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Pope Francis and his Protestant views

Bill Tammeus | May. 1, 2013 A small c catholic

I often tell people that if you lose your way in Reformed Tradition (read Presbyterian) theology [1], you can always go back to square one, which says, in essence, this: God is sovereign.

Or -- in wording I prefer now because most of us have no experience living under a sovereign -- God is gloriously free.

I thought about that the other day when I read something Pope Francis said in a book [2] he co-authored in 2010 as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Speaking about how he would converse with an atheist, Bergoglio wrote: "I would not tell him that his life is condemned because I am convinced that I have no right to pass judgment."

That, friends, is Reformed Tradition theology. It is up to God to determine who will have eternal life. It is not up to us. Even if you go to Reformed Tradition founder John Calvin's hard-to-follow concepts about predestination (to say nothing of double predestination), you discover that no human being can know for certain who is saved and who is condemned.

This very point once led my friend Kathleen Norris to write this in her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith [3]*: "It strikes me that only a French lawyer could have come up with so complex, if not bizarre, a justification for treating all people as if they could be among the elect, the chosen of God."

She's right. Even if you buy Calvinism's some-get-saved, some-get-damned-and-there's-nothing-you-can-do-about-it scheme, you don't know who is who, so you have to be nice to everyone on the theory that you may spend eternity with that person.

Which is pretty much what Bergoglio was saying in *On Heaven and Earth [4]*, co-written with Rabbi Abraham Skorka.

When I read what Bergoglio said on this subject, I had a provocative thought that I was tempted to throw into the lede of this column. Something like this: "Hey, Catholics: Do you know what you've done? You've chosen a Protestant pope."

But the day after I read the pope's words, I discovered that someone had beat me to that conclusion. Writer Jonathan Merritt asked this question [5] about Pope Francis in this Religion News Service piece: "... could the growing popularity (of Francis) among non-Catholics make him 'the first Protestant Pope?' "

Merritt added this: "The combination of the new Pope's concern for justice issues and his conservative theology seems to be appealing to many of these socially conscious Protestants." (I like what Merritt said, though I'm not happy he got the idea that Francis may be the first Protestant pope into print before I did. But let it go.)

Those of us in mainline Protestant churches (Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, etc.) have been long on social justice concerns and short on respect for hierarchical governance structures and fancy ritual.

We pay a price for this emphasis, but it's one we've been willing to pay. And it now appears to many of us that the new pope is intent on moving the Catholic church a bit closer to this Protestant approach.

Perhaps we could meet in the middle. We Protestants will add more ritual and you Catholics can decentralize your governance structure as together we wash the feet of the poor.

I know that sounds a bit facetious, but I'm serious. There is much we can learn from each other, and the learning of it might move us closer to some kind of reunification (at least of spirit) nearly 500 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses [6] to the cathedral door, thus (inadvertently) starting the Protestant Reformation.

We Protestants don't have our own pope to negotiate a grand bargain with Francis, but if he's really the first Protestant pope, problem solved. All we Protestants and you Catholics need to do to start is pay attention to the times he's standing on our common ground and join him there.

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[5] http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2013/04/10/is-francis-the-first-protestant-pope/
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