



A R E W E  
T O G E T H E R ?

*A Protestant Analyzes  
Roman Catholicism*

R . C . S P R O U L



“For two decades (or longer), evangelicals have been making a steady retreat from practically every front of historic contention with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The statement called *Evangelicals & Catholics Together* accelerated the quest for evangelical-Catholic détente in the mid-1990s. Many evangelicals seem to think this is a positive, unifying movement. I’m convinced it is a dangerous drift. From the time I began to detect this new ecumenical climate until now, one of the few voices sounding a clear and consistent warning about it has always been R.C. Sproul’s. He sees clearly that what is at stake is nothing less than the gospel. The various recent ecumenical manifestoes all demonstrate this, albeit in subtle, confusing terms. More proof is found in the published teachings of the Roman Catholic Church herself. For at least fifteen years, I have wished for a clear, accessible exposé using the most recent Roman Catholic catechism to show why that church’s doctrine is incompatible with—even hostile to—the true gospel of Jesus Christ. I’m especially glad now to have just such a book from the pen of Dr. Sproul. No one is better qualified than he to speak definitively to the issues, and he has done a superb job of making the case from Scripture, from church history, and from the Catechism of the Catholic Church itself.”

—DR. JOHN MACARTHUR

*Pastor-teacher*

*Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, Calif.*

“We live at a time when evangelicalism’s theological chaos and preference for parachurch pyrotechnics over biblical ecclesiology have made Rome an increasingly attractive option for many Christians seeking something more intellectually and institutionally satisfying. This is why Dr. Sproul’s book is so timely, as it sets out the differences between orthodox Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in a clear, concise, and helpful way. Anyone wanting to know what is at stake in the debate between Geneva and Rome should read this book.”

—DR. CARL R. TRUEMAN

*Professor of biblical and religious studies*

*Grove City College, Grove City, Pa.*

“When discussing Roman Catholic theology, Protestants have too often been ignorant, careless, or unfair. The power of this book is that R.C. Sproul is fair, precise, and charitable as he proves that the errors of the Roman Catholic Church are both deep and significant, and that the Roman Catholic gospel is not the gospel of the Bible. Even as he calls for us to love our Roman Catholic friends, he warns that we cannot consider them brothers and sisters when the gospel itself is at stake.”

—TIM CHALLIES

*Blogger, [www.challies.com](http://www.challies.com)*

“Some are drawn to Roman Catholicism because of the rich tradition they see in it but do not see in much of evangelicalism. Even church leaders and historians are telling us the Protestant/Roman Catholic divide is over. We need a biblically sound and historically informed answer. This book is the answer. With his characteristic persuasion and clarity, R.C. Sproul shows the errors of Roman Catholicism when viewed against the beauty and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

*President*

*Reformation Bible College, Sanford, Fla.*

“Truth is precious, for it sets us free (John 8:31–32). In Christ’s church, our unity revolves around knowing what we believe (Eph. 4:12–13). Too often discussions about Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are marred by indifference to doctrine or unfair caricatures of each other’s beliefs. In neither case do we love the truth. R.C. Sproul’s book is a masterpiece of fairness, brimming with quotations from authoritative Catholic and Protestant writings. In a short scope he gives us a clear view of the central questions of the Reformation. He helps us to see that we cannot minimize our differences and remain faithful to Christ, for the gospel itself is at stake.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

*President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.*



“This is a terrific book, one I have been hoping to find for a long time. Sproul firmly and rightly defends the faith of the Reformation, but without resorting to rancor or caricature. He takes great pains to be fair to Rome, considering the nuances of the Catholic Catechism and the significance of Vatican II. This will be the first book I recommend when either Protestants or Catholics ask me what is the difference between the two.”

—REV. KEVIN DEYOUNG

*Senior pastor*

*Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, N.C.*

“An enormously important book at a turning point in relationships between Roman Catholics and Protestants. It displays everything we would expect from Dr. Sproul: clarity, precision, honesty, and deeply held conviction about the nature and substance of a continuing disagreement. Crucial reading written with courage and grace.”

—DR. DEREK W. H. THOMAS

*Senior minister*

*First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.*

“This book is not what you might assume: a rehearsal of slogans. Rather, it is an intelligent and engaging primer for Protestants and Roman Catholics alike about what Rome actually teaches and what are the profound issues that continue to separate confessional, evangelical Protestants from the Roman communion. This is a book that Protestants should give to their Roman Catholic neighbors and that Protestant pastors (after reading it) should give to their members. It is also a book that more than a few theologians and historians should read before the next round of ecumenical discussions and documents.”

