and mutual respect among believers in these different traditions.

The *Catechism* goes on to acknowledge: “Furthermore, many elements of sanctification and of truth’ are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church: ‘the written Word of God, the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements.’”¹⁴ Again, these “elements of sanctification and of truth” are the telltale signs that one has encountered true Christianity. When these are present, those who follow Christ will distinctly hear his voice.

In short, then, whether we talk in terms of beliefs that are “most fundamental and essential” in the hierarchy of truth, or whether we talk about a core of doctrines popularly called “mere Christianity,” believers on both sides of the Reformation divide properly discern a common faith that unites them around a common center. Protestants who read part 1 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will discern in those pages the essence of the faith they profess for the same reason that many Roman Catholics who read *Mere Christianity* see in those pages a true account of the heart of their faith. While Protestants will see things in the *Catechism* that they think are unbiblical, and Roman Catholics will see things missing in *Mere Christianity* that are important to them,¹⁵ it is nevertheless remarkable that members of each group discern a common faith that transcends disagreements.

So Why Did We Write This Book, and for Whom?

Given what we have written in this chapter, some readers may think there is something ironic, perhaps even inconsistent, in our writing a book spelling out where we think Roman Catholicism goes wrong. Is this book not inevitably an assault on the very ecumenism and unity we profess? We recognize the potential danger here. In a letter to one of his Roman Catholic correspondents,

13. *Catechism*, par. 818. This paragraph comes from the 1964 Vatican II document titled *Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree on Ecumenism*.

14. *Catechism*, par. 819.

15. This is also true for most Protestants. Lewis intended not to spell out the fully developed faith of any Christian tradition or denomination but only to present what he thought was common to all.

C. S. Lewis wrote: “The question for me (naturally) is not, ‘Why should I not become a Roman Catholic?’ but ‘Why should I?’ But I don’t like discussing such matters, because it emphasizes differences and endangers charity. By the time I had really explained my objections to certain doctrines which differentiate you from us (and also in my opinion from the Apostolic and even Medieval Church), you would like me less.”¹⁶

In our introduction, we gave some reasons why we thought this book needed to be written, despite the potential hazards Lewis identified. As we commented there, the most basic reason is that many people are concerned with these issues and are struggling with them. A number of evangelicals have converted to Rome, and many Roman Catholics have converted to evangelicalism and other Protestant traditions, including Pentecostalism.¹⁷ Part of this is due to aggressive apologists on both sides who have taken as their mission the “conversion” of fellow Christians to their church. They unsettle the faith of fellow Christians, and frankly, many people seem to be confused and are pressured to “convert” because of claims that their faith is deficient, or somehow inconsistent or lacking in full integrity, unless they join a particular church or denomination. To be sure, many who have “converted” have done so only after careful study, consultation, and prayer for discernment. But many others, we suspect, have done so under the pressure of dubious reasons, spurious arguments, and misinformation. And some of these persons who have “converted” are having serious second thoughts about their decision.

We have written this book for all persons grappling with these issues who want to think about them honestly and carefully, as well as for those who minister to such persons. Our concern in this book is as much pastoral as it is theological.

So this book is not aimed at faithful Roman Catholics. We do not write to unsettle the faith of fellow believers, and we say to all our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters with whom we share an active faith in Christ as described above, there are probably other books you should be reading. We recognize you as full members of the body of Christ, as affirmed above, and we have no interest in converting you to our church.¹⁸ Your time would likely be better spent reading a book by C. S. Lewis or G. K. Chesterton rather than this one.

16. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 230. For a detailed exploration of why Lewis was not a Roman Catholic, see Stewart Goetz, *A Philosophical Walking Tour with C. S. Lewis: Why It Did Not Include Rome* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

17. Indeed, Pentecostalism has grown dramatically in many traditionally Roman Catholic countries, especially in the Global South.

18. There are many nominal Christians in all traditions. There is certainly a viable ministry of introducing such persons to a vital faith in Christ. That, we believe, should be our focus, not getting them to join our particular church.

But if you have an interest in the issues that divide evangelicals and other orthodox Protestants from Rome, and particularly if you are struggling with whether you need to cross the Tiber to practice your faith with full integrity (or if you have already done so but are rethinking the matter), we have written this book to explain why you need not do so. The chapters that follow are straightforwardly critical, sometimes pointedly so. Still, we emphasize that we are dealing with family issues. Sometimes families are divided and face conflict. We do not shy away from that reality even as we aim to speak the truth in love. And ultimately, we aim to serve the cause of true Christian unity in the common faith we profess.