

# Should We Take the Road Back to Rome? An Analysis of Roman Catholic Ecumenical Trends

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*[Editor's Note: There is a strong impetus within evangelicalism today to view the Roman Catholic Church in friendlier terms. Some would even consider them partners in the gospel. But can Roman Catholic and Protestant soteriology be reconciled? Has the Roman Catholic Church changed its position in the past 500 years? And how should Protestants today react to recent ecumenical trends developing within the Roman Catholic Church? This essay, coming from our training center at the heart of the Roman Catholic world itself, provides excellent analysis to help Christians navigate these important questions.]*

## Introduction

After years of study and deep reflection on the message of the gospel, Luigi Desanctis escaped from Rome on September 11, 1847, making his conversion to the evangelical faith public. He explained, "God is my witness that I am not lying: the only purpose of my abandoning the Roman Church was the salvation of my soul, and the only motive was the corruption of that Church that I abandoned."<sup>1</sup> What makes this conversion impressive is that he was an examiner of the Catholic Inquisition and professor of theology at a university in Rome.<sup>2</sup> His words give us cause for reflection in light of ecumenical discussions between the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter the RCC) and Evangelicals. Desanctis was convinced that the only safety for his soul was outside of the walls of the RCC. Is it safe for evangelicals today to consider ecumenical unity with the RCC? This question is even more important given that in 2017, the Lutherans and the RCC will jointly commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. They say:

Catholics and Lutherans realize that they and the communities in which they live out their faith belong to the one body of Christ. The awareness is dawning on Lutherans and Catholics that the struggle of the sixteenth century is over. The reasons for mutually condemning each other's faith have fallen by the wayside.<sup>3</sup>

Is it then safe for us today to consider gospel unity with the RCC?<sup>4</sup> To answer this question,

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<sup>1</sup> Tito Chiesi, *Lasciò la Chiesa per seguire Cristo: La vita e l'opera di Luigi Desanctis (1808–1869)* (Mantova, Italy: Passaggio, 2014), 35 [translation mine]. In referring to corruption in the Church, Desanctis intends both doctrinal and moral corruption.

<sup>2</sup> As an examiner, he was responsible to examine various books and their authors to see if they were orthodox or heretical from the Roman Catholic perspective.

<sup>3</sup> "From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017," Vatican Website, sec. 238. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_2013\\_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione\\_en.html#New\\_challenges\\_for\\_the\\_2017\\_commemoration\\_](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html#New_challenges_for_the_2017_commemoration_).

<sup>4</sup> It is not the purpose of this essay to explore what the Evangelical approach should be regarding collaboration with the RCC to fight

we must proceed with discernment. Five hundred years ago, the Protestant Reformation created a historic division in the Western Church that was over the essence of the gospel itself. The anniversary of the Reformation gives us an opportunity to explore the answers to two related questions that will in turn assist in reflecting on the safety of gospel unity with the RCC. First, what are the theological and historical underpinnings of ecumenism that brought about the change in the RCC? Second, is there enough convergence between Rome's gospel and the biblical gospel to suggest that we are in a new era where Christian unity should be pursued with the RCC?

## What Is Ecumenism?

Before delving into these questions, a more basic question must be answered. What is ecumenism? In recent decades, as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), there has been a transformation of attitude within the RCC toward Christians who are outside of the Church, which has led the RCC to seek to unify various branches of Christianity, both on an individual and ecclesiastical level. The best place to start when seeking to understand the Ecumenical movement is Vatican II's decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Latin for "Restoration of Unity"). In this document, the burden, the meaning, the means, and the final goal of ecumenism are laid out. The decree opens:

The restoration of unity is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only . . . . Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians. This movement toward unity is called "ecumenical." Those belong to it who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, doing this not merely as individuals but also as corporate bodies.<sup>5</sup>

According to Vatican II, the unity for which Christ prayed for his disciples (John 17:21) is the unity of the one Church (the RCC) to which belong all those who affirm the Trinity and Jesus as both Lord and Savior. Those who affirm these truths but are outside of the RCC are referred to as "separated brethren." This sin of separation was something that happened in the past such that "the children who are born into these Communities and who grow up believing in Christ cannot be accused of the sin involved in the separation, and the Catholic Church embraces upon them as brothers, with respect and affection."<sup>6</sup> Through kind-spirited dialogue, fair representation, mutual prayer, and discussion, the Council proposed to seek unity with these once excommunicated brethren because they are not enemies, but "separated brethren."<sup>7</sup>

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against social ills of our time, like abortion and threats to the institution of marriage. This essay focuses on whether or not there are grounds for gospel unity such that Evangelicals and Catholics belong together in the Body of Christ and could thus participate in common projects for world missions and evangelization.

<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis redintegratio* [Decree on Ecumenism], Vatican Website, November 21, 1964, sec. 1. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html). In reference to the Reformation, the Council recognizes that "in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions made their appearance and quite large communities came to be separated from full communion with the Catholic Church" (sec. 3).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., sec. 3. The Council of Trent saw the separation over the doctrine of justification as a "grievous detriment to the unity of the Church," and consequently strictly forbade that anyone believe differently from the doctrine of justification explained in that same Council. (Session 6, January 13, 1547, Decree concerning justification, intro, in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Charlotte, North Carolina: Tan Books, 2011), 29).