—DR. R. SCOTT CLARK

*Professor of church history and historical theology*

*Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.*

“In this irenic, though uncompromising, response to recent attempts by evangelicals to say that nothing substantial in terms of key doctrines now divides them from contemporary Roman Catholicism, R.C. Sproul rightly shows that this is deeply misguided thinking. On core issues that relate to the nature of salvation and the church, Sproul ever so carefully and judiciously spells out the way that Roman Catholic thought is as far away as it has ever been from that of the Reformers, and that, if we are to be true to the Scriptures, we cannot move beyond the lines established at the time of the Reformation. What is at stake is nothing less than the nature of the gospel. This is an extremely helpful book that should be required reading for all interested in relating to Roman Catholics today.”

—DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

*Professor of church history and biblical spirituality  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.*

“We will soon be observing the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. At a time when some are questioning the relevance and importance of the Reformation to the evangelical church, R.C. Sproul’s survey of the leading differences between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism is both welcome and needed. Liberally referencing and explaining the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, Sproul carefully shows what are—and are not—the differences between Rome and Protestantism. Writing in the way that we have come to expect—clearly, accessibly, and pastorally—Sproul convincingly demonstrates that the issues that stirred the Reformers centuries ago not only strike at the heart of the gospel but also remain with us today. In a day when many evangelicals are giving renewed attention to the biblical gospel, Sproul’s work admirably assists the church in articulating the gospel faithfully and wisely.”

—DR. GUY PRENTISS WATERS

*James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.*

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Roman Catholicism*

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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*To R.C. Sproul Jr.,  
in memory of his wife,  
Denise Sproul*





## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword: Combating the Drift.</i> . . . . .	xi
<i>Introduction: At Stake: The Gospel</i> . . . . .	I
1. Scripture . . . . .	II
2. Justification . . . . .	29
3. The Church . . . . .	51
4. The Sacraments . . . . .	67
5. The Papacy . . . . .	85
6. Mary . . . . .	101
<i>Conclusion: How Then Should We Proceed?</i> . . . . .	121
<i>Notes.</i> . . . . .	123
<i>Index.</i> . . . . .	127



*Foreword*

COMBATING  
THE DRIFT

Even among evangelical Protestants, there is a widespread assumption that the Reformation is over. We hear it said that the questions that divided Western Christendom in the sixteenth century are remote from the problems of contemporary life. Besides, the argument continues, ecumenical rapprochements have defused the mutual condemnations. The Roman Catholic Magisterium now affirms a robust doctrine of grace in salvation and the churches of the Reformation finally have come to acknowledge the role of human agency. In the face of aggressive secularism and a culture of death, not to mention a resurgent Islamic movement across the globe, are not our divisions—and the polemics that sustain them—both unnecessary and a scandal to our common witness?

Widely recognized as a leading Christian professor, pastor, writer, and teacher, R. C. Sproul disagrees with this assumption. An avid student of Thomas Aquinas, he belongs to a long tradition of Reformed theologians who have read widely and profitably in the pre-Reformation heritage. Like the Reformers, he knows that the medieval church always affirmed—and official Roman Catholic teaching

today affirms—the importance of grace, Christ, faith, and Scripture. It was the *sola* (Latin: “alone”) that the Reformers attached to these affirmations that provoked the Reformation and continues to divide these historical bodies. Sproul knows where these confessions agree on substantial matters and where they diverge in equally significant ways. This knowledge makes this book a learned exploration that avoids sweeping caricatures, as well as sweeping announcements that we have finally resolved our differences.

Through the years, many Protestants themselves have drifted from the core convictions that ignited the Reformation. Whole denominations with Reformation roots have wandered so far from God’s Word toward a human-centered philosophy and spirituality that our differences with Rome seem slight by comparison. While the Reformers discerned in the medieval church a creeping Semi-Pelagianism that is natural to the fallen heart, many Protestant bodies today entertain and even encourage an outright Pelagianism. If our condition is not as grave as Scripture indicates, it is not surprising that our perception of salvation shifts from a rescue operation by God incarnate to our own personal and social progress and transformation. Jesus becomes an inspiring example, of course, but He hardly needs to be a divine Savior to fulfill this role. Not surprisingly, the divinization of the inner self (Gnosticism) and a denial of Christ’s unique person and work (Arianism/Socinianism) ensue, as night follows day. No one needs to announce this fact. No formal break with Christianity is necessary. The creeds may still be affirmed, but they no longer matter, because our faith and life are determined more by our natural theology than by the surprising and disorienting gospel.

