

Remembering the Lord's Death

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Occasionally while my wife and I are away from our home church and in the company of some Roman Catholic friends, we will attend worship in the community of faith more familiar to them; a local Catholic parish. Recently we did worship with the Roman believers and I found the service to be both biblically sound and rewarding. I listened closely to the theology being expressed in the liturgy, the hymns and choruses that were sung and the homily offered by the priest. Even having done so with a critical analysis in mind, I found that what was said there would not have been disturbing to either Luther or Calvin (former Roman Catholics and reformers), and certainly not to Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, or Thomas Aquinas. In fact, it was a very serious and solemn worship experience, not the least bit "seeker friendly" as so many of the evangelical churches tend to be in these days. There were no jokes, no dramas, no worship teams clapping their hands, no drums and guitars, no contemporary solos and no choir singing an anthem. The entire service was serene, reverent and God honoring and because it focused on Christ's death, it recalled to my mind the great sacrifice that my personal Lord and Savior had made for me.

The priest performed an infant baptismal service that day, a rite that is practiced in many of our Protestant denominations (I.e. Reformed Presbyterians, Anglicans, Lutherans), but one to which I am personally, theologically opposed. However, that did not deter my appreciation for the value of my worship experience. I am often called to teach, preach and worship in Wesleyan Arminian and Pentecostal services where their theology and mine differ considerably, but that does not dissuade the joy that I have in coming to the throne of grace with my brothers and sisters in Christ. I have the same opinion of my Roman Catholic brethren.

As most of us know, the Mass is a celebration and a remembrance of the death of Christ and the Eucharist is observed during each Mass as a part of that time of remembering. Every true believer knows what the Lord told His followers concerning the bread; "This is my body, which is for you; do this **in remembrance of me**" and also what He said of the cup of wine, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this whenever you drink it, **in remembrance of me.**" The remembering relates to His death. (Emphasis added)

Paul added to that statement by saying that whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion as it is known to Protestants, or The Eucharist as it is called by the Roman Catholics, we should be cognizant of our Lord in respect to three time frames: "For **whenever** you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the **Lord's death** until **he comes.**" (I Corinthians 11:26; emphasis added) That is a time honored statement having to do with the present "whenever you eat...and drink..." the past, "...the Lord's death..." and the future "...until he comes." Note that the Eucharistic or Holy Communion worship experience is a specific proclamation of the Lord's death.

When I was first saved of the Lord (1970), the fellowship wherein my family worshiped was replete with religious bigots; people who thought that the Pope was the Antichrist and that all Roman Catholics were destined to Hell and a Godless eternity. As such they mocked the crucifix that hangs in the sanctuaries and homes of Roman Catholic people, saying "They still have Jesus on the cross. Our cross, the one that hangs in our church or around our necks, is empty."

That was the very kind of high minded criticism of fellow believers that the Lord detests (Proverbs

6:17, 19). Those people not only had a low opinion of Roman Catholics, but Protestant liberals and Pentecostals as well. Their religious bigotry flew directly in the face of our Lord's high priestly prayer in John chapter 17 where He pled, "May they be brought to **complete unity**, to let the world know that you sent me." That unity has been referred to by some as the "final apologetic."

Having thought about those differences of opinion and those separate styles of worship and symbols of our faith, I have concluded that neither the Roman Catholic nor the Protestant church has a true grip on the finished work of Christ. Whether one remembers the death of Christ by seeing Him hang on a cross dripping with blood (I might add, a most graphic way to recall and to appreciate His suffering) or simply by gazing at the empty cross, the real significance of what He did is not depicted by either of those symbols.

If we were to be entirely, theologically correct, our churches would have a painted mural on the wall at the front of the sanctuary, showing an empty tomb, with the stone rolled away. The thieves who died on either side of Christ also bled and suffered (and deservedly so), and later their crosses were also empty. The grand and final difference however, is that today their bones are still in their tombs (though one of them now resides with Christ) while our Lord arose from the dead and now sits at the right hand of the Father in Heaven interceding for us. Christ's resurrection is known as the "consummate apologetic," the profound evidence that He is in fact God who was made man, for our benefit and who paid the penalty of sin for all who believe; the elect of God.

