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WRF MEMBER THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER SUGGESTS REASONS WHY EVANGELICALS SHOULD ENGAGE WITH POPE FRANCIS.

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Why We, As Evangelical Reformed Christians, Seek to Dialogue with Pope Francis

by
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In Vatican Files 113, "What Do You Think About Pope Francis?", posted on September 24, 2015 [and available both on this website [HERE](#) and at this location - <http://vaticanfiles.org/2015/09/113-what-do-you-think-about-pope-francis/>], Leonardo De Chirico and Greg Pritchard criticise those evangelical leaders who visit the Pope. This was some days before Leonardo De Chirico published the next Vatican File suggesting that it might be appropriate to revisit the question of whether the papacy might be regarded as the Antichrist. I had just left Germany to attend the Vatican Synod on the Family when I read the first piece and I read the second piece the very day that I met with Pope Francis. Only now, after two weeks of the synod, have I been able, with Thomas Johnson, to respond to those blogs.

We believe that it will be helpful to the global evangelical and Reformed church to discuss these matters but I need to conduct the discussion in an unemotional, sober and honest spirit, respecting each others opinions, arguments, and evidences.

In Vatican File # 113, the authors seem to be painting a very negative picture of the Pope's character and plans, and are convinced that Reformed evangelicals who visit with him are naive and ignorant of the Pope's real goals and of Catholic theology.

Of course, it is very difficult – and perhaps impossible - to judge the real motives of any person in detail. Only God really knows the hearts of His creatures. And I would suggest that the authors of Vatican File # 113 have moved a bit too quickly to a final judgment about Pope Francis's motives. Evaluating the motives of Pope Francis reminds us of the problems we had in judging the motives of Mikhail Gorbachev. For years it was not clear whether his call for changes within communism were mere rethoric, idealistic dreams, or an actual commitment. The results of his leadership seem to have demonstrated that what he said was what he really believed, although the ultimate result – the break-up of the Soviet Union – probably was not intended by him. Still, looking back, it seems that those who questioned Mr. Gorbachev's motives probably reacted a bit too negatively.

All I can do is weigh the arguments in Vatican File #113 and compare that to our own study of what the Pope has written and said and done.

So here is my personal impression: Between the picture they paint of the Pope's character – having never met the Pope – and the real Pope that I have met, there simply seems to be no real link. They will say that this is because I have fallen prey to what they call "the siren call of unity." History will tell. But what I say and what foes and friends of the Pope will tell you - this Pope, whether he is right or wrong, is one of the most friendly, warm-hearted persons in the world and he is able to be friendly even after having spoken to a hundred people each before you. He several times told me in private things that he planned . . . and, in every case, he did what he had said . . . even though it occasionally took some time. He really loves everyone, he cannot live without others, he can listen to others for hours and he loves to hear life stories. I remember once when we had a meeting scheduled with the Pope for the following morning, we received a personal phone call from the Pope, asking whether everything was fine or if he could do anything for us.

Of course, the above is no statement about theology; it is just a statement about the kind of person this Pope seems to be. And I do know – Pope Francis's being a decent, even a "nice," person does not undo the Council of Trent or Vatican I. This is my appeal: please keep separate the character of the present Pope and the theology for which he and his church stand; those are two very different things.

The Pope apologizes for something different nearly every month. Is this all to win Evangelicals? Why did he apologize to parents whose unbaptised children could not be buried properly because the church did not accept them as believers (they were buried outside the church cemeteries)? Because of us? Surely not. Why did he apologize for bishops and cardinals trying to suppress information about the sexual abuse of minors within the church? Because of us? Why did he apologize for a too-close intermingling with the Mafia in Italy? Because of us? All these are inner-Catholic problems, which do not make a difference to Evangelicals directly.