<sup>7</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, sec. 4 states, "The term 'ecumenical movement' indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity."

It is evident from the preceding statements that Vatican II marked a substantial development in the posture of the RCC toward Christians, who did not belong to its institutional jurisdiction. The well-known dictum from Cyprian, a third-century bishop and martyr, that “outside the Church there is no salvation” (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*) had governed the RCC for centuries.<sup>8</sup> Both the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) anathematized those who were outside of the RCC’s doctrinal confines. As a result, history is stained with the blood of those who were tried and killed as heretics by the RCC, both in- and outside of Italy.<sup>9</sup> However, Vatican II apparently signaled a new era in the Protestant-Roman Catholic relationship, as though the anathemas had faded into the past in favor of the phrase “separated brethren.” Fifty years have elapsed since Vatican II. Many efforts at dialogue and discussion have occurred between the RCC and the Evangelical world.<sup>10</sup> These dialogues have led to the point mentioned above where the Lutherans and the RCC will declare the Reformation over in their joint commemoration of its anniversary.

## The Historical and Theological Context of Vatican II

In order to discern whether or not gospel unity with the RCC is advisable, Vatican II must be understood in its broader historical and theological context. The history of the RCC can be broken down into three general eras.<sup>11</sup> First, there was the imperial era, starting with the fall of the Roman Empire. Leonardo De Chirico states:

From the ashes of the Roman Empire rose the imperial church that assumed a pyramidal institutional structure, clothing it with Christian language and symbols. The imperial hubris of Roman Catholicism (that is, its desire to be both church and state) is its original sin which has never been seriously questioned.”<sup>12</sup>

This imperial notion is woven into the fabric of what it means to be the RCC. The wedding of both imperial and spiritual power is nowhere more clearly stated than in the 1302 papal bull, *Unam Sanctam* where Pope Boniface VIII states:

Therefore, both are in the power of the Church, namely, the spiritual sword and the temporal sword; the latter is to be used for the Church, the former by the Church; the former by the hand of the priest, the latter by the hand of princes and kings, but at the nod and sufferance of the priest. The one sword must of necessity be subject

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<sup>8</sup> Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian*, 72.21. This position is historically traceable throughout various papal documents and Roman Councils. For example, *Unam Sanctam*, the papal bull by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302, Trent in 1547, and Vatican I in 1870 all made similar statements about the necessity of the RCC and its sacraments for salvation. For further examples, see William Webster, *Roman Catholic Tradition: Claims and Contradictions* (Battle Ground, Washington: Christian Resources Inc., 1999), 68–71.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the impact that the anathemas of the RCC had, Leonardo De Chirico states, “Before the Second Vatican Council, non-Catholic Christians, and in particular, Protestants, were considered to be ‘heretics.’ The excommunications and the anathemas against Protestants pronounced by the Council of Trent caused the Protestant Reformation to be considered heresy and the evangelicals were stigmatized with the name ‘heretics.’ In countries with a Catholic majority, this title has heavily conditioned evangelical witness and has often fueled strong discrimination against evangelicals.” “Il Vaticano II, banco di prova della teologia evangelica,” *Studi di Teologi: Il Vaticano in ottica evangelica*, IFED, 25/2, no. 50 (February 2013): 121. [translation mine]

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent overview of these dialogues, see De Chirico’s *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism*, Religions and Discourse, vol. 19 (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2003), 119–164.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Leonardo DeChirico, the pastor of a Reformed Church in Rome and a scholar of Roman Catholicism. He used this helpful historical breakdown in a debate with another evangelical leader Giovanni Traettino in April, 2016 at the annual assembly of the Italian Evangelical Alliance.

<sup>12</sup> De Chirico, “Evangelicals and Catholics: A New Era?” *Vatican Files*, May 1, 2016, <http://vaticanfiles.org/2016/04/124-evangelicals-and-catholics-a-new-era-4/>.

to the other, and the temporal authority to the spiritual ... For truth being the witness, the spiritual power has the functions of establishing the temporal power and sitting in judgment on it if it should prove to be not good ... Furthermore, that every human creature is subject to the Roman pontiff,—this we declare, say, define, and pronounce to be altogether necessary to salvation.<sup>13</sup>

Second, there was the oppositional era which includes both Trent, Vatican I, and the years before Vatican II. In this era, the RCC opposed all those who disagreed with their teaching, thus defining saving faith and its content according to the RCC. It is well known that Trent tragically cemented the sacramental system of the Middle Ages into the Catholic understanding of salvation and also anathematized the biblical gospel.

