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# The Pope Comes to America — Evangelical Thoughts

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Pope Benedict XVI arrived in the United States yesterday, and a flood of media attention has arrived with him. I was asked by editors at *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* to write a special column for “On Faith” which would represent an evangelical voice [see article [here](#)].

Here is the column:

Pope Benedict XVI’s first visit to America as Pope will not be his introduction to this country, but it will be the first opportunity for Americans to see this Pope up close – three years after his election as pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church.

Along with others, many evangelical Christians will be watching with interest. The long pontificate of the globe-trotting John Paul II is all an entire generation of evangelicals now remember as background, and Benedict is a comparatively unknown figure.

Writing immediately after Benedict’s election, I wrote these words, referencing the Pope’s previous role in the Vatican as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger:

*Yet, there is no reason to believe that the election of Pope Benedict XVI will do anything to breach the divide between evangelicals and Roman Catholics on issues related to biblical authority, the Gospel, and a host of other essential theological questions. We hold no expectation that this pope holds views of justification and the Gospel that are any more harmonious with evangelical conviction than those held by his predecessors. Indeed, Ratzinger’s theological brilliance may be deployed in ways that will cause evangelicals even greater frustration.*

As the Vatican’s most influential theologian, Cardinal Ratzinger was already known for his brilliant and incisive critiques of modern secularism and postmodernism’s retreat from truth. At the same time, he was also a staunch defender of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church – doctrine he had defined and defended as Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Thus, I did not expect that Pope Benedict would move to breach the theological divide between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Indeed, I would have been most surprised if, now elected as Pope, Benedict would reveal himself as someone other than who he had been as Cardinal Ratzinger.

I have not been surprised. Pope Benedict has continued his incisive work on the challenge of modern secularism. His speech at Regensburg, Germany in 2006 and his baptism of a prominent Muslim convert this past Easter were clear signs that this is not a Pope primarily concerned with ecumenical relations. Even so, his statements about the address and the baptism – and the general question of Islam – were perfectly in keeping with Catholic doctrine since Vatican II. Evangelicals can admire his boldness without appreciating his inclusivism. Perhaps the most clarifying moment since his election came last July when the Vatican released the document known as “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church” – a document that reasserted the claim that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church.

The secular press and a good many non-Catholic church leaders expressed outrage and offense at the Pope's comments – assuming that such teachings were simply out of place in the modern world. But Benedict was restating the tradition and teaching of his church – and he did so because he cared for those he believes are outside the blessings of grace he is certain are given to those in the communion of his church – and to that communion alone.

I actually appreciated the Pope's concern. If he is right, we are endangering our souls and the souls of our church members. Yet, 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 in understanding the church.

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

The divide between evangelical Christians and the Roman Catholic Church remains – as this Pope well understands. And, in so many ways, this is a Pope we can understand. In this strange world, that is no small achievement.

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As always, the comments section of the “[On Faith](#)” column is interesting and revealing [see [here](#)].

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