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# Pope Benedict XVI—What Should We Think?

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Ratzinger had been understood to be the frontrunner as the cardinals entered their historic conclave. Labeled by the media as the Vatican’s “watchdog” for doctrine, Cardinal Ratzinger had played an important role as an intellectual and theological advisor to Pope John Paul II and as the Roman Catholic Church’s theologian charged with protecting the church’s authority and doctrine. Of course, anyone who carries these responsibilities is sure to acquire a list of wounded opponents and critics. In the case of the conservative Ratzinger, this was especially true, as the Cardinal Prefect had functioned for over two decades as an indefatigable defender of Catholic theology and moral teaching.

The early election of Ratzinger came after press reports indicated that he entered the conclave with at least 50 votes committed to his election. In this case, the old Vatican saying, “In a pope, out a cardinal,” was proved untrue. Though no one beyond the cardinals knows exactly what went on within the conclave, Cardinal Ratzinger emerged as the new pope after only two days of voting. By any measure, that was a remarkable achievement.

Observers quickly offered interpretations of Ratzinger’s election as pope. Predictions of a transitional papacy—Ratzinger is 78 years of age—were common. The long papacy of John Paul II casts an enormous shadow over any successor. Clearly, Pope Benedict XVI is unlikely to serve a term of any comparable length to that of his predecessor.

By all accounts, the theme of this papal election was continuity. Ratzinger was well understood to stand behind many of the most significant encyclicals and declarations of John Paul II. Indeed, Vatican observers routinely identified Ratzinger as the “hidden hand” of the last papacy. It was obvious that John Paul II placed great trust in Ratzinger—a fact hardly missed by his fellow cardinals.

Yet, if John Paul II was considered a conservative pope, Ratzinger is seen as a further shift to the right. That screeching sound you hear is the sound of liberal Roman Catholic theologians and activists seared and chastened by the election of the church’s most conservative leader as the next pontiff.

What are evangelicals to think of the new pope? By any measure, this is a difficult question, for it raises the entire universe of issues that stand between evangelical theology and the doctrines taught by the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, the papacy itself is a first-order issue of contention. Evangelicals, thankful for the last pope’s clear affirmation of human dignity and the objectivity of truth, must be relieved in some sense to see John Paul II followed by an ardent defender of the sacredness of human life, the integrity of marriage, and a commitment to truth. Yet, Ratzinger’s doctrinal conservatism will, of course, extend to the very issues most crucial to the evangelical/Roman Catholic divide.

Evangelicals rightly point to the papacy as an unbiblical office that, by its very nature, compromises the integrity of

Scripture and invests an unbiblical authority in an earthly ecclesiastical monarch. Claims of papal succession, papal authority, and papal infallibility do nothing but widen the breach between evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church. The conservatism that leads Ratzinger to defend historic Catholic positions on abortion, euthanasia, and a host of other issues go hand-in-hand with his defense of the papacy, magisterial authority, and the evolving body of Catholic doctrine.

A theological advisor to the Second Vatican Council (along with the last pope), Ratzinger has written scathing critiques of the liberal proposals put forth by many contemporary Catholic theologians. As the Vatican's doctrinal officer, he has taken disciplinary action against liberation theologians and others who have violated Catholic teaching. He has chastised Asian Catholic theologians for suggesting that Eastern religions may be as valid as Christianity, and he has been quick to defend the magisterium's right to determine, define, and protect Catholic teaching.

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.

In his previous writings, this new pope has indicated a clear and genuine understanding of what evangelicals believe. As a matter of fact, he may be the most well-informed pope in history, in terms of evangelical conviction and theological commitments. That is not to say that the pope is in any way sympathetic to those convictions. This much is clear—this papacy is likely to be both interesting and challenging.

One of the strange dimensions of this entire picture is the fact that evangelicals, concerned with the preservation of biblical truth and determined to defend biblical morality, will share much common ground with this new pope. In a sermon delivered to his fellow cardinals just two days prior to his election, Cardinal Ratzinger issued an eloquent and profound critique of postmodern relativism.

“How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many waves of thinking . . . The small boat of thought of many Christians has been tossed about by these waves—thrown from one extreme to the other: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism, and so forth,” he declared. As he continued, “We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain, and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires.”

There is not one syllable in those statements with which evangelicals would not be in full and enthusiastic agreement. Indeed, Ratzinger's writings reveal a keen theological mind that understands the contours of the postmodern crisis and signal a staunch defense of truth against a posture of relativism.

Similarly, in a lengthy interview published in 1985, Ratzinger went after liberal biblical critics who subvert the authority of Scripture. “Ultimately the authority on which these biblical scholars base their judgment is not the Bible itself but the [worldview] they hold to be contemporary. They are therefore speaking as philosophers or sociologists, and their philosophy consists merely in a banal, uncritical assent to the convictions of the present time, which are always provisional.”

Once again, evangelicals would be in fundamental agreement with that assertion.

Today's evangelicals find themselves in a situation well described by J. Gresham Machen almost a century ago, when that great evangelical defender of the faith launched his attack on Protestant liberalism as a fundamentally new religion at odds with Christianity. Machen no doubt surprised many of his evangelical readers when he declared that evangelicals committed to the defense of the Gospel actually have more in common with orthodox Roman Catholics on issues such as the person of Christ and the Trinity than they would with their own liberal Protestant counterparts.

We should be chastened by the realization that so little has changed over the last century. Catholicism has undergone several significant transformations, but it still stands light years from clear biblical teachings such as justification by faith alone. If anything, the papacy is stronger than ever, bolstered by the long pontificate of John Paul II and now assumed by the energetic Benedict XVI.

All this will require that evangelicals think clearly, analyze carefully, and hold fast to our own theological convictions. We should be unashamed and unreluctant to state our agreement with this new pope in his analysis of the dangers of the postmodern challenge and in his defense of the sanctity of human life and the inviolability of marriage. In this regard, evangelicals, who rightly reject the papacy as an institution, find themselves nonetheless relieved that the vast energies of the Roman Catholic Church are not likely to be redirected in a way that is hostile to those shared convictions.

But the institution of the papacy remains a great stumbling block, and this papacy will present its own challenges. Let's hope that this generation of evangelicals is ready for this task.

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