

Dear All

Herewith the discussion topics for our next edition of “Table Talk” to be held at Villa Bethel, Mougins at 12.30 p.m. on Friday 29th April 2005 (as agreed at our last meeting). These topics have been provided by Darby – subject only to a little restatement and reorganisation by me!

Topic 1

This week has seen what will probably be the most significant event this year for the immediate future of the Christian Church as a whole – the declaration that Cardinal Ratzinger would become Pope Benedict XVI. This prompts a number of questions:

- (a) Was he a good choice as Pope.
- (b) Is the Catholic church the *true* Christian church which Jesus asked Peter to found i.e. were protestant Christians “led astray” by new interpretations of scripture.
- (c) Did St Peter himself change prior ideas of Christianity in establishing the church and have the growth of traditions, even the establishment of the canon of scripture, constituted a “new interpretation” of the original Christianity of Jesus.

Topic 2

The idea of the uniqueness of Christianity prompts a number of questions:

- (a) How can we evangelise, or simply reach out to others, with our humility intact, whilst we remain certain that Christianity is the only true and valid path to God?
- (b) Is there in fact only *one* “True Path” or do all seekers after God find him in a different unique and personal way? If so does each of us have a personal God and is that what we mean by a “personal relationship” with God.

Topic 3

The ideas of “prayer” and listening to God prompt a number of questions:

- (a) As Christians we are told to lose our self will and listen to the voice of God, but how can we hear God? Is it through concerted effort such as prayer or is a moment by moment communion possible?
- (b) Catholic Christians frequently direct their prayers to Mary. Some even pray to the Pope or their dead husband. Are we all praying to the same God?
- (c) Should we pray for what we want or for what God wants?
- (d) If we have lost our self will isn't a consequence that we don't need to pray *for* anything, but simply listen to God in perfect communion with him?

Topic 4

T Merton wrote “The man of faith who has never experienced doubt is not a man of faith” and “It is not the suppression of doubt. You overcome it by going through it.” This prompts a number of questions about faith and doubt:

- (a) Is it really possible to have faith without ever experiencing doubt?

- (b) Do we believe that doubt is a necessary part of faith?
- (c) Does the Christian church acknowledge the validity of doubt, or has it become defensive and increasingly a club for believers only?

Suggested Answers

Topic 1

- (a) I consider that he was probably not the best choice for Pope. He is believed to be extremely conservative theologically and this will probably make it difficult to continue the initiatives of reconciliation with other denominations started and advanced under Pope John. Also there are deep divisions within the German churches. I think Christoph Schonborn might have had better reconciliatory qualifications, Francis Arinze might have been better for dealing with Islam (if that had been regarded as a high priority). Also with 40% of Catholics in South America, a South American Pope could have made sense. Possible candidates would have been Jose Maria Bergoglio (from Argentina), Claudio Hummes (from Brazil) or Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga (from Honduras).
- (b)
- (c) The Catholic church certainly derives directly from the original Christian churches founded by the apostles (and in that sense might be said to be the true Christian church) – indeed the very name derives from the Greek “Katholikos” or universal, but there is little evidence that Peter had supreme authority or indeed that there was any established hierarchic system of authority in Apostolic times.

Certainly, at least until the sixth century, the Metropolitan bishops (especially those in important centres such as Alexandria) had great independence. I consider that the elevation of Peter to a position of supreme authority rests on shaky scriptural foundations. Certainly Jesus did restore him and commission him at “the breakfast on the beach” (John 21) – but this falls far short of giving him supreme authority (or indeed any authority at all). A better text from the Catholic viewpoint is Matthew 16:17-19 (Peter as the foundation of the church), but again this does not give Peter supreme authority. It is clear that Peter himself never claimed supreme authority and indeed Paul might well have been more influential than Peter in the early church.

The first bishop of Rome to declare himself the successor of St Peter (the forerunner of Papal authority) was Leo in 440. Gregory I was given the title Pope by the Emperor Phocas in 604, but refused it, however, his successor Boniface III accepted it. Under papal authority, many new doctrines and forms were added, such as the doctrine of purgatory, the required use of Latin in prayer and worship and the saying of prayers to Mary, dead saints and angels.

