

**The Reformation, evangelicals and Roman Catholicism:
A statement for the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation**

The Evangelical Alliance UK welcomes and encourages the marking of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017. Martin Luther's publication of 95 Theses on the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic church in October 1517 helped set in train a momentous theological, ecclesiastical and social movement, the legacy of which is still very evident in the 21st century.

In this statement we aim to:

- Demonstrate the enduring importance of the Reformation for evangelical Christians, and Christians more generally
- Outline the core theological emphases of the Reformation, and the vital recovery of authentic gospel Christianity that they represented
- Highlight the divergences between evangelical and Roman Catholic faith and practice that are rooted in the Reformation, and that persist today
- Trace and assess the attempts that have been made since the Reformation to promote greater understanding, convergence and common action between evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

As evangelicals, we owe a great deal of our doctrinal, spiritual and cultural identity to the Reformation. Those of us in Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Baptist and Anabaptist traditions can trace a direct line back to the seismic theological and ecclesial renewal led by Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, Thomas Cranmer, John Knox, John Smyth, Menno Simons and other leaders of the Reformation as it developed in various forms across Britain, Europe and the world from the 16th century onwards. Others of us in Methodist, Pentecostal, Independent and new church traditions give thanks for the Pietist and Revivalist development of Protestantism in the 17th and 18th centuries, which defined or deeply influenced these traditions, and which further shaped the distinctive ethos and character of modern-day evangelicalism.

Although it arose historically five centuries ago, the Reformation was not so much an innovation as a recovery – a recovery of the essential content of the 'evangel' or 'good news' of salvation proclaimed by Jesus Christ himself, and by his apostles. That work of recovery is reflected in our own designation as 'evangelicals'. Luther and other early Reformers sought to re-emphasise key aspects of basic, gospel Christianity that they felt had been neglected or abused by the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval and Renaissance periods. As the word 'Reformation' itself suggests, their initial purpose was to reform the church of Rome from within, rather than establish a new church or set of denominations. In time, however, rejection of their proposals led to divergence, separation and the development of Protestantism as a discrete phenomenon. This process was marked by certain fundamental beliefs - beliefs clearly reflected in the Basis of Faith that defines our unity as an Evangelical Alliance today.

First, the Reformers sought to recover the primary authority of the Bible as distinct from ecclesiastical tradition. Faced with accusations of betraying his own Catholic

heritage at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther famously replied: “I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” This concern for biblical primacy in the determination of Christian doctrine and practice was key to Luther’s protest against indulgences in 1517. Indulgences were granted by the church as a means of mitigating the punishment due to sinners, their loved ones or others in purgatory. Traditionally they required some form of ritual action to become effective - from the saying of repeated prayers, through the reverencing of relics, to participation in pilgrimages. In the decades before Luther’s protest, however, they had become heavily commercialised and corrupted, with charges being made for them that would not only be diverted to the building of the grand Basilica of St Peter in Rome, but also to pay off bribes taken out by Prince Albrecht of Brandenburg to secure the Archbishopric of Mainz. Whereas indulgences were deemed acceptable because the church and its Pope had authorised them, Luther could not find biblical warrant for them. Indeed, he argued that they contradicted the teaching of scripture, and that since scripture must guide the church’s teaching, they must be rejected. To reaffirm his commitment to biblical authority, Luther translated the Bible into his native German, thus making it accessible to the mass of ordinary people where previously Rome had authorised a Latin Vulgate version whose translations defended its own ecclesiastical codes, and which in any case was little read and understood beyond a clerical elite. Today, our Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith affirms the “supreme authority of the Old and New Testament scriptures, which are the written Word of God—fully trustworthy for faith and conduct”. In doing so, it echoes Luther’s emphasis, which he in turn believed was reflective of scripture’s witness to itself, and the use of scripture by Jesus.

