

Benedict XVI and Jesus

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With Pope Benedict XVI the Catholic Church has a theologian on “the throne of St. Peter” who seems to know exactly what he does and who has already made quite an impact. In his speech in Regensburg he quoted the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391-1425) who had asked what new things Mohammed had brought apart from violence. Benedict’s use of this quotation was followed by an outcry in the Islamic world. Some observers felt that the Pope had made a serious mistake, while others held that his uncompromising attitude and his insistence that Jesus and Christianity are unique may have advanced the readiness of Muslims to continue dialoguing with the Roman Church. They seem to appreciate people with clear convictions. Benedict XVI has also reminded Protestant Christians that they are not a church. Although this is part of catholic doctrine and not really new, Protestants were irritated that in the era of ecumenism this was stressed again. Benedict XVI addressed also his own church, recommending a return, at least partially, to administering the mass in Latin because he understands such an approach as a means of integration and advancing the unity of the Catholic Church. Finally, he published the book *Jesus of Nazareth* which was immediately translated into many languages and is sold widely. The English version is a translation from the German.

I. *The Book “Jesus of Nazareth”*

Jesus of Nazareth is an intriguing book, containing interesting and thoughtful observations and theological insights. It consists of ten chapters, a glossary, and a bibliography. Following a foreword, Jesus is first presented as the new Moses. Then the author walks his audience through Jesus’ baptism and temptation, he discusses the gospel of the kingdom, addresses parts of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord’s Prayer, deals with Jesus’ disciples as His new family, and turns to the message of the parables. In the Gospel of John he finds principal images which he interprets (water, vine and wine, bread, and shepherd). This is followed by a chapter on Peter’s confession and Jesus’ transfiguration. Finally, Jesus’ identity as “Son of Man,” “the Son,” and “the I Am” is explained.

The book ends somewhat abruptly. This may be due to the fact that it is the first part of a larger work. A second volume is supposed to follow. Most chapters are theological rather than exegetical in nature. Benedict XVI does not necessarily speak to the average readers, because he includes theological discussions and reviews theological literature, yet the glossary indicates that lay people are the intended audience. The author’s main concern seems to be to restore Jesus’ true identity and present Him as the one in whom Christian faith is concentrated. This is a laudable goal. His convictions concerning Jesus come across clearly. He asks: “If we had to choose today, would Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, the son of the Father, have a chance?” (41) and states “. . . following Christ is not comfortable—and Jesus never said it would be, either” (109), but: “Jesus gives us ‘life’ because he gives us God. He can give us God because he himself is one with God, because he is the Son. He himself is the gift—he *is* ‘life’” (p. 354).

As indicated above the author writes as a theologian which explains the carefully crafted language. Sometimes he mentions issues but does not fully develop them. For instance, he presents different scholarly views on the kingdom of God including the ecclesiastical interpretation, but does not elaborate on the latter (49). Instead he focuses on Jesus. Talking about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he correctly holds: “Jesus uses ideas that were current in the Judaism of his time. Hence we must not force our interpretation of this part of the text” (215) which would indicate that the text cannot be used as a valid argument in favor of the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, he mentions an intermediate state between death and resurrection and thereby remains ambiguous (216-217).

II. *Problems with the Book “Jesus of Nazareth”*

In spite of these concessions and a hidden acknowledgment of problems in the past--“ . . . the secular power of the papacy is no longer a temptation today . . .” (42)--he affirms catholic doctrines and positions. This has to be expected. By the way, this statement about the secular power of the papacy does not deny that the Catholic Church has secular

power. On the contrary, it affirms it. However, it claims that today this power is no longer a temptation. Here are now some of the problems with the pope's book:

- Monasticism and asceticism (77) as well as mysticism seem to be endorsed (95, 131).
- In a passage dealing with the saints he stresses that on them "God has placed a particularly heavy burden of temptation . . . They are called to bear them through to the end for us ordinary souls and to help us persist on our way to the One who took upon himself the burden of us all" (164).
- The beast out of the sea (Rev 13a) is understood as the Roman imperial power (165).
- Biological evolution is presupposed, because "when you have lost God you have lost yourself; than you are nothing more than a random product of evolution" (166).
- The church is supposedly built on Peter (288). It is held that he has received a special commission from the Lord which is different from Paul's because there is "continuity"—probably a hint to apostolic succession—and thus the primacy of Peter is affirmed (297).
- Throughout the book there is an emphasis on the sacraments (238, 243, 248). For instance, while discussing water in the Gospel of John, he remarks: "Spirit and water, heaven and earth, Christ and the Church, belong together. And that is how 'rebirth' happens. In the sacrament, water stands for the maternal earth, the holy Church, which welcomes creation into herself and stands in place of it" (240). The Eucharist is stressed most and is seen in many biblical texts in some of which others would have a hard time to find any reference to it. For instance, he connects Jesus' first temptation with the multiplication of the loaves and the Eucharist (32-33; see also 252, 261, 269-270, 280, 289, 302).
- The author seems to uphold the Decalogue, although he talks about freedom from law (61). Later he says: "The 'Law of Christ' is freedom . . ." (100). He suggests that Jesus "'spiritualizes' the Law and in so doing makes it the path to life for all" (101). Discussing Psalm 15 he comes to the conclusion "that the condition for admission to God's presence is simply the content of the Decalogue—with an emphasis on the inward search for God, on journeying toward him (first tablet) and on love of neighbor, on justice toward the individual and the community (second tablet)" (94). This quotation may affirm the Decalogue, however, our question would be how Benedict XVI understands salvation.
- In a section on the Sabbath (106-112) he enters into a dialogue with the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner and concludes that at "the heart of the Sabbath disputes is the question about the Son of Man—the question about Jesus Christ himself." The problem is not just the centrality of Jesus, but if Jesus is central, "the Sabbath loses its great social function. The Sabbath is one of the essential elements that hold Israel together. Centering upon Jesus breaks open this sacred structure and imperils an essential element that cements the unity of the People of God" (111). He then transitions to Sunday. For Christians—he does not even say early Christians—the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week, the beginning of creation, became the Lord's day. "The essential elements of the Old Testament Sabbath then naturally passed over to the Lord's day in the context of table fellowship with Jesus. The church thus recuperated the social function of the Sabbath as well . . . An unmistakable signal of this was the fact that Constantine's Christian-inspired reform of legal system granted slaves certain freedoms on Sundays; the Lord's day was thus introduced as a day of freedom and rest into the legal system now shaped on Christian principles. I find it extremely worrying that modern liturgists want to dismiss this social function of Sunday as a Constantinian aberration . . ." (112). This sounds as if he supported government enforced Sunday keeping, but as in other places he remains somewhat vague. Yet there is an interesting statement on page 121, "Likewise it soon became clear that the essential content of the Sabbath had to be reinterpreted in terms of the Lord's day. The fight for Sunday is another of the Church's major concerns in the present day, when there is so much to upset the rhythm of time that sustains society."

