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No, I'm Not Offended

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Aren't you offended? That is the question many Evangelicals are being asked in the wake of a recent document released by the Vatican. The document declares that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church — or, in words the Vatican would prefer to use, the only institutional form in which the Church of Christ subsists.

No, I am not offended. In the first place, I am not offended because this is not an issue in which emotion should play a key role. This is a theological question, and our response should be theological, not emotional. Secondly, I am not offended because I am not surprised. No one familiar with the statements of the Roman Catholic Magisterium should be surprised by this development. This is not news in any genuine sense. It is news only in the current context of Vatican statements and ecumenical relations. Thirdly, I am not offended because this new document actually brings attention to the crucial issues of ecclesiology, and thus it presents us with an opportunity.

The Vatican document is very brief — just a few paragraphs in fact. Its official title is “[Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church](#),” and it was released by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on June 29 of this year. Though many media sources have identified the document as a papal statement from Pope Benedict XVI, it is actually a statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that was later approved for release by the Pope (who, as Cardinal Ratzinger, headed this Congregation prior to assuming the papacy).

The document claims a unique legitimacy for the Roman Catholic Church as the church established by Christ. The document stakes this identity on a claim to apostolic succession, centered in the papacy itself. As the document states, “This Church, constituted and organised in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him.”

Lest anyone miss the point, the document then goes on to acknowledge that the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy also stake a claim to apostolic succession, and thus they are referred to as “Churches” by the Vatican. As for the churches born in whatever form out of the Reformation — they are not true churches at all, only “ecclesial communities.”

Look at this:

According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called “Churches” in the proper sense.

Pope Benedict was already in hot water with the media because of his recent decision related to the (limited) reinstitution of the Latin mass, complete with a call for the conversion of the Jews. He was not likely to be named “Ecumenist of the Year” anyway. This latest controversy just adds to the media impression of big changes at the Vatican under the current papacy.

There have been changes for sure. Benedict is truly a doctrinal theologian, whereas his popular predecessor, Pope John Paul II, was more a philosopher by academic training. Those familiar with the current pope know of his frustration with the tendency of liberal Catholic theologians and laypersons to insist that the Second Vatican Council (known

popularly as “Vatican II”) represented a massive shift (to the left) in Catholic doctrine. Not so, insisted Cardinal Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith. Now, as Pope, Benedict is in a position to shape his argument into a universal policy for his church. Vatican II, he insists, represented only a deepening and reapplication of unchanging Catholic doctrine.

Evangelicals should appreciate the candor reflected in this document. There is no effort here to confuse the issues. To the contrary, the document is an obvious attempt to set the record straight. The Roman Catholic Church does not deny that Christ is working redemptively through Protestant and evangelical churches, but it does deny that these churches which deny the authority of the papacy are true churches in the most important sense. The true church, in other words, is that church identified through the recognition of the papacy. Those churches that deny or fail to recognize the papacy are “ecclesial Communities,” not churches “in the proper sense.”

I appreciate the document’s clarity on this issue. It all comes down to this — the claim of the Roman Catholic Church to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the Pope as the universal monarch of the church *is* the defining issue. Roman Catholics and Evangelicals should together recognize the importance of that claim. We should together realize and admit that this is an issue worthy of division. The Roman Catholic Church is willing to go so far as to assert that any church that denies the papacy is no true church. Evangelicals should be equally candid in asserting that any church defined by the claims of the papacy is no true church. This is not a theological game for children, it is the honest recognition of the importance of the question.

The Reformers and their heirs put their lives on the line in order to stake this claim. In this era of confusion and theological laxity we often forget that this was one of the defining issues of the Reformation itself. Both the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church staked their claim to be the true church — and both revealed their most essential convictions in making their argument. As Martin Luther and John Calvin both made clear, the first mark of the true Church is the ministry of the Word — the preaching of the Gospel. The Reformers indicted the Roman Catholic Church for failing to exhibit this mark, and thus failing to be a true Church. The Catholic church returned the favor, defining the church in terms of the papacy and magisterial authority. Those claims have not changed.

I also appreciate the spiritual concern reflected in this document. The artificial and deadly dangerous game of ecumenical confusion has obscured issues of grave concern for our souls. I truly believe that Pope Benedict and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are concerned for our evangelical souls and our evangelical congregations. Pope Benedict is not playing a game. He is not asserting a claim to primacy on the playground. He, along with the Magisterium of his church, believes that Protestant churches are gravely defective and that our souls are in danger. His sacramental theology plays a large role in this concern, for he believes and teaches that a church without submission to the papacy has no guaranteed efficacy for its sacraments. (This point, by the way, explains why the Protestant churches that claim a sacramental theology are more concerned about this Vatican statement — it denies the basic validity of their sacraments.)

I actually appreciate the Pope’s concern. If he is right, we *are* endangering our souls and the souls of our church members. Of course, I am convinced that he is not right — not right on the papacy, not right on the sacraments, not right on the priesthood, not right on the Gospel, not right on the church.

The Roman Catholic Church believes we are in spiritual danger for obstinately and disobediently excluding ourselves from submission to its universal claims and its papacy. Evangelicals should be concerned that Catholics are in spiritual danger for their submission to these very claims. We both understand what is at stake.

The Rev. Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, responded to the press by saying that the Vatican’s “exclusive claims” are “troubling.” He also said, “what may have been meant to clarify has caused pain.”

I will let Bishop Hanson explain his pain. I do not see this new Vatican statement as an innovation or an insult. I see it as a clarification and a helpful demarcation of the issues at stake.

I appreciate the Roman Catholic Church’s candor on this issue, and I believe that Evangelical Christians, with equal respect and clarity, should respond in kind. This is a time to be respectfully candid – not a time to be offended.

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