Luther’s protest against indulgences was also more specifically a protest against the idea that salvation could either be earned by human effort or will, or bought by human funds or goods. This understanding derived particularly from Luther’s close study of the New Testament in its original Greek, fresh and more accurate editions of which had recently become available to him. The outcome was his and other Reformers’ formulation of the signature Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Rome had taught that righteousness could be accumulated through ever-more assiduous acts of ritual penance and devotion. Grace might be given through baptism and might inhere in the six other sacraments it had defined, but to be truly justified or made right with God required additional works of holiness prescribed by the church. For the Reformers, however, justification was *sola fide* and *sola gratia* – dependent purely on a saving faith which was itself a free gift, or grace, of God, secured by Jesus’ substitutionary death for sinners on the cross. This liberating idea has been central to evangelical preaching, teaching and witness: while the precise relationship of grace to works in ongoing discipleship has been interpreted differently in different strands of evangelicalism, the common commitment of evangelicals to this foundational principle is expressed by the Alliance’s Basis of Faith when it affirms “the justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ”. We note that the Lutheran World Federation has chosen to mark the Reformation quincentenary by applying this principle to the three-fold message that salvation, human beings and creation are ‘not for sale’. This bears out the rich implications of justification not only for personal faith and redemption, but also for wider society in a world marred by the sinful exploitations of people-trafficking and ecological profligacy. As such, it resonates with our own Evangelical Alliance work in public policy and advocacy, and the connections we seek to make between the

necessity for personal faith in Jesus Christ and the call to bring the good news we know as individuals to bear in our communities, and in society as a whole.

As an Alliance of evangelicals drawn from many denominations and networks, we manifest in our own history and development the plurality of religious expression to which the Reformation gave rise. By emphasising the believer's direct personal access to God through prayer and Bible reading, and the priority of a conscience 'captive to the Word' before institutional church structures, Luther and the Reformers paved the way – whether intentionally or not – for the extraordinary diversity of Christian churches and streams that exist in the UK and worldwide today. This can be seen in both positive and negative terms, and is a reminder that for all its necessity and for all its phenomenal achievements, the Reformation had consequences which were at times more complex, and in certain cases, less positive.

On the one hand, the diversification of Christianity which flowed from the Reformation spurred principles of religious toleration and freedom of thought which would profoundly influence the Enlightenment, and which would come to underpin modern democracy, human rights and free trade. On the other, it meant that a Church which Jesus had called to be one body became one only in a more abstract, ethereal sense, or even that it too often modelled division and fragmentation rather than the unity for which Jesus himself had prayed (cf. Mk 14:22; John 17:20-24). Most immediately, of course, this meant division between Roman Catholics and Protestants. While Rome had already split from Eastern Orthodoxy in the 11th century, and while we firmly believe that the Reformation was essential in itself, it would be disingenuous to deny that certain *outcomes* of the Reformation were more baleful. Indeed, in various contexts Protestants and Catholics viciously persecuted one another, and elsewhere certain types of Protestant saw fit to shed other types of Protestants' blood. From the Peasants' War of 1523 to the Thirty Years' War of 1618-48 the Reformation became a focus of severe national and international conflict, with millions of lives lost. For all the progress made in reconciliation since, the resonance of those conflicts can still be felt in more recent sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland, Liverpool, Glasgow and elsewhere.

Against this background, significant attempts have been made over the past hundred years or so to improve mutual understanding between Catholics and Protestants, and much of this work has centred on the legacy of the Reformation. The ecumenical movement has been prominent in this, and although the Roman Catholic church has not formally joined the World Council of Churches (WCC), it has interacted closely with it. Some evangelicals have been active in Catholic-Protestant dialogue through the WCC, and others have more recently participated in it through the looser ecumenical network known as the Global Christian Forum. The Evangelical Alliance UK and the World Evangelical Alliance have sent representatives to the latter. In addition, many evangelicals participate in more local ecumenical networks alongside Catholics. In 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed a Joint Declaration which affirmed a "consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification", even while recognising persistent divergence on more detailed aspects of it. We acknowledge that among our members in the UK Alliance, some will regard these initiatives more positively than others. Indeed, in this respect it is important to note that more distinctively evangelical interactions with Roman Catholics over the past 40 years or so have been careful to reiterate continuing

points of divergence rooted in the Reformation, even while seeking to bring shared convictions and concerns more to the fore.