Vatican I cemented the RCC itself as an institution, reasserting papal rule and declaring the infallibility of the pope.<sup>14</sup> Vatican I teaches (in the same trajectory of the 1302 Bull by Boniface VIII), that “hierarchical subordination and true obedience” to the Roman Pontiff are a duty.<sup>15</sup> In fact, according to Vatican I, “all the faithful of Christ must believe that the holy Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff possess the primacy over the whole world.”<sup>16</sup> Vatican I is clear that if one does not embrace the Council’s teaching on the pope, they are anathematized.<sup>17</sup>

In this same era, the Marian Dogmas were also solidified. In 1854, in the papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, Pope Pius IX declared under the alleged inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Mary, from conception, was kept free from the stain of original sin. Pius IX says that if one thinks otherwise, he has “made shipwreck concerning the faith, and fallen away from the unity of the Church.”<sup>18</sup> In 1950, the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary was dogmatically and authoritatively defined by Pope Pius XII in the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*. This doctrine states that Mary was assumed into heaven, body and soul, without dying.<sup>19</sup> If one denies or questions this, “he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic faith.”<sup>20</sup> If anyone changes it or opposes it, they will “incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul.”<sup>21</sup> In this second general era, the RCC drew distinct lines as to what must be believed, opposing all who would dare contradict it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Boniface VIII, *Unam sanctum*, November 18, 1302, in Philip Schaff, *A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1910), 6:26.

<sup>14</sup> First Vatican Council, Session 4, July 18, 1870, First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, Chapter 4, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 2:270.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Session 4, Chapter 3, 2:262.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Session 4, Chapter 3, 2:262–263.

<sup>17</sup> Regarding Vatican I, De Chirico explains, “... Vatican I creates a desert around the church, burns up the ground around it, cuts ties with the world, and creates a state of continual belligerence. Was this a strategic choice worthy of being called “catholic”? Maybe it was Roman, too Roman, but hardly Catholic” [translation mine]. (“Il Vaticano II,” 114) [translation mine]. Interestingly, Vatican I was brought to a premature finish due to the Italian armies invading Rome, armies that united the Italian peninsula as a country for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire. This invasion, ironically during Vatican I, took political power away from the Vatican at the same time the Council was trying to consolidate its institutional authority.

<sup>18</sup> Pius IX, *Ineffabilis deus* [Decree on the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary], December 8, 1854. in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 2:212.

<sup>19</sup> Pius XII, *Munificentissimus deus* [Apostolic Constitution Defining the Dogma of the Assumption], November 1, 1950, sec. 44, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501101\\_munificentissimus-deus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, sec 47.

<sup>22</sup> For a helpful explanation of what saving faith is, according to historical Catholic councils and documents, see William Webster, *Saving Faith: How Does Rome Define It?* (Battle Ground, Washington: Christian Resources Inc.), 1997.

During this oppositional era, starting in the early 1900s within Evangelical Christianity in Europe, there were various attempts to find a broad ecclesial unity around the gospel and mission. Representatives from the Vatican were invited to be involved in these dialogues.<sup>23</sup> The Vatican, however, was not interested in dialoguing about unity at the invitation of evangelical organizations. Pope Pius XI, in his 1928 encyclical, *Mortalium Animo*, condemned the evangelical ecumenical efforts, calling out Protestants who refused to submit to the pope. He stated, “It is clear that the Apostolic See cannot on any terms take part in their assemblies, nor is it anyway lawful for Catholics either to support or to work for such enterprises; for if they do so they will be giving countenance to a false Christianity, quite alien to the one Church of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Pius XI refused any kind of unity in which a Protestant would engage with the RCC as equals because “the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it.”<sup>25</sup> Pius XI continues, “In this one Church of Christ no man can be or remain who does not accept, recognize and obey the authority and supremacy of Peter and his legitimate successors.”<sup>26</sup> It is plain to see that the theological presupposition entering into Vatican II was a unity that maintained the primacy of the RCC and the papacy because evangelicalism was ostensibly a false Christianity.

This leads to the third era, “the era of compliant and captivating Catholicism.” Perhaps because of the RCC’s loss of political power in Italy in the 1860s or because of the isolation and marginalization the church faced in the oppositional era, Vatican II exhibited a monumental shift in tone or posture to a more pastoral approach.<sup>27</sup> This can be observed in Pope John XXIII’s opening address to Vatican II in 1962. In the section “How errors must be fought,” he states, “That being so, the Catholic Church, raising the torch of catholic truth by means of this Ecumenical Council, desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benevolent, patient, moved by mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her.”<sup>28</sup> Errors are no longer fought through anathemas but through mercy and patience.

Through this more softened approach, the RCC sought to become the protagonist of ecumenism. Rome’s desire to see a unified Christianity flowed out of its self-understanding as the one true Church of Christ and the means of God’s salvation. As *Unitatis Redintegratio* confirms:

Nevertheless, our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as Communities and Churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those who through Him were born again into one body ... For it is only through Christ’s Catholic Church, which is “the all-embracing means of salvation,” that they can benefit fully from the means of salvation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In 1914, 1919, and 1927, Pope Benedict XV declined an invitation for Catholic representatives to participate with one Christian ecumenical group known as “Faith and Work.” In 1925, another Christian group named “Life and Order” also had an invitation declined. De Chirico, *Quale unità cristiana? L’ecumenismo in discussione*. Caltanissetta (Italy: Alfa & Omega, 2016), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Pius XI, *Mortalium animo* [Encyclical on Religious Unity], January 6, 1928, sec. 8, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19280106\\_mortalium-animos.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19280106_mortalium-animos.html).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 8, 10

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 11

<sup>27</sup> De Chirico, “Evangelicals and Catholics.”

