

The One True Church

By Mark Mayberry

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Introduction

Recently, the Pope partially affirmed a Biblical truth, but did so in such a distorted manner that his affirmation was devoid of truth. According to a July 10, 2007 news report on MSNBC.com:

Pope Benedict XVI has reasserted the universal primacy of the Roman Catholic Church, approving a document released Tuesday that says Orthodox churches were defective and that other Christian denominations were not true churches. ... It restates key sections of a 2000 document the pope wrote when he was prefect of the congregation, "Dominus Iesus," which set off a firestorm of criticism among Protestant and other Christian denominations because it said they were not true churches but merely ecclesial communities and therefore did not have the "means of salvation." In the new document and an accompanying commentary, which were released as the pope vacations here in Italy's Dolomite mountains, the Vatican repeated that position. "Christ 'established here on earth' only one church," the document said. The other communities "cannot be called 'churches' in the proper sense" because they do not have apostolic succession — the ability to trace their bishops back to Christ's original apostles.

Is Authenticity Based Upon Apostolic Succession?

According to the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, "Apostolic succession, in Christian theology, the doctrine asserting that the chosen successors of the apostles enjoyed through God's grace the same authority, power, and responsibility as was conferred upon the apostles by Jesus. Therefore present-day bishops, as the successors of previous bishops, going back to the apostles, have this power by virtue of this unbroken chain. For the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches, this link with the apostles is what guarantees for them their authority in matters of faith, morals, and the valid administration of sacraments. Essential to maintaining the apostolic succession is the right consecration of bishops. Apostolic succession is to be distinguished from the Petrine supremacy (see papacy). Protestants (other than Anglican) see the authority given to the apostles as unique, proper to them alone, and hence reject any doctrine of a succession of their power. The Protestant view of ecclesiastical authority differs accordingly. See orders, holy; church."

Apostolic authority, properly understood, involves the revelation of previously established divine truths (Matthew 16:13-20; John 14:25-26; 16:12-13; 20:19-23). Possessing the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1-8; 2:1-4), thus empowered to reveal and confirm the truth, the apostles performed a foundational work (Ephesians 2:19-23; Revelation 21:10-14). The concept of "apostolic succession" is unknown in Holy Scripture. Instead, the gospel is spread as faithful believers preach the word (Acts 8:1-4; Colossians 1:3-8; 2:1-5; 2 Timothy 2:2; 4:1-2).

Is Authenticity Based Upon Fidelity to the Pattern?

Belief in an unbroken succession of faithful leaders is unrealistic and unnecessary. Consider the example of Josiah, king of Judah, as recorded in 2nd Kings 22-23. Preceded by wicked Amon, who forsook the Lord and served idols, Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years. He did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left.

In the eighteenth year of his reign, a copy of the book of the Law was discovered in the house of the Lord. When Josiah heard it read, he tore his garments, realizing the consequences of Judah's longstanding apostasy. Humbling himself before the Lord, the king instituted extensive reforms, reinstating the worship and service of Jehovah according to the Biblical pattern. As a result, he was counted as righteous.

Our duty is similar. We must search the Scriptures to see if the things that are taught are consistent with revealed truth (Acts 17:10-12; 1 John 4:1-2). God's word is divinely inspired (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and supremely powerful (Romans 1:16-17), being able to build us up and to give us an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

Conclusion

Yes, the church of Christ is singular and unique (Matthew 16:16-18; Romans 16:16). There is, indeed, one body of baptized believers (Acts 2:38-47; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). That body is large enough to include male and female, slave and freeman, Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3:27-29; Ephesians 2:14-16). That body is the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:4-6). However, our identification with the one body is not based upon an unbroken chain of apostolic succession, but rooted in our fidelity to the inspired message (John 8:31-32; Acts 2:42).

Sources:

The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, (Columbia University Press, 2004), s.v. "Apostolic Succession."

Pope: Other Denominations Not True Churches

Benedict issues statement asserting that Jesus established ‘only one church’

MSNBC News Services Updated: 8:52 a.m. CT July 10, 2007

Lorenzago Di Cadore, Italy - Pope Benedict XVI has reasserted the universal primacy of the Roman Catholic Church, approving a document released Tuesday that says Orthodox churches were defective and that other Christian denominations were not true churches.

Benedict approved a document from his old offices at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that restates church teaching on relations with other Christians. It was the second time in a week the pope has corrected what he says are erroneous interpretations of the Second Vatican Council, the 1962-65 meetings that modernized the church.

On Saturday, Benedict revisited another key aspect of Vatican II by reviving the old Latin Mass. Traditional Catholics cheered the move, but more liberal ones called it a step back from Vatican II.

Benedict, who attended Vatican II as a young theologian, has long complained about what he considers the erroneous interpretation of the council by liberals, saying it was not a break from the past but rather a renewal of church tradition.

In the latest document — formulated as five questions and answers — the Vatican seeks to set the record straight on Vatican II’s ecumenical intent, saying some contemporary theological interpretation had been “erroneous or ambiguous” and had prompted confusion and doubt.

It restates key sections of a 2000 document the pope wrote when he was prefect of the congregation, “Dominus Iesus,” which set off a firestorm of criticism among Protestant and other Christian denominations because it said they were not true churches but merely ecclesial communities and therefore did not have the “means of salvation.”

In the new document and an accompanying commentary, which were released as the pope vacations here in Italy’s Dolomite mountains, the Vatican repeated that position.

“Christ ‘established here on earth’ only one church,” the document said. The other communities “cannot be called ‘churches’ in the proper sense” because they do not have apostolic succession — the ability to trace their bishops back to Christ’s original apostles.

‘Identity of the Catholic faith’

The Rev. Sara MacVane of the Anglican Centre in Rome, said there was nothing new in the document.

“I don’t know what motivated it at this time,” she said. “But it’s important always to point out that there’s the official position and there’s the huge amount of friendship and fellowship and

worshipping together that goes on at all levels, certainly between Anglican and Catholics and all the other groups and Catholics.”

The document said Orthodox churches were indeed “churches” because they have apostolic succession and that they enjoyed “many elements of sanctification and of truth.” But it said they lack something because they do not recognize the primacy of the pope — a defect, or a “wound” that harmed them, it said.

“This is obviously not compatible with the doctrine of primacy which, according to the Catholic faith, is an ‘internal constitutive principle’ of the very existence of a particular church,” the commentary said.

Despite the harsh tone of the document, it stresses that Benedict remains committed to ecumenical dialogue.

“However, if such dialogue is to be truly constructive, it must involve not just the mutual openness of the participants but also fidelity to the identity of the Catholic faith,” the commentary said.

‘Not backtracking on ecumenical commitment’

The document, signed by the congregation prefect, U.S. Cardinal William Levada, was approved by Benedict on June 29, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul — a major ecumenical feast day.

There was no indication about why the pope felt it necessary to release the document, particularly since his 2000 document summed up the same principles. Some analysts suggested it could be a question of internal church politics, or that it could simply be an indication of Benedict using his office as pope to again stress key doctrinal issues from his time at the congregation.

Father Augustine Di Noia, undersecretary for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said the document did not alter the commitment for ecumenical dialogue, but aimed to assert Catholic identity in those talks.

“The Church is not backtracking on ecumenical commitment,” Di Noia told Vatican radio.

“But, as you know, it is fundamental to any kind of dialogue that the participants are clear about their own identity. That is, dialogue cannot be an occasion to accommodate or soften what you actually understand yourself to be.”

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