Between 1977 and 1984 the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (ERCDOM) brought evangelicals from a range of churches and networks together in conversation with representatives of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.ⁱ This spurred the World Evangelical Fellowship (now the World Evangelical Alliance) to issue a formal statement on Roman Catholicism in 1986.ⁱⁱ Then, in 1994 and 1998, the North American-based initiative Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) issued two statements that were motivated particularly by a shared commitment in various areas of social ethics.ⁱⁱⁱ Between 1993 and 2002 the World Evangelical Alliance updated its 1986 statement in a bilateral document published jointly with the Pontifical Council on Christian Unity and entitled *Church, Evangelization and the Bonds of Koinonia*.^{iv} In 2005 the Evangelical Alliance UK issued a report on *Faith and Nation* which engaged with different aspects of Catholic social teaching and explored respective understandings of core concepts in social and political theology such as the Common Good.^v Then, in 2009, a group of largely American Catholic, Orthodox and evangelical Christians issued the Manhattan Declaration, centring, like the ECT statements of the 1990s, on key common moral imperatives.^{vi} We would encourage those interested in exploring evangelical-Roman Catholic relations in more depth to consult these texts. Here, it will suffice to summarise the main points of convergence and divergence between evangelicals and Roman Catholics that have been identified in them, and that we believe are worth highlighting in the context of the quincentenary of Luther's protest. Beyond the foundational issues of biblical authority and justification mentioned above, these points are as follows:

Additional points of divergence

- **The nature and authority of the Church.** The various bilateral reports mentioned above find much to affirm about the common fellowship of Catholic and evangelical believers in Christ, and we would echo this. Even so, like those reports we would also highlight that Roman Catholic teaching maintains that the one true Church of Jesus Christ 'subsists in' the church of Rome, with evangelicals and others classed less definitively as 'ecclesial communities'. We do not accept that the Church as such is expressed definitively by the church of Rome. Rather, we believe that the Church is manifest in communities of disciples in which the gospel is faithfully preached, celebrated, shared and lived out in mission.
- **The papacy and papal infallibility.** The claim that the one universal Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic church is based in large measure on its claim that the apostolic mission of the early church was led, embodied and continued by an unbroken lineage of bishops, that Peter occupied a position of primacy among the apostles, that he was the first bishop of Rome, and that the see of Rome is therefore also a universal, primatial or papal see. While some evangelicals belong to churches led by bishops, we reject this narrative of papal supremacy and Petrine succession as without biblical warrant. We also reject the linked doctrine of papal infallibility that has evolved in relation to

it, whereby the Pope is deemed to speak without error when pronouncing on matters of doctrine and practice *ex cathedra*.

- **Sacraments.** For a large majority evangelicals, authentic churches are defined not only by faithful proclamation of the gospel but also by observance of the two sacraments or ordinances that Jesus himself authorised – that is, by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper or Communion. These two sacraments or ordinances were promoted by Luther and the Reformers, who in doing so rejected the Roman Catholic teaching that there were five further sacraments that could be classed with them (namely Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Holy Orders). As evangelicals, we continue to hold that these five actions or functions should not be defined as sacraments. With respect to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, evangelicals would also typically disagree with the Catholic notion that they intrinsically or instrumentally mediate regeneration and grace, and would disavow Catholic teaching on Communion as a Eucharistic sacrifice. These theological differences are underlined by the fact that evangelicals and other non-Catholics are officially unable to receive Communion in Roman Catholic churches.
- **Mariology.** Centuries of popular Roman Catholic devotion to Mary led in 1854 and 1950 respectively to papal promulgation of the dogmas of her immaculate conception and assumption. As evangelicals committed to the primary authority of scripture over church tradition, we recognise the biblical Mary as the faithful virgin mother and nurturer of Jesus, an exemplary female disciple standing in a prophetic lineage that includes Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, and a steadfast witness to Jesus’ death on the cross. While as evangelicals we regard church councils as subordinate to scripture, many of our churches accord particular authority to the first four ecumenical councils of the early Church, including the Council of Ephesus (431), which defined Mary as *Theotokos* – the ‘God-bearer’. Indeed, there is much that we can glean from Mary’s life and witness; yet on biblical grounds we nonetheless regard her as a pilgrim sinner who sometimes misconstrued the message of Jesus, and we find no basis for her immaculate conception or assumption (cf. Mark 3:21; 31-35). Nor do we find any biblical grounds for the common Roman Catholic construal of Mary as one through whom we should pray, or who effects our redemption along with Christ.