Having experienced personally several of his apologies, I only can say that, from my perspective, he means it. He is deeply convinced, not only that the "sons of the church" sinned (this was Pope John Paul II's constant wording), but also that the church itself sinned (and sins) and needs to ask all of its victims for forgiveness. This is a major step for a Church which had never before asked for forgiveness **as the Church**. Pope Benedict did move in this direction when writing about the misuse of minors by priests and bishops in Ireland, but, with Pope Francis, this has become a major theme. And when he asks for forgiveness because the Catholic Church persecuted Pentecostals, he is continuing this emphasis. I doubt that it will bring Petecostals to entert the Catholic Church, but it does bring about a new spirit of interaction and a new view of any church, that it sins when its leaders sin . . . a fact that is as true of evangelical and Pentecostal churches as it is of the Roman Catholic Church.

There are many Catholics who do not like this. They think that the Pope does not win anyone by this but, in fact, loses people because they can no longer be confident in a holy and infallible church. Pope Francis does seem to worry about results when he sees what he thinks is wrong; he simply apologizes from his heart. He has preached this all his life and now continues in the same vein. Of course, no one can really see into the heart of another person, but I have been close to many of the above-mentioned occasions and this is my personal conclusion about Pope Francis.

Some people say that Pope Francis never changes theology or church law. But such apologies as the Pope has issued do constitute a major change in the Catholic Church and they will have far-reaching effects. These apologies have already become part of official documents of the Church. To cite just one specific example, I attended the Second Synod on the Family and, in several places in the official documents of that Synod, apologies are offered on behalf of the church and on behalf of the bishops to many groups of people who had received improper counseling or inappropriate pressure or other, even more serious mistreatment.

Another example of such change in church law at the Synod was the action of the Pope to move the marriage annulment court from the Vatican, where it was for centuries, down to the local bishops (announced September 8; effective December 8, 2015). This, in fact,

is a major change in both church law and theology.

The authors of Vatican File #113 explicitly see it Pope Francis' strategy to be that of "absorbing movements and converting kings," especially "evangelical kings." I have wondered about who they might regard as such "kings." But, as I am an evangelical who has visited Pope Francis personally and have a kind of friendship with him, I have no other choice than to think that the authors may be talking about me – among others. The fact that people have contact me, asking whether we have read Vatican File # 113 indicates that this impression is held by others. Also the authors do not state that the World Evangelical Alliance, which I represent, is an exception.

But even if the authors were not specifically talking about me, I would like to try to respond to their concerns.

Here are a few comments made about Pope Francis in Vatican File # 113 - 1) He is a "Jesuit" (but do all Jesuits really cheat?), 2) he is a "chess player" (you have to be if you have to deal with the Curia!), and 3) he is a "gifted politician" (he is the head of a state!). These terms seem to us to impugn both the Pope's motives and his character. They seem to suggest that Pope Francis is an expert at deluding people, especially evangelicals, and that he seeks to draw whole movements unwittingly back into the Catholic Church. They say that the Pope has "created a blank screen," so that all evangelicals (and others) can read their own convictions onto that screen. As I have suggested above, it is exceedingly difficult accurately to understand our own motives, much less the motives of others and yet the authors write as if they know the final truth about the Pope's ultimate motives. In reality, only God knows all our final motives, including those of Francis.

Since I am among those evangelicals who have spent time with Pope Francis, I have to conclude that I am also "not immune to France's charm and kindness" and shout: "Oh, he agrees with me." I am amazed by his "magnetic presence" and will fill his "blank screen" with my dreams. I follow "The Siren Call of Unity" and am close to being converted to the Catholic Church. But how do the authors know this about me? Did they ask me or study me? Not to my knowledge. In my case, I make this clear declaration: that none of these things describes me.

The authors state that "the unity proposed by Francis still gravitates around the Roman Catholic Church." So what? Did you expect anything else? And did I overlook this? Yet I have to say - there is a clear difference between Pope Francis and his predecessors: **Francis has made it clearer than any previous Pope that non-Catholic Christians believing in Jesus Christ as their Saviour are fully Christians.** Even before his elevation to the Papacy, this man publicly prayed at the opening of Protestant evangelistic campaigns and urged his listeners to trust in Jesus Christ. Reflecting this kind of attitude toward Protestants, he studiously avoids using the word "sects" when referring to evangelicals and Pentecostals.

