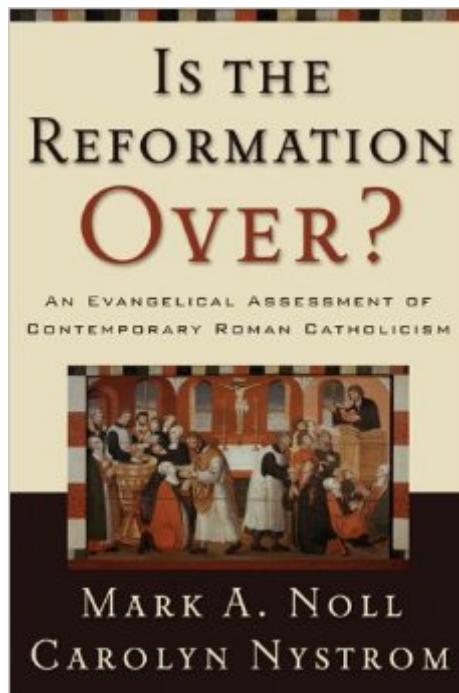


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Is The Reformation Over?: An Evangelical Assessment Of Contemporary Roman Catholicism



Synopsis

For the last few decades, Catholics and Protestants have been working to heal the wounds caused by centuries of mistrust. This book provides an evaluation of contemporary Roman Catholicism and the changing relationship between Catholics and evangelicals. The authors examine past tensions, post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogues, and social/political issues that have brought Catholics and evangelicals together. While not ignoring significant differences that remain, the authors call evangelicals to gain a new appreciation for the current character of the Catholic Church. Written by Mark Noll, one of the premier church historians of our day, and Carolyn Nystrom, this book will appeal to those interested in the relationship between evangelicals and the Catholic Church.

Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Baker Academic; 1 edition (July 1, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801027977

ISBN-13: 978-0801027970

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 6.4 x 1.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (23 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,382,472 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #94 inÂ Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Theology #1345 inÂ Books > Christian Books & Bibles > History > Historical Theology #2263 inÂ Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Ministry & Evangelism > Evangelism

Customer Reviews

As an evangelical Protestant I have often wondered what to make of Catholicism. How am I to view it? Am I to side with those who are virulent in their denunciations of it, or should I join with those who try to build bridges to those they see as their brothers and sisters in Christ?The authors admit that those who tend toward the extremes will not be satisfied with this book, since the authors seem to favor the approach of those who choose dialogue and understanding rather than hostility.Right from the start the book makes the contention and provides ample evidence "that both in the Roman Catholic Church and in relations between evangelicals and Catholics things are `not the way they used to be.'" Billy Graham is an example. During the 1950's Catholics were discouraged and in some countries even forbidden by their leaders to attend his meetings. Graham was just as strong

in his stance against Catholics. By the 1980's Catholic leaders were participating in Crusades, and Graham even began to send decision cards of professed Catholics to the local Catholic archdiocese. In the year 2000, 15 Catholic delegates were officially sanctioned by the Vatican to attend Graham's Amsterdam conference to promote world evangelism. This is one of many examples in the book given to support the idea that much has changed since the Second Vatican Council. That's not to say that significant differences between the two groups don't remain. The book looks at areas of agreement and differences primarily from a historical point of view. My guess is that you won't find a better book on the history of evangelical and Catholic relations.

Noll and Nystrom's analysis of Catholic-Evangelical relations is one of the best such works currently available, in that it is both scholarly and charitable. (Other authors on this subject could stand to learn a good deal from Noll and Nystrom's advice about incorporating the three theological virtues in study of Catholic-Protestant differences.) The tone is balanced and fair. The authors are not afraid to offer criticism of Roman Catholicism, but they are strong enough to point out problems within Evangelicalism as well. At times they take quite literally the Biblical injunction to remove the log from one's own eye before pointing out the specks in others. One caveat to the readers who may be looking for something different: the subtitle may be something of a misnomer. The authors are not so much assessing Roman Catholicism as they are assessing the relationship between Catholics and Evangelicals. This is not a book focused on theological analysis of the remaining doctrinal differences, and it may disappoint readers who are looking for such analysis. Some such analysis does occur in chapters 5 and 9, but as it is brief, it doesn't do justice to many of the issues. (Catholics, for example, will be confused to find so much emphasis put on clerical celibacy, which is not even a matter of doctrine, while the description of the Catholic view of sacraments seems inadequate in several respects. Evangelicals, for their part, may wonder why issues that seem serious are simply passed over briefly.) What the book does best is offer a history of the changing relationship between the two religious camps and a thorough analysis of how the situation now stands.

Yes. That's the simple, if too glib, answer. And the authors, who have taken a good deal of time and care to carefully examine the question, deserve a better response than that. Still, as a former Protestant Evangelical who entered the Catholic Church on the Easter Vigil of 2005, that's the conclusion I came to. I came to the Catholic Church because I arrived at the point where I could affirm her self-understanding. This came about through a thirty-year process where I looked at the

questions dividing Evangelicalism and Catholicism from the point of view of history, theology, and practice. Since Mark Noll is a historian, he seems especially attuned to the strength of the Catholic position, and the weakness of the Evangelical position, vis-a-vis history. Anyone who looks closely at the history of the Church in the first few centuries following Christ's resurrection will see clearly that it very early on takes on a Catholic appearance. From Clement of Rome through Ignatius of Antioch through Polycarp through Justin Martyr through Irenaeus--that is, from about the end of the first century through the end of the second century--the Church increasingly comes to resemble its present shape, in its structure, ecclesiology, liturgy, theology, and sacramental understanding. This is so clearly established that no one, except Protestant liberals like Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman, questions it anymore. The difficulty for Protestant Evangelicals is that they accept the theological developments but not the structural, ecclesiological, liturgical, and sacramental developments. The question arises, why accept the one and reject the others?

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