Points of convergence and co-operation

- **Creeds.** Although not all evangelical churches recite or formally subscribe to the key ecumenical creeds of the early Church – the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds – we do share with Roman Catholics the substantive doctrines affirmed by those creeds, as well as by the Council of Chalcedon (451). Hence the creation and sustaining of the cosmos by God, the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the deity of Christ and his uniqueness for salvation, his conception by the Spirit and birth of the Virgin Mary, his atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, universal rule and promised return to judge humanity and usher in a new and eternal order – all are held by evangelicals and

Catholics alike. Indeed, these doctrines are all affirmed in the Evangelical Alliance UK Basis of Faith, as well as in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

- **Evangelism and renewal.** The conflicts of the Reformation led to deep mutual suspicions and divisions in the practice of evangelism. Catholic and Protestant missions tended to operate on distinct tracks, sometimes seeking to proselytize each other's communities on the basis that those on the opposite side could not possibly be true Christians. From its earliest days the Evangelical Alliance has promoted religious liberty, and this has included support for the right of evangelicals to persuade Catholics of the evangelical understanding of the gospel. In the past century, however, there has been growing mutual understanding and effort between Catholics and Evangelicals in the work of evangelism, especially as focused on those with no Christian background. As this work has developed – through bodies such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Alpha International - the World Evangelical Alliance has come with the Roman Catholic Church through bodies such as the Global Christian Forum to affirm a deeper appreciation of the distinctions between coercive and 'unworthy' proselytism and genuine evangelism, and has recognized the value in certain cases of Evangelicals and Catholics making common cause in the latter. We appreciate that the extent of such joint action in evangelism may vary significantly according to context, and we recognise that in some Catholic-majority countries in particular Evangelicals may still face significant cultural (if not legal) resistance to the public commendation of evangelical faith. While standing in solidarity with such evangelicals, we also recognise genuine efforts at co-operation in evangelism between evangelicals and Catholics elsewhere.

Not only in evangelism but also in charismatic renewal, significant numbers of evangelicals and Catholics since the 1960s have found new depths of fellowship as they have explored the gifts, work and life of the Holy Spirit together. Indeed, some have pointed to this shared experience of renewal as mitigating at least in part the legacy of conflict and division mentioned above.

- **Social and medical ethics and the common good.** In the 1990s, Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) crystallized a good deal of earlier joint action by each community on ethical issues related to the start and end of life, as well as on the classical Christian understanding of marriage and family. These shared concerns have since been reaffirmed in the Evangelical Alliance UK's *Faith and Nation* report (2005) and in the American-based Manhattan Declaration (2009). Both documents foundationally affirm the dignity of every human creature as made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and from this basis emphasise the obligation of Christians to work not only for the wellbeing of their own church communities but also for the 'common good' – that is, the fulfilment and flourishing of individuals, families, societies and the world as a whole, particularly with respect to food, shelter and health, material comfort, peace, justice and security, rights to life, privacy, freedom of thought, speech, assembly and religion, and enfranchisement in political processes (cf. Jn. 10:10). During the Reformation and post-Reformation periods Catholics and Protestants alike could manifest or reflect prejudices to which these more

recent shared commitments provide a clear corrective: at times, for instance, both Rome and Luther colluded with an antisemitism which is rightly repudiated now. More specifically still, these shared ethical principles have been applied by evangelicals and Catholics to the following key areas of common concern and action:

- **Abortion.** Abortion is characteristically viewed by evangelicals and Catholics alike as manifesting a ‘culture of death’ in which aspects of humanity that are deemed burdensome are thereby deemed dispensable. The assertion of abortion as a parental ‘right’ is also challenged in this shared evangelical-Catholic perspective by the right of the unborn, innocent child to life – a right based on the definition of both the unborn and the born as made in God’s image (Psalm 139:13). While pragmatically these common convictions tend to lead evangelicals and Catholics to work together for the reduction of termination limits and tightened medical authorisation, theologically such mutual effort stems from a conviction that abortion is wrong in principle, except where the mother’s life would be at risk from carrying the child further through pregnancy. In acting on this conviction, however, Catholics and evangelicals have also worked together effectively to provide pregnancy counselling and support, adoption services, and post-abortion care.
- **Euthanasia.** At the other end of the life-cycle, evangelicals and Catholics have become increasingly active together in resisting moves to facilitate and/or legalise euthanasia. This, again, stems from fundamental convictions about the sanctity of human life as created in God’s image, and the sovereignty of God over life and death. Although distinguishing current campaigns for euthanasia from the overt eugenics movements of the early-mid-20th century, evangelicals and Catholics characteristically see certain similarities of attitude, albeit now presented in the language of ‘liberty’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘choice’. In response, they are active in resisting legal moves to endorse euthanasia where it is not yet permitted, and to mitigate or repeal the relevant legislation in countries or states where it has been sanctioned.
- **Same-sex relationships and marriage.** Drawing especially on the biblical creation narrative (Gen. 2:23-4) and on the teaching of Jesus and Paul (Matt. 19:1-12; Eph. 5:22-3), evangelicals and Catholics have widely co-operated in recent times in the promotion, support and defence of marriage as a one-flesh union of one man and one woman for life. Marriage in this sense has been presented by both as the foundational institution of human society – a corollary to the common good which delivers better outcomes overall for spouses, children and communities than other forms of co-habitation. Alongside this conviction about monogamous, heterosexual marriage, evangelicals and Catholics have also agreed in highlighting biblical representations of sexually active same-sex unions as falling outside God’s purposes for human relationships and human society. In more recent times, this has meant widespread joint action to oppose legislation approving same-sex

marriage. Where same-sex marriage has been legalised, it has meant working together to protect the rights of churches and their ministers to reaffirm heterosexual marriage, and to retain the right to conduct only heterosexual marriages. At the same time, however, evangelicals and Catholics have worked more closely together on welcoming same-sex attracted people and same-sex couples in the church context, and on dialoguing with LGBTI groups to ensure mutual respect and understanding in this contentious area of Christian ethics, ministry and pastoral care.

Five centuries on from the Reformation, it is clear that many of the core distinctions that developed between Luther's understanding and that of the Roman Catholic Church remain between modern-day evangelicals and Catholics. In certain areas, however, there have been significant attempts to foster deeper understanding of the theological and ecclesiastical differences that distinguish each tradition, and to develop this understanding in a less conflictual way. Particularly in the spheres of evangelism and social and medical ethics, there has also been genuine collaboration and co-operation towards agreed ends, not least as defined by shared commitments to the common good.

We recognise that different individuals and streams within the Evangelical Alliance UK will have different interpretations of details of Luther's legacy, and that of the Reformation as a whole. We also recognise that there will be a range of views within our membership on the proper extent of joint action or 'co-belligerence' between evangelicals and Catholics. Even so, we give thanks that Luther's witness to the primacy of biblical authority and the centrality of justification by grace through faith did so much to shape our identity as evangelicals, and we pray for God's guidance as we bear out that heritage in our work and witness as evangelicals today, both on our own account and in relation to others, including Roman Catholics.

Evangelical Alliance UK, January 2017^{vii}

ⁱ https://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1984_ercdom.htm

ⁱⁱ Paul G. Schrottenboer (ed.), *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [1986].

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1994/05/evangelicals--catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium-2> [1994]; <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1998/01/001-the-gift-of-salvation> [1998]

^{iv} <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/tc/pdf/CT-koinonia-statement.pdf>

^v <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Faith-and-Nation.pdf>

^{vi} http://manhattandeclaration.org/man_dec_resources/

[Manhattan_Declaration_full_text.pdf](#) ^{vii} Drafted by the Evangelical Alliance Theology Advisory Group and approved for circulation by the Evangelical Alliance Leadership Team and Board