

The Gospel and from Tradition

“For it is by GRACE that you have been you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...” – Ephesians 2:8

In my last two newsletter articles on our study of the “differences” between Catholic and Protestant understandings of the gospel (8/06/07 & 8/13/07), I pointed out that when it comes to truly understanding the doctrine of salvation presented to us in God’s Word...IT IS CRUCIAL that you really understand the biblical definition of words like “justification” and “imputed”. In summary, according to Protestant understanding of the Holy Scriptures, justification is the process by which God takes a person’s faith (i.e. sincere believe and humble acceptance) in Jesus Christ (and what he accomplished through His death, burial, and resurrection for all mankind) and, through that faith, not only forgives that person of ALL their sins, but also declares that person “righteous” (i.e. totally perfect and blameless in his sight! Ephesians 1:4). This “righteousness” which comes from God (Rom 3:21) through a believer’s faith (Rom 3:22) is IMPUTED (i.e. undeservedly credited to our account) through God’s grace (Rom 3:24; Rom 4:3-5). Thus, according to the Bible, a true believer is not only initially “given” eternal life (i.e. saved from eternal damnation) upon being “born again” (John 3:3; John 10:28-30), but also that same believer is “sealed” (i.e. guaranteed) unto eternal life by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13; Eph 4:30-32) due to the grace and mercy of God APART FROM ANY GOOD WORKS WE DO OR DON’T DO! (Titus 3:5; Gal 2:15-16; Rom 3:20)

As I have shown you in my previous newsletters, Catholicism not only rejects this Protestant understanding of “how” a person is saved, but also rejects any doctrine that teaches a person is “eternally” saved at the time they initially put their faith in Christ Jesus. That is why Pope Benedict XVI came out this past summer with an official claim that only the Catholic Church is the “real” church and only Catholicism has the “true” gospel. Although this was a shocking claim to many in this world, the Pope was actually not proclaiming something new or initiating a revolutionary doctrine of the Catholic Church. Rather, he was just reemphasizing what had been being taught through Rome for over a thousand years. Thus, since it is obviously true that Catholic leadership does not agree with the Protestant (i.e. Baptists, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) teachings on how a person gets (and remains) saved...then WHAT is their understanding of these VERY IMPORTANT BIBLICAL doctrines?

To even begin to answer this question, it is important to first of all understand what sources a Catholic would turn to in order to answer this question for themselves. While a Protestant preacher and pastor (like me) would tell you to “search the Scriptures” to discover what a person must do to be saved, a Catholic priest would point to Scripture AND TRADITION. In John A Hardon’s book on “The Catholic Catechism” (which was sponsored and approved by the Vatican in 1981), he wrote:

“What must a Catholic believe? The answer is disarmingly simple: ‘By divine and catholic faith everything must be believed that is contained in the WRITTEN WORD of God (i.e. the Bible) OR IN TRADITION, and that which is PROPOSED by the Church as a divinely revealed object of belief, either in SOLEMN DECREE or in her ordinary UNIVERSAL MAGISTERIUM.’ (pg. 36).

In other words, what John Hardon, a Priest and professor of the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago, is saying is that Catholics can not JUST turn to the Bible and let the Holy Spirit be their primary teacher (1Jn 2:27). They must submit their “personal” understanding of what the Scriptures are saying to the authority of the TRADITIONAL teaching and authority of the Catholic Church. Rev. Hardon made this clear when he also wrote:

“The Second Vatican Council (1959-1965) further clarified that...Scripture AND Tradition are BOTH sources of God’s revealed message to mankind. There is nothing ambiguous about how a Catholic knows what to believe: WHATEVER THE CHURCH proposes as having been revealed.” (page 36-37)

“True, in a basic sense, Catholicism believes that the WHOLE CONTENT of God’s revealed word is NOT LIMITED to the BIBLICAL page...BOTH Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be ACCEPTED and venerated with the SAME SENSE of loyalty and reverence.” (page 47)

This claim, that Catholics are to revere the Bible “and” whatever the Catholic Church teaches as EQUALLY INSPIRED sources from God, is not an insignificant detail in understanding the confusion that exists in understanding the differences between the Catholic “gospel” and the Protestant “gospel”. Protestants have in the past and continue to this day to rely only on the Word of God (itself) as the only true source of faith and practice; additionally, Protestants (like me) believe that only the HOLY SPIRIT can be relied upon as the reliable SOURCE of all DIVINE REVELATION (1Cor 2:10-16). Although “The Catholic Catechism” claims that the teachings of the Pope and the decisions of the official Catholic Church Councils are infallible and are as “divinely inspired” as the Holy Scriptures (Hardon, pages 226-233), God has proclaimed His Word, alone, as being that which is “perfect” and “reliable” (Psalm 119:36, 137-138; 2Tim 3:16-17; 2Pet 1:19-21; 2Pet 3:16). In addition, the Bible teaches that the Word of God (i.e. His revelation to mankind before Christ returns) is “finished” (Heb 1:2; Jude 3-4; Rev 22:18-19; 1Cor 13:8-12).

But, because Roman Catholics have “traditionally” taught that the “keys of the kingdom” were given to Peter (and, thus, they claim he was the first Pope) and that his successors have the right to “forgive” or “retain” a person’s sins (Matt 16:18-19), this leads Catholic officials to confidently proclaim that “...it is impossible for men to be saved if they refused to enter or remain in the CATHOLIC CHURCH...” (Hardon, page 235) and “whoever is saved OWES his salvation to the one Catholic Church” (Hardon, page 236).

So, why does Pope Benedict XVI believe that the Catholic Church is the only true church and the only source of true salvation? Not because “the Bible told him so”, but because “the traditional teachings of the Catholic church told him so”. Which of these sources would you choose to believe???

Next week, I will explain to you how Catholicism applies words like “justification”, “imputed”, and “grace” totally DIFFERENT than how the Bible does! **-Pastor Louis**