<sup>28</sup> John XXIII, “Solenne apertura del Concilio ecumenico Vaticano II,” October 11, 1962, sec. 7.3, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_spe\\_19621011\\_opening-council.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html). [translation mine]

<sup>29</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, sec. 3.

Dialogue with other Christians and other religions is a means to the end of bringing separated brothers back to communion with the Mother Church in order to enjoy the full benefits of salvation and unity. While Protestants enjoy a degree of God's grace because of shared doctrines and shared history, they do not experience the fullness of God's grace that is found in the RCC.<sup>30</sup> The shared elements actually belong to the RCC in the first place and are therefore, "forces impelling toward catholic unity."<sup>31</sup>

Doctrinal change and repentance is not the goal of their ecumenism. The RCC has no intention of being moved from its position. The RCC believes it is inseparable from the biblical gospel because it cannot be wrong. That is, at no point in history, would it ever be necessary to separate from it because of gospel infidelity. Vatican II states it this way: "We believe that this unity subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time."<sup>32</sup> The final goal of ecumenism is Roman Catholic unity, when "all Christians will at last, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, be gathered into the one and only Church in that unity which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning."<sup>33</sup>

While it is right to observe the contradiction between Vatican II's calling Protestants "separated brethren" and the preceding Church councils that anathematized them, it is also critical to observe that the shift in tone at Vatican II is a strategic choice to bring all Christianity under the jurisdiction of the RCC. Dogmatic condemnations and rigid declarations are not winsome and will push people away. Thus, the RCC opts for the motherly language of mercy and dialogue because it is more compelling. Therefore, ecumenical dialogues are the natural outflow and method of their catholicity, their mission in the world, in order to bring about this papal unity. As De Chirico states:

Indeed, the dimension of fellowship with Rome and that of submission to Rome are inseparable and indissoluble aspects of the ecumenical vision of Catholicism. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot be cum Petro [with Peter] unless you are sub Petro [under Peter]. The fact is, we are talking about Catholicism, of course, but the kind of Catholicism that remains, down to its core, roman, papal, marian, and vatican. The ecumenical openness is therefore targeted at the catholicization of all of Christianity. It is the Catholic system that requires it and it is the Catholic system that has the resources to accomplish it.<sup>34</sup>

The ecumenical posture of the third era must be understood on the backdrop of the imperial era and the oppositional era of the RCC. When Vatican II speaks of uniting all Christians under the Vatican and when they speak of obedience to the Roman Pontiff and his jurisdiction, it is hard not to perceive the continuing imperial and oppositional tone that characterized the first two eras, especially given the fact that "the Roman Catholic Church is not a simple denomination. It is a church-state, with a monarch, political claims, and an army."<sup>35</sup> Imperialism and opposition are imbedded into the DNA of the RCC through the infallible and authoritative statements of the first

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<sup>30</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic constitution on the Church], November 21, 1964, sec. 15, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, sec. 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> De Chirico, "Il Vaticano II," 122. [translation mine]

<sup>35</sup> Leonardo De Chirico, "Roman Catholic Ecumenism: Let the Italian Evangelicals Speak," *Vatican Files*, July 23, 2014, <http://vaticanfiles.org/2014/07/84-roman-catholic-ecumenism-let-the-italian-evangelicals-speak/>.

two eras. One must recall Boniface VIII's statement in 1302 "that every human creature is subject to the Roman pontiff,—this we declare, say, define, and pronounce to be altogether necessary to salvation." These historical and theological underpinnings of the ecumenical movement strongly warn evangelicals that unity with Rome would come at the high price of gospel compromise. It should therefore be adamantly avoided.<sup>36</sup>

## Understanding Ecumenical Efforts since Vatican II: The Joint Declaration

Having examined the theological and historical backdrop to ecumenism, it must be discerned whether there is enough convergence between Rome's gospel and the biblical gospel to suggest that unity should be pursued. In order to answer this question, one must take into account one of the most notable examples of ecumenical efforts between Protestants and the RCC, the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (hereafter the *JD*) by the RCC and the Lutheran World Federation. It is because of this document that Lutherans and the RCC will commemorate the Reformation together in 2017.<sup>37</sup>

The principal statements in the *JD* that give pause for reflection are "Together we confess: *By grace alone*, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works"<sup>38</sup> and "... *Through Christ alone* are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith" [emphasis added].<sup>39</sup> Considering that the *five solas* have been the distinguishing marks of the Reformation, how is the RCC's seeming rapprochement with *solus Christus* and *sola gratia* to be understood? Before getting into specifics, it is helpful to keep the following observations in mind while reflecting on the *JD*.

