

Unity at the Crossroads

For those of us who have had the privilege of extensive foreign travel and contact with the body of Christ in many different countries, coming home can sometimes offer a rude shock. Here in the United States our own denominational or independent churches are often quite provincial about the extent to which the Holy Spirit seems to be uniting the church worldwide along the lines prayed for by Jesus in John 17.

Charismatic Christians, of course, seem more ready than most to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is doing. They point out the manifestation of Holy Spirit renewal is so similar from country to country that you'd have to believe there was some unbelievably clever conspiracy going on if you didn't think God was at work.

But whenever Holy Spirit renewal is active in a country or culture, a very fundamental theological question quickly arises: How much unity should there be between Roman Catholics and Protestants?

To some in the renewal movement, the question is irrelevant. After all, there are many places where Catholics and Protestants seem to be working closely together both to advance the gospel and to work out the implications of a Christian worldview in society as a whole. Neither side seems troubled by the differences in their core theologies.

In the end, though, theology does matter. For one thing, it

affects key practical issues among Christians—authority, for example, or the very freedom to evangelize.

In 1994, key U.S. evangelical and Catholic leaders signed a statement called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.” Though the document didn’t try to syncretize Catholic and Protestant theologies and focused on cooperative work on moral and cultural issues, it was thoughtfully criticized by some evangelicals. They said if Martin Luther’s point were true—that faith alone could bring about justification and salvation—then what common ground could there be with people who traditionally rejected this position?

That criticism led to another document in 1997 that spelled out how close to each other Catholics and evangelicals had now come. The Gift of Salvation, also signed by outstanding Protestant and Catholic theologians and academics, essentially stated the classic Protestant position that both salvation and justification could be acquired solely through faith.

But though the pope himself is believed to be warmly sympathetic to this position, how does a Protestant cope with notions like Mary as co-Redemptrix of mankind or papal infallibility or forgiveness of sins for pilgrims to Rome in the 2000-2001 Jubilee Year?

More problematic still, though, are the problems of Catholic-Protestant coexistence in parts of the world where Roman Catholicism is the dominant Christian faith. Nowhere has there been more tension than in Latin America.

An uninterrupted growth of Protestants in almost every country

of Central and South America in the last 40 years has led to sharp challenges to the near-monopoly of social and legal authority that Catholic hierarchies had previously enjoyed for hundreds of years. Yet there is still a long way to go before there is true equality under the law for Catholics and Protestants.

Chile, for example, passed a religious-freedom bill only as recently as 1999, despite an estimate that close to one-fifth of the population is Protestant.

In Argentina, despite the significant presence of Protestants, especially of

Pentecostals, the legal position of nonCatholics is still tenuous. There still is not a single evangelical Protestant university on the entire continent of South America.

The task evangelicals and charismatics thus face is complex as they seek to expand the message of salvation by faith in cultures that are generally sympathetic to Christian symbols but lack much evidence of Christian spiritual fruit. In the end, the best testimony always comes from dramatically changed lives of individuals who have discovered the gift of salvation.

Differences in Catholic and Protestant theologies affect key issues among Christians.