The authors of Vatican File # 113 write about those cooperating with the Pope: "Evangelicals have to do their homework in order to go beyond the surface of mere phonetics in order to grasp the profoundly different theological vision." I certainly agree with this statement. But making the statement in the context in which it was made suggests that the authors believe that they are the only ones who have "done their homework" and that those evangelicals who take a different perspective on these matters have failed to do so. Respectfully, I challenge this suggestion.

Am I ignorant of Catholic theology and the history of the papacy? I did my first doctorate in ecumenical theology in 1985, writing my first piece criticising the new Catholic canon law in 1983 and, since then, I have written extensively on the Catholic Church (including a history of indulgences and the theology behind indulgences). I have been energetically engaged in evangelical-Catholic dialogue since 1983 (when John Stott initiated such contact). These are just a few of the reasons why I, again respectfully, disagree with the suggestion that, because I differ with the authors of Vatican File # 113 on how evangelicals should relate to Pope Francis, I simply have not done my "homework."

My appeal is this - our disagreement over *policy* (how to relate to the Vatican) should not automatically be considered a difference in *doctrine*. Like at least one of the authors of Vatican File # 113, Thomas Johnson and I are both individual members of the World Reformed Fellowship and, as such, we have subscribed in writing to the Westminster Confession of Faith and to the statement that Scripture is "without error" in all that it teaches.

Our experience is similar to the experiences of other evangelicals - times have changed a lot; one freely can speak one's convictions as an evangelical in the Vatican. Pope Francis has often asked me about specific matters and he seems to expect and to respect honest and clear answers from my evangelical and Reformed perspective. He does not expect or respect polite tiptoeing around difficult matters. At the recent Vatican Synod, I had every opportunity to present my Reformed and evangelical case. When it comes to theological content, I do not compromise and no one in the Vatican has ever pressured me to do so.

Here are a few further responses to specific statements in Vatican File # 113:

- 1) The authors say: "Francis is bringing evangelicals close and is saying that we are the same and that the Reformation is over." Yes, Pope Francis has brought many of us close. And yes, he believes that everyone believing in what Jesus did at the cross for him has the same faith. But in all the hours of discussion, I have never heard him say that the Reformation is over and there is no clear evidence elsewhere of his having made such a statement. The authors point to an article in the USA about a meeting of evangelicals with the Pope. That article was written by someone who himself was not present. I was present at this very meeting. What the Pope actually said was that "Luther's protest" was over and, by this, he clearly meant what he stated elsewhere, that he fully supports the definition of justification that was agreed upon between the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican in 1999. My opinion is that that 1999 definition is a decent one and could be signed by Evangelicals, although large parts of the definition are related specifically to distinctive Lutheran theology. It must be noted that there was heated debate within the Vatican about that definition at the time of its signing and I think that is a reasonably clear sign that some top-level Roman Catholic leaders saw it as moving away from the traditional church position. I personally am glad that Pope Francis agrees with the 1999 definition and my point here is simply that any discussion of whether Pope Francis believes that the Reformation is over needs to focus very directly and specifically on the content of the 1999 definition of justification.
- 2) The authors say that Pope Benedict in Germany "expressed confusion on how to respond to the enormous growth of the global evangelical church." I was present on that occasion and all business was conducted in German, my native language. Benedict was not confused, but said to the (liberal) Presiding Bishop of the German Protestant Churches, that "we" (meaning the two large Protestant groups in Germany) have to learn from the growing Evangelical movements, how every believer gives testimony to others about his faith and does not leave it to the church and its staff. The liberal Bishop really did not like to hear this, but Pope Benedict meant what he said and was not confused' he was simply urging those present to sign the document, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World," which states the same in the second sentence.
- 3) The authors speak about Francis' "seemingly biblical language (e. g. conversion, mission, personal relationship with Jesus)" and state that in every case he means something totally different from what Evangelicals mean when they use those terms. I disagree here. There certainly can be no question that this issue needs open and extensive discussion. Yet I have written long statements on all major writings of Pope Francis and have sought to distinguish in detail which of his positions are close to the positions of evangelicals and which are not. Others have disagreed with me on some of the details of my analysis. But few seem to regard Francis as just a "chess player" who uses those terms primarily in order to entice evangelicals to convert to Catholicism. I would just plead for us to talk about the Pope's specific positions on specific doctrines and not to write off everything the Pope says without a careful examination of what he has actually said.