III. The Pope's Methodology

We now turn to a crucial issue which is the Pope's methodology of interpreting Scripture. Some important statements regarding his approach are found in the foreword. But throughout the book the issue comes up again and again. The approach Benedict XVI takes is difficult to describe and may seem to be somewhat inconsistent and sometimes ambiguous. While he sounds more conservative, his approach is not always so.

He affirms the historical-critical method, which is understandable. His predecessor John Paul II had endorsed it, and he himself, as Cardinal Ratzinger, may have drafted the document that was accepted by the Catholic Church. However, his "yes" to this method is not one hundred percent. He thinks the method is important because interest in history should not be lost. Christianity is dependent on history, and the method offers a historical, although critical approach. But the method is limited. ". . . the historical-critical method . . . is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events" (xv). "For the time being, it is important . . . to recognize the limits of the historical-critical method itself" (xvi). What then are these limits? Benedict XVI is very precise in pointing out the problem areas:

- ". . . the historical method not only has to investigate the biblical word as a thing of the past, but also has to let it remain in the past . . . the one thing it cannot do is make it into something present *today* . . ." (xvi).
- "Because it is a historical method, it presupposes the uniformity of the context within which the events of history unfold. It must therefore treat the biblical words it investigates as human words. . . its specific object is the human word as human" (xvi-xvii).
- "The unity of all of these writings as one 'Bible,' however, is not something it can recognize as an immediate historical datum" (xvii)

This is a tacit acknowledgment that the historical-critical method is not conducive to faith. Therefore, he suggests the use of a complimentary method, namely canonical criticism (xviii). This would allow for attending to the content and unity of Scripture. He criticizes liberal exegesis (111, 186, 219, 323-324, 328) which is limited (184, 186). Obviously he is opposed to the assumption of a gap between the so-called historical Christ and the biblical Christ (xi). He also does not see opposition between Matthew's poor and the poor in Luke (76) and rejects the ideas that "God cannot act in history" (35) and that He "says nothing and has nothing to say" (36).

So far so good, but following the critical approach he assigns Daniel to the 2nd century B.C. (56) and the so-called Deutero-Isaiah to the end of the Babylonian exile (347). Commenting on John 7 and the Feast of Tabernacles, he writes: "These water rituals are in the first place indications of the origin of the feast in the nature religions . . ." (244). Inspiration is affirmed, but connected with the church. Scripture emerges from the church. "The author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community" (xx). On page 182 he uses "inspired" in quotation marks when speaking about Scripture and seems to suggest that inspiration is the maturation of Scripture "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

In good catholic tradition he affirms "the four senses of Scripture" (xx) and supports allegorizing (184, 200-201, 279). He does not only use and rely on some Apocrypha (30) and the church fathers (49, 207, 279)—although he admits that they may at times be wrong (212)—but stresses "the living tradition of the whole church" (xviii). Mentioning historical conditioning, he writes: ". . . the body of law in question is also historically conditioned and entirely open to criticism . . . Even within the Old Testament legislation, it undergoes further development. Newer prescriptions contradict older ones regarding the same object. These casuistic provisions . . . are nonetheless not directly divine, but are developed from the underlying deposit of divine law, and therefore subject to further development and correction" (124).

Conclusion

Benedict XVI is certainly a brilliant theologian and administrator, and in some respect *Jesus of Nazareth* is a brilliant book, but it leaves Bible believing Christians unsatisfied. The author is bound by tradition, cannot really free himself to allow the text to talk for itself, and uses a methodological approach to Scripture which in some ways is conservative and in others is liberal. In the end it is—in good catholic fashion—the church that controls Scripture and not

vice versa. As Adventists we laud the author's emphasis on Jesus and his confession that he trusts the gospels (xxi) while wondering why he seems to have reservations with other biblical books. We are concerned about various doctrinal statements in the book and their implications.

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