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ARTICLE

Christian Unity At What Cost? New Ecumenical Push Challenges Proselytism



BY PNW STAFF FEBRUARY 11, 2026

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Across Europe--and increasingly within global Christianity--the language of unity has become the highest virtue. Division is treated as a scandal. Distinction is framed as hostility. Conviction is recast as intolerance. Nowhere is this trend more visible than in Italy, where on January 23, 2026, eighteen national leaders representing Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant, and evangelical bodies signed the "Covenant Between Christian Churches" in Bari. The document is being heralded as a historic step toward healing centuries of division.

But for evangelicals committed to the authority of Scripture and the centrality of the gospel, the moment calls not for celebration alone--but for careful discernment.

Christian unity is a biblical command. But biblical unity is never detached from biblical truth. The New Testament does not call the church to unity at any cost; it calls believers to unity in Christ, in the truth, and under the authority of God's Word. When unity is pursued apart from those foundations, it risks becoming not a testimony to the gospel--but a substitute for it.

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The Bari Covenant reveals this tension clearly. Article 1 declares that "every division and misunderstanding between our Churches is a wound to the Body of Christ and manifests the sin of the Churches." On the surface, this language sounds humble and conciliatory. Yet theologically, it presents a serious problem. Scripture does not treat every division as sinful. In fact, some divisions are commanded.

The Apostle Paul instructs believers not to be "unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Jude urges Christians to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Jesus Himself warned that His coming would bring division, even within families, because truth divides from error (Luke 12:51). Unity, biblically speaking, is not an absolute good. It is a gift given to those who are truly in Christ.

This raises a question the Covenant leaves unanswered: Are all the signatory churches united in the biblical gospel itself? Evangelicals must answer honestly. Significant and unresolved differences remain on justification, authority, sacramental theology, Mariology, the nature of saving faith, and the role of tradition. To treat these differences as minor misunderstandings rather than essential disagreements is not reconciliation--it is redefinition.

The concerns deepen in Article 2, where the churches commit to "avoiding every form of competition, proselytism, or overreach," and to recognizing one another as "sister churches." This language may aim to curb unethical or coercive evangelism, which evangelicals rightly reject. But the blanket rejection of "proselytism" goes far beyond condemning abuse. In modern ecumenical discourse, proselytism often means any attempt to call someone out of a false or deficient understanding of the gospel.

That is profoundly dangerous.



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The Great Commission is, by definition, a call to make disciples--to persuade, to proclaim, to call for repentance and faith. Evangelism does not end at denominational borders. The New Testament knows nothing of a category where someone is assumed to be spiritually secure simply because they were baptized into a particular institution. Paul preached to religious Jews. The Reformers preached to baptized Catholics. Evangelicals today must retain the freedom--and the responsibility--to preach the gospel to all people, including those who identify as Christian but may not be born again.

To forbid or stigmatize such evangelism in the name of unity is to silence the very message that creates true unity in the first place.

This is why the Covenant's implicit declaration that the Roman Catholic Church is a "sister church" carries such weight. It suggests that the theological disputes of the Reformation are now settled--or no longer relevant. Yet Rome has not renounced doctrines that evangelicals believe obscure or undermine the gospel of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To act as though these differences no longer matter is not reconciliation; it is theological amnesia.

The participation of a Pentecostal church--the Church of Reconciliation--in this ecumenical covenant raises further questions. Historically, much of the Italian Pentecostal movement has resisted formal ecumenism precisely because of these gospel concerns. As recently as 2014, major Pentecostal bodies affirmed that "irreconcilable and absolutely divergent theological and ethical differences persist" with Roman Catholicism, making ecumenical initiatives impossible. Has something fundamentally changed since then? Or is this participation an isolated exception rather than a representative shift?

Evangelicals must resist the temptation to frame this debate as unity versus division, love versus hostility, or peace versus pride. The real question is simpler and harder: What kind of unity does Scripture actually require of us?

The Bible allows--and at times demands--unity in non-essentials and cooperation for common good. Evangelicals can and should work alongside Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants in areas such as religious freedom, humanitarian aid, and moral witness in society. Respect, kindness, and humility are not optional. But unity that demands silence about essential gospel truths is not biblical unity--it is institutional harmony.

True Christian unity flows from shared submission to Christ and His Word. It does not require pretending that real differences do not exist. And it certainly does not require abandoning the call to evangelize--even among those who call themselves brothers.

In a fractured world, unity is attractive. But unity without truth ultimately fractures the gospel itself. Evangelicals must therefore speak with both courage and charity, insisting that the church's deepest unity is not negotiated at tables of compromise, but forged at the foot of the cross--where sinners are saved not by affiliation, but by faith in Christ alone.

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