

Has Rome Accepted The Gospel?

By Hans K. LaRondelle, Th.D.

Why the Reformation?

The sixteenth-century Protestant churches arose in response to the question, What constitutes the supreme authority: the Bible or church tradition?

For Luther, Christ was the center of holy Scripture. Salvation from sin and guilt came through personal faith and trust in Christ alone. The Bible was all-sufficient to make man wise for salvation. Therefore Luther exalted Scripture as the ultimate norm of saving truth and the supreme authority of divine revelation. The Bible was to be accepted as its own expositor. This principle became known as sola Scriptura.

Luther expressed the essence of the Protestant Reformation before the royal diet in the city of Worms on April 18, 1521: "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the pope nor the councils alone, it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the Word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything against the conscience."

To Luther the Bible was no longer a law book with endless ceremonial and ethical regulations. Doctrinal statements produced by ecumenical councils could never be as authoritative as God's own witness in holy Scripture. The church of Christ, Luther held, is built not on the shifting sands of human traditions, sanctioned by ecclesiastical canonization, but on the bedrock of Scripture alone. He therefore used the Bible, Christ, and faith interchangeably, these three indissolubly connected to one another.

This idea of dynamic relationship, revolutionary for Luther's time, conflicted with the belief that salvation comes through church sacraments such as baptism, the Eucharist, and penance. Rather, the grace of God comes straight from Christ to the believing, repentant soul, through the channel of personal faith and trust in Scripture alone. This truth brought with it the most precious gem for the Christian of the Reformation era: assurance of divine acceptance and salvation. Certainty of justification by God here and now, said Luther, is a pure gift, sola gratia, by grace alone.

Luther's theology of the cross of Christ contains no room for human merit or achievement that would make God a debtor to man. By God's forgiving grace every believer is set free from condemnation by the righteous law of God. The spirit of God transforms his heart and will; he loves God and his neighbor. The order is always redemption first, then moral obedience. This priority of salvation led Luther to make the priesthood of all believers his basic concern. Every layman is called to be not merely a listener but a proclaimer, a witness of the faith right where he is, because he has direct access to Christ.

The Preeminent Question

What Protestants call the "Reformation" of Luther, Roman Catholics used to call the "revolt" of Luther and "the age of schism." The differing judgments reflect divergent priorities in respect to truth and unity. On Christmas, 1949, at the inauguration of the so-called holy year, Pius XII asked "Why should there still be division, why schisms?"

The sixteenth-century schism was not the cause itself; It was the result of a deeper question: Why did Rome excommunicate Luther without refuting him? The pope demanded blind submission and Luther's recantation of all his books. Luther replied that, with his conscience bound by the holy Scriptures, he could not recant unless he was shown to be wrong from the Scriptures.

The Reformation issue focused on the authority of Scripture and of church tradition. In 1546 the Council of Trent defined the unwritten traditions of the church to be the other authoritative source of divine truth, because these, "received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down to us transmitted as it were from hand to hand."

At the first Vatican Council in 1870, however, a new concept of tradition was sanctioned--the evolving and expanding consciousness of faith through the church. Tradition no longer need be a product of practice within the apostolic church, but can be determined by the living pope and declared by him *ex cathedra*. The pope's decree thus may become authoritative tradition. A case in point are the two papal encyclicals on Mariology, the one of 1854 concerning the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary, and the one of 1950 regarding the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven. Because papal infallibility in matters of faith and ethics is now officially placed above the authority of ecumenical councils, these dogmas were decreed by popes without council action and without Scriptural foundation.

The definition of religious truth depends, therefore, solely on the pope's decision. Consequently, submission is unconditional. Furthermore, Vatican Council II (1962-1965) officially defined a papal decision *ex cathedra* as "irreformable" The supreme question today has become the question of the infallible authority of the pope in relation to the authority of holy Scripture.

The Essence of Roman Catholicism

It is acknowledged even by some Roman Catholic scholars that the Council of Trent, which convened between 1545 and 1563 and condemned Luther's teaching of justification *sola fide* as "an idle trust of heretics," did so without having heard or even understood him." Trent's concept of Luther's *sola fide* is clearly a caricature of the reformer's message of saving faith and justification. Trent considered faith to be merely an intellectual assent to the doctrines of the Bible and of the church, a so-called "unformed faith." To become "formed faith," the infusion of grace by means of the church sacraments was necessary. Only then would the believer possess the beginning of inherent righteousness.

The dilemma is clear: If God's justification of the believer is a sacramental process, then it is not exclusively by faith in Christ. Furthermore, in the sacramental infusion of grace, the believer still is not united with Christ and His salvation. Thus he lacks the certainty of salvation. Instead his natural free will

is credited with merits before God if it cooperates with the new inclination of the soul to do good works. In this complicated justification process the goal is "truly to merit the obtaining of eternal life in due time" There cannot be any blessed assurance of salvation "except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God has chosen to Himself."

This official doctrinal stance of the Council of Trent documents that the fundamental rift between Catholicism and Protestantism is over the teaching authority of the church. By its doctrinal fixation on justification as a sanctifying process through the sacraments and its stance on the supreme authority of church tradition, the Roman Catholic Church forced the renewal movement to become a separate church, against the will of Luther.

Will Schism Continue?

Failed efforts by Roman Catholic theologians to integrate Luther's renewal of the gospel--justification by faith in Christ--with Roman Catholicism's sanctifying process, have confirmed that Romanism and Protestantism teach fundamentally different ways of salvation. In the Catholic doctrine, the works of the believer are a constitutive part of his justification and have a salvation-attaining character. The Council of Trent's doctrine of human merit stands like a dam to block Luther's sola fide. To speak of rapprochement or even of reconciliation is not warranted.

The modern Roman Catholic Church remains essentially a sacramental church--salvation comes only through its hierarchical-sacramental mediation. Justification constitutes man's cooperation with grace infused by the church sacraments. Vatican II compares the church with the incarnate Redeemer. It was instituted as a "universal sacrament of salvation." The Catholic, therefore, at best can receive from his church only an assurance of hope. Vatican II is based on Trent and presupposes its traditional definitions of justification and merit. The claim of some modern Roman Catholic theologians to consensus with Luther on justification finds no support in any official decision or interpretation of Vatican II. The doctrine of justification and merit stands unchanged as the watershed between two different dogmatic interpretations of the gospel. Luther saw that the integrity of the Scriptures was challenged also by the doctrines of the mass and the papacy. Thus he acknowledged the necessity of schism: "Therefore we are and remain forever separated."

Roman Catholic scholar Dr. Peter Kreeft was only realistic when he wrote "We cannot have reunion until the Catholic Church catches up to Luther."