This drift, away from the light of God’s Word and back to the orbit of our fallen hearts, is as evident today in evangelical circles where Reformation essentials were defended and proclaimed with passion. According to several studies, American evangelicals generally do not know what they believe and why they believe it.

Consequently, most share with the wider culture a confidence in human goodness and a weak view of the need for God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. According to these reports, most evangelicals believe that we are saved by being good and that there are many ways of salvation apart from explicit faith in Jesus Christ.

So, if the question of the Reformation—"How can I find a gracious God?"—is no longer relevant, then Christianity is no longer relevant. And if evangelical Protestantism has lost its frame of reference for answering that question, it makes sense that the doctrinal divisions of the Reformation seem irrelevant when there is so much for us to do together in order to transform our world.

For the author of this book, though, the Reformation, far from being over, needs to sweep across the landscape of contemporary church life—Protestant as well as Roman Catholic. Here are a few of the disturbing trends that need to be checked and reformed:

- We are all too confident in our own words, so that churches become echo chambers for the latest trends in pop psychology, marketing, politics, entertainment, and entrepreneurial leadership. We need to recover our confidence in the triune God and His speech, as He addresses us authoritatively in His Word.

- We are all too confident in our own methods for success in personal, ecclesial, and social transformation. We need to be turned again to God's judgment and grace, His action through His ordained means of grace.

- We are all too confident in our own good works. We need to repent and be brought again to despair not only of our sins but of our pretended righteousness.

- We are all too enamored of our own glory, the kingdoms that we are building. We need to be brought back to that place of trust in Christ where we are deeply aware of "receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28), because God is building it for His own glory, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Only as we turn



our ears away from the false promises of this passing age to God's Word, to His saving revelation in Christ as the only gospel, and to the glory of the triune God as our only goal, can we expect to see a genuine revival of Christian discipleship, worship, and mission in the world today.

Even if you do not agree with everything in this book, you will find here the counsel of a wise, faithful, and well-informed pastor. Sproul is passionate about defending the Reformation not as a curator of a museum but as a shepherd of Christ's flock. It is precisely because these questions remain the enduring and ineradicable issue for every human being in every place since the fall of humanity in Eden that he persistently draws our attention back to them. I have been shaped, provoked, and instructed by his laser-like focus on these questions throughout my adult life.

May the Spirit of God illumine our minds and hearts to hear and understand His Word along the important and sometimes difficult path that the author blazes in these pages. Through it, may we be not only clearer in understanding where we differ from our Roman Catholic friends, but more delighted in the treasure laid up for us in God's living and abiding Word.

—Dr. Michael S. Horton

*J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology and Apologetics  
Westminster Seminary California*

*Introduction*

A T S T A K E :  
T H E G O S P E L

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST is always at risk of distortion. It became distorted in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. It became distorted at innumerable other points of church history, and it is often distorted today. This is why Martin Luther said the gospel must be defended in every generation. It is the center point of attack by the forces of evil. They know that if they can get rid of the gospel, they can get rid of Christianity.

There are two sides to the gospel, the good news of the New Testament: an objective side and a subjective side. The objective content of the gospel is the person and work of Jesus—who He is and what He accomplished in His life. The subjective side is the question of how the benefits of Christ's work are appropriated to the believer. There the doctrine of justification comes to the fore.

Many issues were involved in the Reformation, but the core matter, the material issue of the Reformation, was the gospel, especially the doctrine of justification. There was no great disagreement between the Roman Catholic Church authorities and the Protestant

Reformers about the objective side. All the parties agreed that Jesus was divine, the Son of God and of the Virgin Mary, and that He lived a life of perfect obedience, died on the cross in an atoning death, and was raised from the grave. The battle was over the second part of the gospel, the subjective side, the question of how the benefits of Christ are applied to the believer.

The Reformers believed and taught that we are justified by faith alone. Faith, they said, is the *sole instrumental cause* for our justification. By this they meant that we receive all the benefits of Jesus' work through putting our trust in Him alone.

The Roman communion also taught that faith is a necessary condition for salvation. At the seminal Council of Trent (1545–1563), which formulated Rome's response to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic authorities declared that faith affords three things: the *initium*, the *fundamentum*, and the *radix*. That is, faith is the *beginning* of justification, the *foundation* for justification, and the *root* of justification. But Rome held that a person can have true faith and still not be justified, because there was much more to the Roman system.

