

EDITORIAL: At least the pope cleared the air

July 20, 2007

Posted: 7/20/07

EDITORIAL: At least the pope cleared the air

“Is the pope Catholic?”

That’s got to be one of the world’s oldest one-line jokes. It’s also probably the world’s most-used non-scatological rejoinder to an obvious question. For example, this discussion about Texas weather in July:

“Is it going to be hot tomorrow?” your neighbor asks.

“Is the pope Catholic?” you reply.



Everybody knows the pope is Catholic. That’s why reaction to Pope Benedict XVI, who recently acted Catholic, has been baffling.

The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which Pope Benedict headed when he was Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, declared the

church established by Jesus Christ exists completely and fully only in the Roman Catholic Church. Although [the document](#) affirms other Christian denominations can be “instruments of salvation,” the statement insists on the primacy of the Catholic Church. It contends Protestant denominations are not really churches “in the proper sense”; they’re only “ecclesial communities.”

The theological thinking behind the Vatican’s assertion is fairly straightforward. Basically, it goes like this: Catholics believe in apostolic succession, or the idea that the pope’s spiritual authority has been handed down, in unbroken succession, from the Apostle Peter, whom they believe was the first pope, all the way to Benedict XVI. The pope—the bishop of Rome—is authoritative over all the church, its “universal monarch.” The pope’s authority extends through archbishops and bishops down to priests, who are empowered to administer sacraments and, in effect, connect Christ to people. Since God’s grace must be mediated to people, and since pastors and ministers of other denominations are outside the authority of apostolic succession and cannot appropriately mediate grace, they’re not part of the true church.

Ironically, some other Christian leaders seemed surprised by the pope’s assertion. The Vatican’s “exclusive claim ... goes against the spirit of our Christian calling toward oneness in Christ,” responded Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Those claims “caused pain,” added Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

So, what’s this really mean for Baptists and other non-Catholic Christians?

Well, Baptists shouldn’t be surprised, nor should we be bothered by the pope’s claims. For almost 400 years, Baptists have held fast to doctrine entirely counter to papal authority and apostolic succession. We’ve championed “the priesthood of all believers”—the notion that each

individual is a priest before God, both privileged to approach God directly and individually and responsible for the stewardship of such a blessed privilege. We believe each soul is competent to stand directly before God, so we don't need a priest, or even a pope, to intercede for us. We shouldn't feel perturbed knowing the pope thinks we're wrong, especially since we believe he's wrong.

But we also owe the pope a measure of admiration. He sees himself as the shepherd of the Roman Catholic flock, and one way he seeks to protect them is to clarify spiritual issues for them. (Perhaps he even believes he needs to care for non-Catholics by clarifying issues for them too.) So, he seems to be taking his pastoral duty seriously, and that is commendable.

Also commendable is his effort to clearly state his church's position as contrasted to Orthodox, Protestants and other Christians. We live in a talk-radio world, where shouting and anger seem to be the norms of disagreement. Yet here we have a forthright yet calm presentation of belief. Yes, it provides ground for disagreement, but also opportunity for honest dialogue.