

# ***“The Roots of Christianity”***

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***Matthew 13:1-9***

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I heard that Pope Benedict had a little trouble on Fifth Avenue during his visit to New York.

After getting all of Pope Benedict’s luggage loaded into the limo (and he doesn’t travel light), the driver noticed that the Pontiff was still standing on the curb. “Excuse me Your holiness,” said the driver, “Would you please take your seat so we can leave?” The Pope replied, “Well, to tell you the truth, they never let me drive at the Vatican, and I’d really like to drive today. After all I just celebrated my birthday.” “I’m sorry,” said the driver, “I cannot let you drive. I’ll lose my job. And what if something happens?” (All the while thinking he should have stayed at home today.) The Pope says, “There might be something extra in it for you.” Reluctantly the driver gets in the back seat of the limousine, and the Pope climbs in behind the wheel. The driver quickly regrets his decision – for the Pope puts it in gear and speeds off, reaching 100 miles per hour!

And before the driver can say anything, a siren is heard. The Pope pulls over and winds down his window. The police officer takes one look at him, goes back to his motorcycle and gets on the radio. “I need to talk to the chief.” the officer says to the dispatcher. The chief gets on the radio and the officer tells him that he has stopped a limo going 100 mph. “So bust him!” the chief declares. The officer replies, “I don’t think we want to do that, he’s really important.” The chief exclaims, “All the more reason!” “No, I mean really important.” Said the officer. The chief asks, “Who is it, the Mayor?” Officer: “Bigger!” The chief: “Governor?” Officer: “Bigger!” “Well,” said the chief, “Who is it?” Officer: “I think it might be God!” Chief: “What makes you think it’s God?” Officer; “He’s got the Pope as his chauffeur!”

Well, of course the Pope would never speed! But, he was recently in our country, visiting our capital and New York City. Pope Benedict XVI was well received by Catholics and non-Catholics. I was impressed with his pastoral spirit, that he exhibited toward his flock; the 70 million Roman Catholics in America.

As you know, one third of the world’s population is Christian (one in three). Half of the world’s Christians are Roman Catholic, and Pope Benedict is their leader. This is a person of great importance – religiously, and culturally. Again, his visit to our nation was very positive! He was not the “Rottweiler” of his past, the defender of doctrine. Instead, certainly holding firm with his church’s teachings, as affirmed and confirmed by him, he reached out as a pastor to his people, a wise and sincere move. Of course, we Protestants (of many stripes) see things differently. Authority is placed on a different level. History, Christian beginnings, ecclesiology, and more are interpreted differently.

An interviewer once asked Pope Benedict, when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger, if he had ever thought of converting to Protestantism. At once he exclaimed, “Never!...from a purely psychological point of view I have never been attracted to it.” (Good answer! Seeing he is now the Pope!)

No surprise. My answer goes the other way. With respect for the Roman Catholic church from which

we Protestants came, and owe much to, what with my problem with authority (a Protestant curse – or virtue) my “never!” goes in the opposite direction. But, thank God we Christians, especially those of us who are more related than we’ve been taught (due to extreme family divisions) Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions are directly related. By all means we are different! Yet, foundationally we share much in common.

Respectfully, issues of authority, birth control, ordination, and what designates a true church, to name a few – I disagree. We disagree. But, just for a brief time, I want to uplift a fundamental agreement that Pope Benedict has been declaring with passion and resolve. He is immensely concerned that we, Christians, both in Europe and the United States are neglecting the deep roots of our faith. So much of who and what we are today – “sacred and secular” we owe to our Christian faith.

He is greatly concerned with what he calls the “dictatorship of relativism” – a belief “that does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” He goes on to say, “Being an adult means having a faith which does not follow the waves of today’s fashions or the latest novelties.”

He is on to something!!

This Zeitgeist – this mindset – of relativism must be approached through “reason”, not “emotion”.

In this morning’s text, Jesus is teaching his followers about how to live. He uses a parable. It’s about a farmer planting seeds. His listeners knew all about planting and harvesting. They knew it was important to have good soil, and for the seeds to get down into the soil so their roots would take hold, and give a great harvest. Recall the seeds that fell on rocky ground. Not much soil. What happened? The seeds sprang up immediately, but they were on the surface, they had no depth, they were not where they needed to be, deep down into the soil! The sun comes out – scorches and burns them and they wither away!

Why? They had no root!

Friends, how deep do your Christian roots go? How much time have you given to irrigating, tilling the soil, to strengthen your roots?

How much time have you spent studying, contemplating, the values – worldviews that are out there? For too many, the default position is “relativism” unquestioned. I’m not declaring dogmatism, but searching, studying – active engagement with what is culturally presented as “just the way things are!”

G. K. Chesterton years ago argued that men and women are either created in “the image of God”, or they are “a disease of the dust.” If we are only the meat and bones of materiality, what are the limits of human exploitation?

Among the roots of Christianity is the belief, conviction, worldview that the universe is rational and that there is a God that bestows value and dignity on life!

With this the roots will go deep, and bring a harvest of fulfillment!

Amen.