In reality, the Roman view of the gospel, as expressed at Trent, was that justification is accomplished through the sacraments. Initially, the recipient must accept and cooperate in baptism, by which he receives justifying grace. He retains that grace until he commits a mortal sin. Mortal sin is called "mortal" because it kills the grace of justification. The sinner then must be justified a second time. That happens through the sacrament of penance, which the Council of Trent defined as "a second plank" of justification for those who have made shipwreck of their souls.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental difference was this. Trent said that God does not justify anyone until real righteousness inheres within the person. In other words, God does not declare a person righteous unless he or she *is* righteous. So, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, justification depends on a person's sanctification. By contrast, the

Reformers said justification is based on the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus. The only ground by which a person can be saved is Jesus' righteousness, which is reckoned to him when he believes.

There were radically different views of salvation. They could not be reconciled. One of them was the gospel. One of them was not. Thus, what was at stake in the Reformation was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though the Council of Trent made many fine affirmations of traditional truths of the Christian faith, it declared justification by faith alone to be anathema,<sup>2</sup> ignoring many plain teachings of Scripture, such as Romans 3:28: "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

### ***Liberalism and ecumenism***

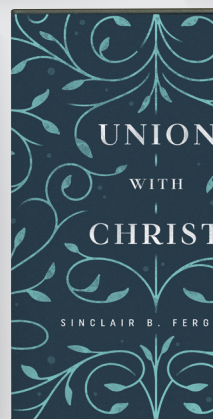
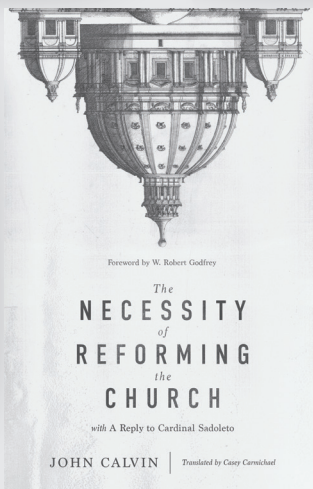
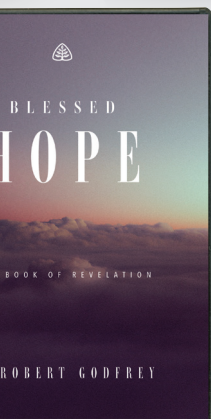
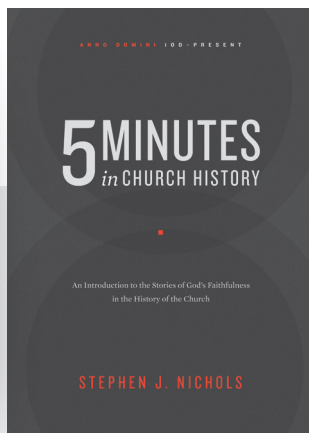
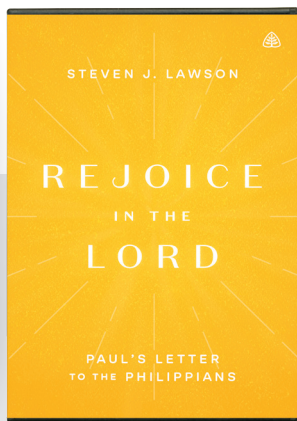
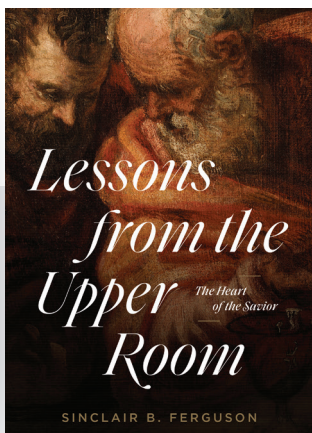
In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the gospel was threatened by theological liberals who denied the supernatural work of Jesus. This was still the biggest threat when I entered seminary in the 1960s. Eventually the compromises were so blatant I had to leave the church in which I was raised and ordained.

About ten years after I was ordained, a minister of the denomination in which I was ordained was tried in a church court for heresy. Such trials were nearly a thing of the past, but this man had publicly denied the atonement of Christ and would not affirm the deity of Christ as an ordained minister. His case went to the highest court of the church.

When that court handed down its decision, it made two affirmations. First, the court reaffirmed the church's historical creeds, all of which declared the deity of Christ and the atonement of Christ. Then the court went on to say that this man's views were within the limits of interpretation of the creed. So, on the one hand, the court reaffirmed the creeds, but on the other hand, it said ministers in the church did not really have to believe the creeds.

That case showed me that the denomination in which I was

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