The document must be read in its ecumenical context. This means there is an extra effort on the part of both parties to avoid inflammatory language.<sup>40</sup> Both churches recognize that excommunications stemming back to the time of the Reformation are substantial barriers to unity in the present generation. New understandings and dialogue have led them to believe that there is enough convergence on the doctrine of justification to say "the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner."<sup>41</sup> Notwithstanding this newfound convergence, the *JD* says, "the churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past."<sup>42</sup> This means that the substantial difference between 1999 and the

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<sup>36</sup> For other Vatican documents regarding Ecumenism after Vatican II, see the 1993 "Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms for Ecumenism." See also Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* ("That they may be one") which reaffirms and advances the vision of Vatican II. Yet an interesting development can be noted in this encyclical. *Ut Unum Sint* goes a step further than Vatican II. John Paul II says that brotherhood has been rediscovered as a result of ecumenical dialogue (sec. 42). However, in the same paragraph, he also underscores that, while the change of attitude is encouraging, the Churches and Ecclesial Communities are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. "Full unity will come about when all share in the fullness of the means of salvation entrusted by Christ to his Church" (sec. 36). Specifically, a visible head is the foundational piece of Christian unity. "This designation is the best possible safeguard against the risk of separating power" (sec. 88). *Ut Unum Sint* also affirms the vision that the Eucharist is the highest sacramental expression of unity as its common celebration signals that all obstacles to ecclesial communion have been overcome (secs. 23, 40, 45). (*Ut Unum Sint* [Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism], May 25, 1995, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html)).

<sup>37</sup> See "From Conflict to Communion" for details regarding the 2017 joint commemoration.

<sup>38</sup> Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, October 31, 1999, sec. 15, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 16.

<sup>40</sup> David Estrada, "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," *Christianity & Society* 11, no. 1 (January 2001): 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 7.

sixteenth century is that there are no excommunications in the current generation, without saying much about change in doctrinal conviction. Furthermore, as an ecumenical document, there is an elasticity in the vocabulary that is used. Extra effort is made to use language that both sides can agree with, without giving precise theological exposition of what one means by that language.<sup>43</sup>

It is most important to keep in mind that in 2000, the year after the *JD*, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI from 2005–2013), issued the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*. This document reaffirms that ecumenical dialogue is necessary for evangelizing the outside world. However, this openness to dialogue does not mean that the RCC has changed its self-understanding. Therefore, the *JD* of 1999 hardly represents any shift in Roman Catholic theology. *Dominus Iesus* is clear that one cannot experience the fullness of God's grace and salvation apart from the Church, which is the "universal sacrament of salvation."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the *JD* must be read so as not to compromise historical Catholic teaching on the subject. Rather, we must seek to see how Roman Catholic theology has the flexibility to use these Protestant phrases, but invest them instead with their own definitions and understandings. With these observations in mind, we are now prepared to understand the usage of the more Protestant-sounding terms, as well as the *JD*'s teaching on justification.

### *Sola Gratia*

How can the RCC affirm the phrase "Together we confess: *By grace alone*, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God" [emphasis mine]? This is unraveled in two ways. First, one must observe that they have linguistically stretched the meaning of *sola gratia* to conform with their sacramental understanding of grace. When a Roman Catholic uses the word "grace" in relationship to justification or salvation they do not mean the unmerited favor of God to unworthy, hell-bound sinners. What is meant is that grace is a redemptive power that is infused into the believer, channeled through the sacraments (in particular, water baptism, the Eucharist, penance, confession, and last rites) in which there is a cooperation between man and God.<sup>45</sup> According to the 1995 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation."<sup>46</sup> This is because "the sacraments confer the grace that they signify."<sup>47</sup> So, when the

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<sup>43</sup> According to De Chirico, in the interest of ecumenical unity, the hermeneutical approach to the excommunications is guided by the thought that profound and mutual misunderstandings existed surrounding key words. These misunderstandings have only been further compounded over the centuries as a result of the different meanings of the words in Latin and other European languages ("La giustificazione come questione ecumenica irrisolta," *Studi di Teologi: La giustificazione per fede oggi* IFED, 27/1, no. 53 (January 2015): 102).

<sup>44</sup> The Declaration states, "Above all else, it must be *firmly believed* that 'the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church'... The Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation," since, united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her head, and subordinated to him, she has, in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being" (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dominus Iesus* [Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church] August 6, 2000, sec. 20, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html)).

<sup>45</sup> The CCC says that grace is "favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God" (sec. 1996). The CCC continues, "The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it." (sec. 1999). Paragraph 2000 further elaborates, "Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 1129. These sacraments of salvation are instituted by Christ (sec. 1117), for the church (sec. 1118), conferred by the ordained Catholic priest (sec. 1120). Trent states, "If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation but are superfluous, and that without them or without the desire of them men obtain from God through faith alone the grace of justification ... let him be anathema" (Session 7, March 3, 1547, Canons on the sacraments in general, Canon 4, 52).

<sup>47</sup> CCC, sec. 1127. See also Trent which says "If anyone says that grace, so far as God's part is concerned, is not imparted through the sacraments always ... let him be anathema" (Session 7, March 3, 1547, Canons on the sacraments in general, Canon 7, 52).



