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WHAT I REALLY ADMIRE ABOUT NEWMAN

By David Phipps

In the midst of the media enthusiasm about the Papal visit I discovered that Benedict and I have something in common. Apparently, he began to study John Henry Newman as a student in seminary. I did the same some thirty years ago, but I don't think he did it at Trinity College, Bristol! Despite our many differences with him, those of us who walk in the tradition of the Protestant Reformers and the Puritans share a common respect with him for one aspect of Newman's thought – his opposition to liberalism and his insistence upon what he called 'the dogmatic principle.'

As the Pope keeps stressing, we live in an age of theological relativism, where one man's opinion is counted as good as any other's. The concept of absolute truth seems to have disappeared. This insight, and his opposition to it, is pure Newman. It runs all the way through his life. The idea was planted in Newman by Thomas, Scott. As a boy Newman read Scott's *Force of Truth*, (a small book, still in print with Banner of Truth, and well worth reading). In the *Apologia* Newman freely admits his debt to the Evangelical Bible commentator, saying that Scott

*followed truth wherever it led him, beginning with Unitarianism, and ending with a zealous faith in the Holy Trinity. It was he who planted deep in my mind that fundamental truth of religion.*¹

And when, in 1879, as a very old man, he was made a cardinal he said in his biglietto speech that

I rejoice to say, to one great mischief I have from the first opposed myself. For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion.... Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily.... It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion.

That's as good a definition of 'theological relativism' as one could find anywhere, but he goes further than that. He opposes the idea, which was gaining ground then and is current in society today, that what matters is the effect that an idea has upon us, rather than the truth of the idea. This reduces faith to nothing more than a matter of sentiment. He writes that

*There is in the literary world just now an affectation of calling religion a "sentiment;" and it must be confessed that it is usually nothing more with our own people, educated or rude.... I do not say so of old Calvinism or Evangelical Religion; I do not call the religion of Leighton, Beveridge, Wesley, Thomas Scott, or Cecil a mere sentiment; nor do I so term the high Anglicanism of the present generation. But these are only denominations, parties, schools, compared with the national religion of England in its length and breadth.... English religion.... consists, not in rites or creeds, but mainly in having the Bible read in Church, in the family, and in private.... It has been comparatively careless of creed and catechism; and has in consequence shown little sense of the need of consistency in the matter of its teaching.*²

This attitude, which Newman resisted, can sadly be found in modern Evangelical circles. It is graphically described by Packer and Parrett:

In group Bible studies, generally, participants are led to look directly for personal devotional applications without first contemplating the writers' points about the greatness, goal, methods, and

*mystery of God. In putting together Christian books and magazines for popular reading... the story is the same: it is assumed that our reaction to realities is more significant than any of the realities to which we react. Thus we learn to cultivate a mode of piety that rests upon a smudgy, deficient, and sometimes misleading conception of who and what the God we serve really is.*³

If this commitment to absolute truth is correct, then it forces us to acknowledge that there is a huge difference between Rome and the churches of the Reformation. We cannot fudge the issue. We might want to be charitable and think that we are all “basically on the same side,” but we need to face the fact that there is a huge doctrinal gulf. What about the doctrine of transubstantiation? Is it true, or is it “repugnant to the plain words of Scripture” and “overthrows the nature of a Sacrament.” (Art. 28) We cannot believe both no matter how hard we try. Again, do we believe that the mass is a sacrifice which truly takes away sin, or do we believe that “The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone,” and therefore that the sacrifices of the mass are “blasphemous fables” and “dangerous deceits.” (Art. 31) We cannot believe both. Again, the 39 Articles teach that “we are justified by Faith only,” but the Council of Trent said that “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified... let him be anathema.” We cannot believe both. And where do we find our final authority – in the Bible or in the Church – no one can have more than one ultimate court of appeal. Either one system is right, or the other, but they cannot both be right.

One of the things to admire about Newman is that he not only spoke about truth – he followed what he perceived to be true. When it became apparent that the bishops thought *Tract 90* incompatible with fundamental Anglican teaching, he began his preparations for moving to Rome. In the middle of the nineteenth century, this was a huge step, and one which was quite likely to cut him off from all his friends and family as he joined a despised minority which was suspected of being at best unpatriotic, and at worst treasonous. Indeed, there is no evidence that his sister, Harriet, ever spoke to him again. He saw that the two doctrinal systems were fundamentally incompatible, and that the differences could not be, as ARCIC tried to do, explained away and minimized, so he left the Church of England.

If the churches of the Reformation are right, this means that Rome is wrong. There is no other way of putting it, but this is not to say that we have a right to unchurch Roman Catholics. Calvin concedes this when he says

*While we are unwilling simply to concede the name of Church to the Papists, we do not deny that there are churches among them.*⁴

Hooker taught the same. Walter Travers had taught that those who did not have the full light of the Gospel could not be saved. In one of his Sermons, Hooker opposed this and said, “I doubt not but God was merciful to save thousands of our fathers living in popish superstitions, inasmuch as they sinned ignorantly.”⁵

We have to say that some Roman Catholics might be Christians – we have all probably met some who show every sign of loving the Lord – although it would be in spite of and not because of Roman dogma, and it must be harder now than in the sixteenth century since doctrinal attitudes have hardened.

So Newman believes firmly in the concept of absolute truth, but this is not just abstract. He believes that the truth has to be taught to the whole church so that the religion of the laity might go beyond mere sentiment, and that they might be equipped to stand up for their faith. In 1851 he made a statement which was many years ahead of its time:

I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity; I am not denying you are such already: but I mean to be severe, and, as some would say, exorbitant in my demands, I wish you to enlarge your knowledge, to cultivate your reason, to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth, to learn to view things as they are, to understand how faith and reason stand to each other, what are the bases and principles of Catholicism, and where lie the main inconsistencies and absurdities of the Protestant theory.⁶

This finds emphatic support from Packer and Parrett:

In this we find that we see eye to eye with the late Pope John Paul II and his successor, Benedict XVI, and we are happy to be in their company at this point. Both have been clear and emphatic that in order to be fully useful, Christians must know their faith well. We could not agree more.⁷

There are many things about John Henry Newman (and Benedict XVI, his disciple) with which we must be forced to disagree, for Newman became a totally loyal son of the Roman Catholic Church, but with this we can agree wholeheartedly: that truth matters and that anything which is not true must be error. This is something which matters to the whole Christian Church. We must ensure that we, whatever our status and situation, have a firm grip upon the truth, and that we are prepared to stand up for it. As Benedict has been saying, we are in the middle of a battle!

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Apologia*, p. 5.
- 2) *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, London, 1891, pp. 56f.
- 3) *Grounded in the Gospel*, J.I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 11.
- 4) *Institutes*, 4:2:12.
- 5) *Sermon on Justification*, Oxford, 1845, Vol. 3, p. 543.
- 6) *Present Position of Catholics in England*, p. 390.
- 7) *Op. Cit.*, p. 9