

Evangelicals and Catholics Together marks 20 years

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(RNS) When evangelicals and Catholics set aside centuries of mutual suspicion 20 years ago, the idea was fairly simple: Even if we can't always work together, at least let's not work against each other.

Now, two decades after the launch of the group Evangelicals and Catholics Together, relations between the two groups appear stronger than ever, forged by shared battles over abortion, same-sex marriage, religious freedom and immigration.

A new pope is finding crossover appeal among evangelicals who share Pope Francis' emphasis on evangelism and his distaste for the fancier trappings and authoritarianism of the papacy.

"The first affirmation of Evangelicals and Catholics Together is that Jesus Christ is Lord, and there's the source of our hope," Catholic theologian Matthew Levering of Mundelein Seminary outside Chicago told the recent Q conference of evangelical movers and shakers in Nashville, Tenn.

"This was an anchor for when they began to discover that we share the same gospel."

The movement was spearheaded by former Nixon aide Charles Colson and the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, founder of the ecumenical magazine *First Things*. Together, the two men—who have since died—held out the promise that there was more that united the two groups than divided them.

Evangelicals and Catholics teamed up in fights against abortion and gay marriage. While the U.S. Catholic bishops led the public opposition to a contraception mandate included in President Obama's health care law, the evangelical owners of the Hobby Lobby chain took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Earlier this year, Catholic bishops and evangelical leaders combined efforts to pressure the House to pass immigration reform measures this year. ECT officials are hoping to finalize a new statement on marriage by June, said *First Things* editor R.R. Reno.

Even as both sides have had strained relationships with the Obama White House, they came together under George W. Bush, a United Methodist with a strong evangelical following. Bush looked to Catholic theologians to undergird his invasion of Iraq and opposition to embryonic stem cell research. He knelt at the casket of Pope John Paul II in 2005 and welcomed Pope Benedict XVI into the Oval Office in 2008.

To be sure, there are still sectors within evangelicalism that see Catholics as people who need to be “saved,” and within Catholicism where evangelicals and other Protestants are seen as something akin to heretics. Yet 50 years after the Second Vatican Council revolutionized the Catholic approach to other churches, relations couldn’t be much better.

In a 2009 Pew Research Center survey, 49 percent of white evangelicals said they view Catholicism as “very” or “somewhat” similar to their own religion. Among Catholics, 60 percent said they view Protestantism as similar to their religion.

Timothy George, an early evangelical leader within ECT and dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, said ECT allows evangelicals and Catholics to remain distinctive while finding common ground.

“ECT represents an ecumenism of conviction, not accommodation, which I think is the way forward,” he said.

Even as many evangelicals reject or remain suspicious of the papacy, they’ve found a pope in Francis that they can deal with. In a February survey, Pew found that 56 percent of white evangelicals had a favorable view of Pope Francis (compared with 14 percent who had an unfavorable view and 30 percent who expressed no opinion). In contrast, 85 percent of Catholics expressed a favorable view.

“The mere fact that more Protestants are talking about the pope, and more favorably, means a change in relations between Catholics and Protestants,” said the Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and editor at large at *America* magazine. “His actions cut across divides because he focuses on words and deeds, just like Jesus

did.”

Francis has urged the faithful to recover their enthusiasm for preaching the gospel and has said that evangelism should be “first and foremost.” And he called on Christians to care for the poor, saying, “There is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor.”

Protestants don’t expect Francis to change church doctrine on key theological differences between Protestants and Catholics, such as papal infallibility, the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the nature of the sacraments, the doctrine of the church or theological views of salvation. But they’ve come a long way in mutual admiration and cooperation, observers say.

“At the time, there was a huge hue and cry,” George said about ECT’s release. “By and large, I think evangelicals now see Catholics as allies, not as enemies, in the deep pressing moral issues of our time.”

As both churches prepare to mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017, the pope’s tenure has also highlighted the historic tensions between Protestants and Catholics. The role of the papacy is an elevated position Protestants would reject, and the Catholic Church just made previous Popes John Paul II and John XXIII saints.

“[Pope Francis] seems to be wanting to democratize things and make the papacy more transparent,” said Carl Trueman, a church history professor at Westminster Theological Seminary. “On the other hand, he’s putting things into place that seem to raise the papacy higher through the sainthood of previous popes.”