Paul reminded us, "If there is no resurrection of the dead then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." Our empty cross does no more to prove Christ's resurrection than the Roman crucifix. What really proves His resurrection in our day is the witness that we are one in the body and Spirit. Our unwillingness to accept the Roman Catholic believer is anathema to the Lord. His deepest desire is for our unity in Spirit, if not in practice.

St Francis of Assisi is known to have said, "It is the responsibility of every Christian to witness each day, all day, and if necessary to speak." Talk is cheap, but the true test of our faith rests in our actions. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." He also said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another." That love should extend to all believers, in all forms of the Christian faith.

I find that too many of us forget the Lord's death, the event remembered at each Mass that is performed by each priest, on a daily basis in most Roman parishes. The Bible is replete with passages that recall that event and its importance to our memories.

"For if, when we were God's enemies we were reconciled to him through the **death** of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life?" (Romans 5: 10)

The Roman Mass reminded me that it was the death of Christ that reconciled me to God and my Reformed faith tells me that His life, lived in perfection, earned for Him a human righteousness that was imputed to me at the time of my spiritual awakening and new birth.

“He **died** for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.” (I Thessalonians 5:10) The Roman Mass was a great reminder for me that I am now alive with Christ here on earth and that my true life, the life of my soul, will continue in and with Him eternally after I have fallen a sleep in physical death.

“So this weak brother, for whom Christ **died**, is destroyed by your knowledge.” (I Corinthians 8:11) Many of us in the evangelical community of faith know more, theologically speaking, because we have been exposed to the truth more frequently and in greater depth. But those to whom much has been given have a greater responsibility to accept and treat with respect those weaker, regenerated brethren who remain in the Roman Catholic community of faith. Francis Schaeffer once said, “There is nothing so ugly as a Christian orthodoxy without understanding and without compassion.”

I am a five point Calvinist, and firmly and comfortably situated in my Reformed theological persuasion, but I agree with Dr Schaeffer that we must be more tolerant of those who have not yet learned the true-truth as presented most clearly in the Holy Scriptures; whether those in error be in the Roman Catholic or the Eastern Orthodox fellowships or some Protestant denomination.

The present Pope, contrary to the opinion of some of the more bigoted Christians in our midst, is not the embodiment of the antichrist. On the contrary he is firmly convinced of the validity and veracity of the Word and though we may differ on non-essential points of doctrine, he is fundamental in his belief regarding the deity of Christ, His miraculous virgin birth, His substitution atonement for our sins, His resurrection and His eventual return. He was the biblical mentor to the Pope (John Paul) who preceded him. Pope Benedict's childhood hero was Dietrich Bonhoeffer and *The Cost of Discipleship* is in plain view on his book shelf.

I would encourage all evangelicals to read all of the passages found in the Holy Scriptures that pertain to the death of Christ and then with that perspective in mind, to attend a local Roman Catholic Mass and listen very closely to the words that are being sung and spoken. You will be surprised to find out how scripturally sound that liturgy is. If the believer prefers the more contemporary style of worship, many Roman churches offer a charismatic Mass with joyful singing, hand clapping, raising of the hands and choruses led by guitars. Only after listening intently to the words can one truly get a feeling for the very theological nature of the service. Unfortunately, many Christians pay little attention to the theological significance of their own worship services, being more into the feeling rather than the facts of their faith.

I close with sage words from C.H. Spurgeon, a Baptist preacher with a firm commitment to the truths of reformed theology: “We do not attain heaven by scoring one hundred percent in theology. If every person who was muddle-headed in one or another area of truth was thereby deprived of heaven, that place would be very confined.”