*JD* states, “We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation,”<sup>48</sup> it means people depend completely on the saving grace of God as mediated through the sacraments.<sup>49</sup>

A second help in unraveling the *JD*'s teaching on grace is to actually examine the current practice of the RCC, rather than just reading words in an ecumenical document. In 2000, the year following the *JD*, the RCC celebrated the year of the Jubilee, notorious for its granting of innumerable indulgences throughout the year. It is well-known that the sale and granting of indulgences were the provoking cause of the Reformation as is evident in Luther's Ninety-five Theses, many of which discuss purgatory and the abuse of indulgences.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, the year of 2016 was declared to be an extraordinary Year of the Jubilee in which, once again, innumerable indulgences were granted. This is the very year before the joint commemoration of the Reformation's 500th anniversary. In the papal bull of indiction for 2016, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis discusses the granting of indulgences and states that “Reconciliation with God is made possible through the paschal mystery and the mediation of the Church.”<sup>51</sup> Francis concludes the Bull by exhorting the Catholic faithful to turn to Mary, “so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.” It is hard to see how one could say in the *JD* that we are accepted by God through grace alone, yet still say that reconciliation comes through the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the mediation of the Church which grants indulgences *and* that Mary needs to make us worthy to contemplate the mercy of Jesus Christ. This confirms the conclusion above that the RCC has linguistically stretched the meaning of *sola gratia* to conform with their sacramental understanding of grace.

In light of the ongoing practice of granting indulgences, one must remember that this practice exhibits in a unique way the sacramental system of the RCC, thus actually contradicting *sola gratia*. The Church, as mediator, is able to dispense from the treasury of merits in order to bring forgiveness, expiation, and placation of divine justice for the temporal punishments for sin. The *Manual of Indulgences*, reprinted in Italian in 2016, contains the text of Pope Paul VI's 1967 apostolic constitution, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, which states:

For this reason there certainly exists between the faithful who have already reached their heavenly home, those who are expiating their sins in purgatory and those who are still pilgrims on earth a perennial link of charity and an abundant exchange of all the goods by which, with the expiation of all the sins of the entire Mystical Body, divine justice is placated. God's mercy is thus led to forgiveness, so that sincerely repentant sinners may participate as soon as possible in the full enjoyment of the benefits of the family of God.<sup>52</sup>

This concept of the exchange of the church's merits or goods which leads to expiation of all

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<sup>48</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 19.

<sup>49</sup> De Chirico, “La giustificazione,” 109.

<sup>50</sup> De Chirico notes that indulgences are the very point “in which synergistic, sacramental, and ecclesiocentric theology was concentrated” (“La giustificazione,” 110). [translation mine]

<sup>51</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae vultus* [Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy], April 11, 2015, sec. 22, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html).

<sup>52</sup> Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum doctrina* [Apostolic Constitution], Vatican Website. January 1, 1967, sec. 2.5. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apc\\_01011967\\_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_01011967_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html).

sins and the placation of divine justice, which in turn induces God's mercy to forgive sins and affords us the full enjoyment of salvific benefits is clearly not what is intended in *sola gratia* in a biblical sense, undermining the all-sufficient work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross and his sovereign grace to sinners who deserve his judgment.

### *Solus Christus*

Having seen that the *JD*'s teaching on grace does not exhibit a new coherence between Protestant and Catholic teaching on the nature of God's saving grace, we now turn to the doctrine of *solus Christus*. When a Protestant affirms *solus Christus*, the doctrine that is being affirmed is that salvation is found in Christ alone.<sup>53</sup> In the *JD*, the RCC says that through Christ alone are we justified. As one reads through various Catholic documents, the RCC never avoids affirming that Christ is the one and unique mediator. In fact the *JD* states, "Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ in all things who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator."<sup>54</sup>

The RCC, however, understands this much differently than a Protestant. *Lumen Gentium* states, "The unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source."<sup>55</sup> This means that in an addition to Christ's unique mediation, there are multiple mediators that cooperate with him and find their source in him. The RCC adds Mary; it adds itself as the sacrament of salvation, along with the saints as those capable of interceding for us in heaven, and those ordained through the sacrament of holy orders (i.e., the priests) who can perform the Mass.<sup>56</sup>

There are at least two fatal flaws in the Roman Catholic understanding of the uniqueness of Christ's mediation. First, the logic of having multiple mediators that derive from one source is simply neither compatible with biblical teaching nor implied by what the authors of Scripture intended. The verse cited by both Protestants and Catholics is 1 Timothy 2:5, which states, "For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Is 1 Timothy 2:5 compatible with the idea of other sub-mediators, like Mary and the Church? No—there is one mediator between God and man in the same way that there is also only one God. The RCC does not teach that the oneness of God can give rise to a manifold cooperation of sub-gods. If there can be no sub-gods, then there can be no subordinate mediators. "One" should be understood numerically, that is, *one* mediator and *one* God, in contrast to *manifold* mediators or *manifold* gods. As can be expected, Vatican II attempts to qualify the subordinate mediatorial role of Mary, *Lumen Gentium* states:

Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation ... Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix. This, however, is to be so understood that it neither takes away from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficaciousness of Christ the one

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<sup>53</sup> *Solus Christus* means that only Christ's once-for-all time sacrifice for sins can propitiate and expiate sins. This also means that He is the only mediator between God and man who can accomplish reconciliation. There is no other religious leader, saint, or any other man or woman who has ever lived who can save man from his sins or participate in this salvation (Acts 4:12). Only Jesus through His perfect life and death provides an all-sufficient righteousness and sacrifice for all who believe.

