

The Gospel of the Council of Trent

“However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who JUSTIFIES the wicked, his FAITH is credited as RIGHTEOUSNESS.” – Romans 4:5

In my last newsletter article (7/31/07), I briefly pointed out that it was “Catholic Priests” such as Martin Luther (Germany), Ulrich Zwingli (Sweden), and John Calvin (France) who in the early 1500’s first began to publicly speak out and write against Catholic doctrines that they believed had strayed from “...*the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*” (Jude 3b) and were no longer biblically accurate. Reviewing the well documented arguments spelled out by these former priests, coupled with the Catholic Church’s response to their “protests”, can go a long way in explaining why I disagree with the current Pope’s recent public assertion that “...*Catholicism provides the ONLY TRUE path to SALVATION.*” (Post & Courier; page 1, 7/11/07)

Although this comment (and others) made by Benedict XVI have surprised many people throughout the world (including many Catholics!), Martin Luther and the early “protestants” of his day would not have been surprised at all. They lived in the day where Catholicism was not only the predominate theology taught throughout Europe, but also it was the only theology ENFORCED by government law at the time. To rebel against Catholic doctrine was seen as a rebellion against the state and government. Therefore, the “protesting” priests all put their very lives in danger when they decided to take a stand against what they believed were FALSE TEACHINGS.

Neither Luther, Zwingli, nor Calvin wanted to die or, for that matter, start a new religion. It is clear from reading their manuscripts that they loved being Catholics and found many wonderful attributes to the Catholic Church (such as do I!). However, their loyalty to Jesus Christ and the Word of God forced them into the position of trying to REFORM the traditional Catholicism of their day. Their hope was to return Catholic doctrines on such topics as “salvation”, “justification”, “grace”, “confession”, “authority of scripture”, etc., etc., BACK to their biblical roots instead of on the mere philosophy and dogma of misguided Popes. Their main goal was to get the Catholic Church that they loved to go back to their ORIGINAL convictions and teachings as it pertained to the “gospel of Jesus Christ” and how “faith” was the essential ingredient for man’s eternal life...not SACRAMENTS or GOOD WORKS! Just an “elementary” review of the response to the “Protestant Movement” by the Catholic Church should be enough to convince “open minded” readers that “Catholics” and “Southern Baptists” (and of course nearly all protestant denominations) have ENTIRELY two different viewpoints of what it takes for a sinful person to get into the right relationship with God (i.e. two different “gospels”).

In 1545, during the reign of Pope Paul III, a council was held in an imperial city in northern Italy called Trent. The Council of Trent convened off and on until 1563, because it became more than just a council to refute the “heresies” of the Protestants. The Council of Trent also was used to detail and reaffirm almost all OFFICIAL doctrine that was to be taught on any Catholic subject (including “salvation”!). It is important to note that the decrees this council made concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ have never been modified, altered, or rescinded by Rome. They remain the stand of Roman Catholic theology and were affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI just last month.

To understand the major differences between the “gospel” that Protestants (and I) believe is taught in the Bible, as compared to that decreed by the Council of Trent, you first need to know the biblical definition of the word JUSTIFIED. This word, along with its derivatives “justification” and “justifies”, is a CRITICAL word in the Bible that ALL Christians need to really understand. The Council of Trent (i.e. official Catholic position) TOTALLY rejected how Protestants (such as Luther) defined the word “justified”. To keep it simple, our English word “justified” is used to translate a Greek word which means “fully acquitted” or “brought into right standing” as it pertains to a judicial act. This legal term in the Greek language was used to proclaim someone as being “not guilty” and/or “righteous” (legally). To justify someone, therefore, means to bring out the fact that the person is just by “proclaiming” him so...or “making” him so...without necessarily referring to how that person was made just. In order for a person to be “saved” and eternally “at peace” with God, you have to be “justified” (Rom 5:1, 9).

When Martin Luther (and other “protesting” priests) read verses such as “...*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and are JUSTIFIED freely by His grace...*” (Rom 3:23-24) and “...*we maintain that a man is JUSTIFIED by faith APART from the law...*” (Rom 3:28) and “...*the law was put in charge to lead us to CHRIST that we might be JUSTIFIED by faith...*” (Gal 3:24), they argued that a man was “justified” (i.e. proclaimed and made righteous in the eyes of God) NOT BY OBEYING GOD’S LAWS, but rather was justified “freely” by God’s grace (i.e. totally undeserved) based on man’s FAITH alone (i.e. belief and acceptance of Jesus as their Lord and Savior!). From their definition of the word “justified” and how they believed it was used throughout the New Testament, the Protestants (correctly, I believe!) explained the process of “justification” (process leading to salvation) as the judicial pronouncement of God in reference to a SINFUL man that, as a result of placing faith in Christ, that sinful man now stands before God having been freely given the status of justness (Romans 3:20-26, 4:3, 5:1, 5:9, 11:6; Titus 3:5,7). The protesting Catholic priests were arguing that the Bible does not support the official

Catholic Church's position that, to be "justified" before God, a person had to faithfully practice the SACRAMENTS and OBEY the laws of God.

The Council of Trent wrote strong rebuttals to the Protestants' position on "justification" and on how a person gets "justified" in the eyes of God. For example, they wrote: *"If anyone says that a man who is justified and however perfect is NOT bound to observe the commandments of God AND the Church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema."* (H.J. Shroeder, translator, 7th session, Canon 20, p. 44)

I don't have space this week to provide you with more quotes from the decisions made at The Council of Trent. However, next week I will share some more with you to emphasize the basic (but very important) differences between Catholicism and the true gospel of the Bible. Until then, meditate on the words Paul gave us when he said: *"Clearly no one is JUSTIFIED before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by FAITH.'"* (Gal 3:11)

- Pastor Louis