It must also be remembered that the Protestant churches were not the first to split off from the original Catholic church, that (dis)honour belongs to the Eastern Orthodox churches which began to split away at the beginning of the fourth century and largely completed that split after being unable to accept “The Definition” (of the nature of Christ) of the council of Chalcedon in 451 (although many writers assign 1054 as the date of final separation). New interpretations of fundamental matters such as the nature of Christ and the nature of the Trinity cannot be regarded as settled until at least the end of the fifth century. Certainly, many doctrinal issues were not even formulated, let alone decided, until well after the time of the Apostles. Thus, the development of doctrine and disagreement within the church has been a feature from

the beginning. No doubt that is why Jesus prayed that we would be one even as he was one with the Father (John 17:11).

The Protestant churches split away mainly in protest against the abuses of power which had become rife in the Catholic church in the middle ages, principally the selling of indulgences to pay for the building of St Peter's in Rome (it is true that these indulgences were for an abatement of punishment in purgatory rather than for the forgiveness of sin, but the practice was still shameful) and Luther's theology of "justification by faith". Unfortunately, this church split, even though well justified, led to much dreadful strife and war, especially the 30 years war.

Partly as a reaction to the abuse of power within the church, Luther took the radical view of replacing the authority of the church with the authority of scripture, thus the exact nature of the canon of scripture took on a new importance. At the Council of Trent in 1546, the Catholic church recognised 27 books of the New Testament, the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament and the six books of the Apocrypha as the canon of scripture. Calvin and the Reformed churches generally recognised the same canon with the exception of the Apocrypha. The OT canon was already largely established in the time of Jesus (he quoted from many of these books during his ministry – although it is notable that he never quoted from the Apocrypha), whilst the closed and limited nature of the NT canon is justified by the Apostolic authority of the writers, which is not possessed by writings which have been excluded from the NT canon (further the 27 books of the NT were all recognised at least somewhere as part of the canon during the lifetime of the Apostles and the current list was settled in two lists by 230 and in one list by 367). I consider that the exclusion of the Apocrypha is also justified on the grounds that contemporary historians such as Philo and Josephus did not accept the Apocrypha.

Arguably then, the theological divergence of the Protestant churches represented a return to original biblically based Christianity – which was much more in line with the teachings of Jesus than the practices of the Catholic church.

Topic 2

- (a) We must always remember that our path to God and our salvation derive not from any goodness of our own but entirely from the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross. Justification is by faith not by works; we can contribute precisely nothing to our salvation. We must lose the "I" and preach only Jesus Christ and him crucified. Keeping the foregoing at the forefront of our minds should enable us to retain a suitable humility.
- (b) We are only given knowledge of one true path. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). In Romans 10: 9-10 Paul tells us that to be saved we must believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and acknowledge him with our lips as our Lord. There *may* be other paths to God (it is not for me to judge others – that's God's job!), but we are only told of *one* path. Thus to secure our salvation we must follow the one certain path we have been given and encourage others to do the same (evangelise).

Topic 3

- (a) We can hear God and commune with him in concentrated prayer, in the quiet of the countryside (God's creation) and even in the hubbub of everyday life. In his book "The Practice of the Presence of God", Brother Lawrence states "the means of attaining the presence of God are (i) ... purity of life, (ii) faithfulness in the practice of this presence [of God] and in keeping the soul's gaze on God, within which always all is done quietly, humbly, lovingly and without giving way to any disturbance or anxiety." (iii) ... take care lest [your] mind wander and return to the world around. [You] must keep it fastened on God alone, so that, seeing itself thus constrained and controlled by the will, in the end it finds itself constrained to abide in God." I recommend this book.
- (b) Prayers to Mary, dead saints etc seem to have been introduced quite late by Papal authority. I consider this unscriptural at best and possibly anti-scriptural. We are told to worship God and him alone. We are also told that Jesus is the only way to the Father. There is great danger in praying to dead relatives. What you contact may well not be God at all, but an evil spirit which can do great harm.
- (c) There is no harm in praying for what we want, just as we might ask our earthly father for a new bicycle. Of course, God will grant our requests only if they are suitable for us and within his will, although there are some scriptural indications that prayer and supplication can change the will of God. Certainly, there is much scriptural evidence that God wants to be his partners in managing the world – what a privilege!
- (d) I think (c) above answers this.

Topic 4

- (a) I don't think so. I think that he who says he has never doubted *anything* about our faith, even for an instant, is not being honest with us or himself. It is in wrestling with, working through and resolving these doubts that our faith grows and becomes more mature.
- (b) Yes see (a) above.
- (c) Possibly some churches are like that, but I hope we are not like that in Holy Trinity, Cannes.