<sup>54</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 18.

<sup>55</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 62

<sup>56</sup> *Lumen Gentium* says, "the priest alone can complete the building up of the Body in the Eucharistic sacrifice" (sec. 17)

Mediator.<sup>57</sup>

However, it is not simply a question of adding to or taking away from the dignity and efficacy of Christ's work.<sup>58</sup> It is a question of numerically adding to Christ. If there are other mediators, then there is not just *one* mediator, no matter how one logically arranges their subordination to a principal source.

The second fatal flaw has to do with the fact that the RCC sees itself to be the continuation of the incarnation of Christ.<sup>59</sup> This mystical union between Christ and the church derives from the Augustinian idea of *totus Christus* (whole Christ) which suggests that the entirety or wholeness of Christ consists of both body and head. The head is Christ in heaven, the body is the church on earth. The two cannot be separated since they form the whole Christ. The use of "Christ-alone" must be understood in light of this. They believe they are the presence of Christ on the earth in such a way that they cannot be separated from Christ. *Lumen Gentium* says, "Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation."<sup>60</sup> So, logically, in the Roman Catholic mindset, to say Christ alone saves is compatible with the church mediating salvation, because, in a mystical sense, they are Christ. Therefore, the use of terms like "Christ alone" and "one mediator" in the *JD* should not be understood as if the RCC now supports the Protestant understanding of *solus Christus*, but rather, for the sake of ecumenical unity, they have introduced their extra-biblical theology into the concept of *solus Christus*.

### *Justification by Faith*

Having removed some of the consternation that could be created by an evangelical reading of the *JD*, we are now ready to offer some assessments regarding the overall teaching of the *JD* on justification by faith. The *JD* states that "the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this *Joint Declaration* is able to formulate a consensus on *basic truths* concerning the doctrine of justification" [emphasis mine].<sup>61</sup> It is evident once again that the document is carefully crafted in order to find common ground. Yet in reality, it actually exhibits continued divergence on some of the most basic truths of doctrine of justification that led to the Reformation. Three shortcomings are sufficient to demonstrate this point.

**The Definition of Justification.** First, the most glaring omission is a lack of any discussion on the meaning of the word *justify*. In the section on the "Biblical Message of Justification," there is some theological discussion, and typical verses are cited, but there is no attempt to give the precise meaning of what justification actually means. The closest definition given is in paragraph

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 62

<sup>58</sup> Despite Vatican II's qualification of Mary's subordinate role, it is evident that throughout history Mary is not subordinate to Christ. William Webster explains, "This is clear from the following parallels between the Lord Jesus and Roman Catholic teaching on Mary: Christ was immaculately conceived—as was Mary; Christ was sinless—so was Mary; Christ accomplished a work as redeemer and mediator—as did Mary; Christ was assumed body and soul into heaven—likewise Mary; Christ is the source of life—so is Mary; Christ is Lord and King—Mary is Queen and Sovereign; Christ is the mediator in dispensing grace—so is Mary; Christ is an object of prayer and trust and supreme devotion—so is Mary." Thus, Webster rightly concludes, "Mary has often displaced Jesus as the true object of worship and devotion" (*The Church of Rome at the Bar of History*, 88).

<sup>59</sup> For a more in depth understanding of this concept see Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*. For evangelical interactions on the subject, see De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives*, 246–283 and Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology & Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2014) 56–66.

<sup>60</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 14.

<sup>61</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 13.

11, where it says, “Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom 3:23–25; Acts 13:39; Lk 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12–21) and from the curse of the law.”<sup>62</sup> “Liberation from sin” is conflated with justification, forensic terminology is missing, imputation is absent, and there are no explanations of justification as a legal declaration. This is typical of the RCC as is seen in Trent, which said that justification “is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man.”<sup>63</sup> The RCC continues to use biblical terms like “justification,” but continues to define them in an unbiblical way, describing justification as a process by which the sinner, through the help of God’s grace, becomes more righteous.<sup>64</sup> From a Protestant perspective, it appears as though the biblical understanding of justification has been compromised.

**The Ground of Justification.** The *JD* discusses the imputation of sin as something both Lutherans and Roman Catholics would agree upon, but the imputation of righteousness, the ground of justification, is not affirmed by the RCC.<sup>65</sup> This is because Trent officially condemned the truth of imputed righteousness<sup>66</sup> and also clearly stated that the single formal cause of justification is not the righteousness by which God is righteous, but the righteousness of God which is infused into the believer.<sup>67</sup> In the Roman Catholic section of the *JD*, being made righteous is “the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace imparted as a gift to the believer.”<sup>68</sup> For the Lutheran on the other hand, righteousness before God in Christ is granted through the declaration of righteousness.<sup>69</sup> There is no real consensus on this *basic truth* of whether the ground of justification is imputed righteousness or infused righteousness.