Here are the ten primary reasons why I (and Thomas Johnson) seek to have substantive conversations with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, including Pope Francis:

- 1) I want every Christian leader worldwide to know evangelical positions not from hear-say or from the media, but first-hand from evangelicals themselves. Sometimes the result is that things do not change or even become worse, but, in the main, such direct conversation tends to dispel false conceptions and to foster better understanding which even can even lead to an end of discrimination against evangelicals.

- 2) I also want to hear first-hand what other Christian leaders and churches stand for and have to say. I do not want to depend on hear-say or the media. Thereby I learn a lot - sometimes that the other side is further away from evangelical Christianity than I thought but, more often, what we have in common, that I need to examine their positions more carefully, or that I can possibly even learn from them.
- 3) We need an on-going dialogue about the central theological issues in order to to get together whenever possible without theological compromise and to have a clear grasp of exactly where and why we do genuinely disagree.
- 4) Friendship is a better platform than mutual antagonism on which to discuss deep differences in theology. This I learned from the man whose name we use on our seminary – the Reformer Martin Bucer, who was known for his willingness to talk TO and not just ABOUT those with whom ge disagreed.
- 5) I desire that evangelical theology be “at the table” whenever and wherever theology is discussed on a global level. We need to be in the middle of the mess! This is true for Christian meetings worldwide, for religious meetings, for academic conferences and even for United Nations events. Being “at the table” does not weaken our theological convictions but, in fact, it often strengthens those convictions as we are called upon to share the reasons for our Gospel hope (I Peter 3: 15).
- 6) For decades, I have campaigned for greater solidarity within the global church with respect to discrimination against and persecution of Christians. I have been privileged to speak to the leaders of a wide variety of Christian traditions about this matter and this was the thrust of my plenary presentation at the recent session of the Vatican Synod. The persecution and martyrdom of Christians is wrong, even (and perhaps especially) when they occur between professing Christians. Pope Francis has already provided significant assistance to persecuted evangelicals in several specific situations.
- 7) The Roman Catholic Church has 1.2 billion members and the churches belonging to the member alliances of the World Evangelical Alliance have 600 million members (both figures are semi-official estimates). Together, we make up three quarters of World Christianity. Thus we run into each other every day worldwide - in politics, in academics, in economics, in social matters, and in various kinds of consultations. What sense does it make for us not to talk to one another? “The world” expects us to talk. Our own people expect us to talk. No problems are addressed and certainly no problems are solved by refusing to talk with one another.
- 8) Following on from #7, there are major ethical and socio-political issues where Catholics and evangelicals stand together against evils in this world (e.g. human trafficking, political corruption, abortion, same-sex marriage). Effective response to these evils seems to me to require that we talk with one another.
- 9) And after all, we must never surrender our fundamental commitment to the unity of the church, even though, for us, it is primarily a unity in faith, not in structural organization. Of course, the means of expressing that unity before the watching world may – and should – be debated but we cannot ignore a prayer of Jesus just because living it out biblically might be difficult (John 17: 20 – 23). Both the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Reformed Fellowship were founded in part to embody this prayer and the Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the confessional foundations of the WRF, devotes TWICE as much space to its discussion of “the universal visible church” as it does to its discussion of “the universal invisible church” (see Chapter 25, paragraphs 1 – 3).
- 10) Last but not least, the New Testament commands us in this way - “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12: 18). I believe that “everyone” includes Roman Catholics.

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