

CHURCH/ECUMENISM

- Topic: The “patient and fraternal dialogue” toward a reformed Papacy
 Convener: Edward P. Hahnenberg, Xavier University
 Moderator: Jeffrey Gros, Memphis Theological Seminary
 Presenters: Margaret O’Gara, University of St. Michael’s College
 John Strykowski, St. James Cathedral, Brooklyn
 Respondent: Mark Powell, Harding Graduate School

This panel was a Catholic response to a Protestant evaluation of papal infallibility, as a contribution to the ecumenical engagement in the papacy of the future, begun in Pope John Paul’s 1995 encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, which many consider his most important ecclesiological contribution.

Nineteenth century Christianity saw an upsurge in concern for epistemological certainty in defending the Christian faith against the corrosive attacks of modernity. In Protestantism, it took the form of a restorationist ecclesiology and biblical literalism, often traceable to Scottish Common Sense Realism, which eventuated in twentieth century fundamentalism. In Catholicism, it took the form of an ultramontane integralism, which was influential in Vatican I, but came to a head in the early twentieth centralization centralization and anti-modernist crusade.

The modern ecumenical movement, the ecclesiology of Vatican II, and John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical inviting ecumenical advice on reform of the papacy, have begun to rebalance views of revelation, ecclesiology and authority among Christians. Mark Powell’s *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation Of An Ecumenical Issue* (Eerdmans, 2009) is one contribution to this ecumenical discussion of epistemology and ecclesiology. It is unique among the responses to the encyclical coming from a free church evangelical, and from a tradition that also has its internal debates on epistemology in the form of biblical inerrancy.

The two respondents presented their analysis and critique, followed by reflections by the author. O’Gara situates her response within the Catholic debate: “The Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility is ‘widely considered to be the primary obstacle in ecumenical dialogue,’ according to Powell (1), so this alone would make it worth discussing. However, even if there were no ecumenical dialogue at all, papal infallibility as understood within Roman Catholic theology itself would still be a doctrine in severe trouble, in need of transforming reconceptualization.”

She makes three reflections on the debate. First, she agrees in substance with Powell’s formulation of the problems and his proposed solution. Second, she gives a close analysis of his use of “William J. Abraham[’s]... approach ‘particularism’ or ‘weak foundationalism.’” She affirms his direction for reinterpretation, building on Newman and Dulles. Third, she ends with her own suggestions for reinterpretation: (a) treating papal teaching with the same principles as conciliar teaching, as Powell suggests; (b) using Lonergan’s “historical mindedness” to understand reception and the role of the *consensus fidelium* in contextualizing infallibility; and (c) reconceptualizing “infallibility out of epistemology into doxology: a praise of God’s faithfulness.”

Strykowski's response focused on the role of the Petrine Ministry within Catholicism, and its gift to the ecumenical movement as the epistemological issues is reformulated and contextualized. For Catholics the papacy has become an identity marker. Following Powell's emphasis on doctrines as soteriological and not epistemological, he emphasizes the soteriological role of the Petrine Ministry as building and maintaining the unity of the Church. He further challenges Powell's canonical theism, asking whether the Christian faith can make ontological claims without epistemological presuppositions. He went on to elaborate on the importance of communion in a self-corrective process of clarifying the truth of revelation, a clarification that is never perfect even when Catholics use the category "infallibility."

Powell's response expressed appreciation and clarification, noting his own journey and evangelical struggle with the same issue of "certitude in response to the modern." His concern for both intellectual honesty and ecumenical reconciliation has let his research to focus on this new paradigm of "canonical theism," moving epistemology into a secondary position. In such a theological framework, emphasis is placed on the vision of God articulated in the canonical heritage of the church; and the soteriological, rather than epistemological, role of canons becomes primary.

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