**The Instrument of Justification.** A final shortcoming has to do with the *basic truth* of the instrument of justification. The Lutherans affirm justification by faith *alone*.<sup>70</sup> The Catholics affirm the importance of faith but refuse to affirm *faith alone*.<sup>71</sup> The RCC affirms that “Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the word and believers in it.”<sup>72</sup> Like they did at Trent, the

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<sup>62</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Council of Trent, Session 6, January 13, 1547, *Decree concerning justification*, chap. 7, 33. Cf. CCC, sec. 1989.

<sup>64</sup> Trent officially condemns those who do not view justification as a process when they say, “If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema” (Session 6, January 13, 1547, *Canons concerning justification*, canon 24, 45). Cf. CCC, sec. 1989.

<sup>65</sup> *Joint Declaration*, secs. 22–24.

<sup>66</sup> “If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost ... or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, Session 6, January 13, 1547, *Canons concerning justification*, canon 11, 43–44).

<sup>67</sup> Trent states, “the single formal cause is the justice of God, not that by which He Himself is just, but that by which He makes us just” (Session 6, January 13, 1547, *Decree concerning justification*, chap. 7, 33).

<sup>68</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 24.

<sup>69</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 23. Declarative language is used only in the Lutheran section, but even here, it seems as though the forensic character of justification and the imputation of righteousness is softened by unclear explanations. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 419.

<sup>70</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 26.

<sup>71</sup> Of course the RCC could not affirm *faith alone* because the Trent says, “If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema” (Session 6, January 13, 1547, *Canons concerning justification*, canon 12, 44).

<sup>72</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 27. Lutheran belief in baptismal regeneration makes them susceptible to confusion with the RCC on this

RCC of today holds to its sacramental understanding of salvation with baptism being the cause of justification. Trent stated, “The instrumental cause [of justification] is the sacrament of baptism, which is the sacrament of faith.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the RCC affirms that the “justification of sinners is ... being made righteous by justifying grace.”<sup>74</sup> As has been demonstrated, justification is for the RCC the *process* of being made righteous. Trent also taught that faith cooperating with works increases one’s righteousness and thus further justifies the sinner.<sup>75</sup> Once again, the *JD* exhibits a divergence rather than a consensus on the basic truths of justification.

These three shortcomings lead to an important conclusion. A more loving and friendlier tone, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot erase the Reformation if there is no real consensus on these three basic truths of justification.<sup>76</sup> There is no substantial difference between the *JD*’s understanding of justification and the teaching of Trent, which means the RCC continues to diverge from the gospel.

### Concluding Implications

Where does this leave us regarding gospel unity with and under the RCC? The Bible says that the ground for unity is not just the truth of who Jesus is, but the truth of how Jesus saves. In Galatians 1:9, Paul states, “if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!” The Galatians were faced with the Judaizers in their midst who distorted the gospel by teaching adherence to the Old Testament customs as a prerequisite for justification, especially circumcision (Acts 15:1). No doubt these men, being part of the church, had an orthodox understanding of the person of Christ. However, they were to be rebuked and accursed because they added to faith. Scripture teaches us to take seriously any deviation from or addition to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Vatican II calls for unity under the pope among Christians who profess the Trinity and those who confess Jesus to be Savior and Lord. Their understanding of the person of Christ may appear orthodox on paper; however, the RCC, in its addition of extra-biblical doctrines to the gospel, is actually saying “no” to the gospel itself, fundamentally denying the biblical doctrine of justification by faith. Therefore, Protestants must not unite with Rome. To do so would pervert the gospel and bring the condemnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of utmost importance is that this generation strive for a robust understanding of the biblical doctrines of salvation, especially that of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This doctrine, in a particular way, is the foundational piece for the message that the true church of Jesus Christ believes and preaches. If this doctrine is perverted or compromised, the church crumbles, there is no gospel to proclaim, and missions become a useless effort. There are millions of people all over the world from many different cultures within the system of the RCC, each with differing degrees of understanding of Church teaching and different levels of faith and adherence to Church beliefs and traditions. There is no salvation for those who believe in the teaching of the RCC. Roman Catholics must be encouraged to a deeper understanding of the biblical gospel and to evaluate its coherence with the teaching of the RCC. Roman Catholic

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particular point.

<sup>73</sup> Council of Trent, Session 6, January 13, 1547, Decree concerning justification, chap. 7, 33. Cf. CCC, sec. 1992.

<sup>74</sup> *Joint Declaration*, sec. 27.

<sup>75</sup> Trent states, “... they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified” (Session 6, January 13, 1547, Decree concerning justification, chap. 10, 36). Cf. CCC, secs. 1990–1992.

<sup>76</sup> Over 240 German Lutheran theologians saw the *JD* as a compromise of the gospel (Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 414).

countries like Italy are a mission field to be reached. For the sake of our Lord and for the sake of the lost, this generation must then labor, like the Reformers 500 years ago, to protect, clarify, and proclaim the true gospel in all of its glory.

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