

Purgatory and Penance: Differences that Remain – the Impasse between Rome and Protestantism

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Introduction

The nineteenth century champion of conservative Calvinistic theology at Princeton Seminary, New Jersey, reminds us, when speaking of the Church of Rome's understanding of the sacraments and the means of grace, that 'she says that the power of a priest is above that even of angels and archangels'.¹ Whilst discussing his ordination on 18 October, 1951 as a priest of the Church of Rome, after four years of painstaking, incisive work in dogmatic and moral theology, the Mexican Cipriano Valdes Jaimes says that, on that day, through the laying on of hands by the bishop, I was given...the ability to forgive men's sins, both inside and outside the...confessional box. On that day I received the power to sacrifice Christ over again on an altar...I could now release souls from purgatory.²

Both quotations illustrate that the Roman doctrines of purgatory and penance are not mere trifles. Yes, it is true that they may be darling doctrines to those in communion with the Pope in Rome but, as they represent an integral part of that subtle and carefully worked out sacramental system by which it is alleged salvation comes to mankind, it is necessary that they be subjected to critical analysis to discover whether they cohere with or vitiate the apostolic doctrine of salvation presented and proclaimed in the Bible. To that end, two activities are necessary. First, the doctrines must be defined. And, secondly, the extent of their concurrence, or otherwise, with biblical truth must be assessed.

Although purgatory is mentioned first in the title, logic demands that we begin with a consideration of penance. For, in the Roman system, the so-called sacrament of penance is for this life and has to do with the remission of and punishment for sins committed after baptism, whereas purgatory is the term applied by Romanists to that state (or place) in which those who have died in a state of grace undergo the punishment still due to forgiven sins before they are admitted to the vision of the Divine Being in heaven.

Penance

Boettner reminds us that ‘in the Roman system penance is one of the seven sacraments, the fourth in the series’.³ Whilst William Webster, a former member of the Church of Rome, informs us that ‘the Roman Catholic Church claims that Christ established the priesthood for the specific purpose of dealing with men’s sins through private confession, absolution, and the assigning of penances to satisfy God’s justice’.⁴ The word penance is derived from the Latin word *poenitentia*, which in the Vulgate translates the Greek noun *metanoia*. This does not mean that the word repentance (the usual way of rendering the word *metanoia* in English) is not used in Roman circles but the translation of the related Greek verb in Matthew 3:2 as ‘Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven...’ (Douay Version) encouraged the medieval understanding that there is a defined and God-given sacrament called ‘penance’.⁵

Two distinctions should be remembered. First, in Roman use repentance or penitence is defined either as a virtue or a sacrament.⁶ As a virtue it is said to have three constituent parts: [1] sorrow for sin; [2] a determination to forsake sin; and [3] an intention to make satisfaction to God. As a sacrament it is said to be an ordinance instituted by Christ for the remission of sins committed after baptism.⁷ Two features of the sacrament can be defined, namely the act of the penitent and the act of the priest. Of the penitent three things are required. First, he is to be contrite, that is, sorrowful and remorseful. Secondly, he is to confess in the hearing of a priest all his mortal sins, remembering that a sin not confessed is a sin not forgiven. And thirdly, he is to make satisfaction for the sin or sins committed.

The necessity for this satisfaction is based upon the understanding that in sin there is both a *reatus culpae* and a *reatus poenae*. The former, namely the guilt by which one is bound as a result of sinning, is removed, along with the penalty of eternal death, by priestly absolution. But the latter, the temporal punishment to be endured for the sin committed, remains. Hence, the penitent is called to do penance. Of the priest two things are expected. First, the granting of absolution, which in the Roman system is more than a mere declaration. It is also said to be judicial and effective. And secondly, the assigning of certain works to be done by the penitent. Generally speaking today these, so the 1994 Catechism of Catholic Church informs us, may consist ‘of a prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbour, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear’.⁸



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The second distinction to be noted is that the word penance may be used in a broad or narrow way. When used in the broad sense it is said to refer in general terms to the two features just outlined. That is to say, to the act of confession by the penitent along with the granting of absolution and the assigning of penitential works by the priest. When used in the narrow sense the word penance refers to the specific works assigned by the priest and the performance of them by the penitent.⁹

We need to dig a little deeper. For, as we muse on these details, we find ourselves asking questions about the origin and development of these ideas. Scholars are united in saying that the sacrament of private penance was a comparatively late development. With the dawn of the third century, J. N. D. Kelly informs us, the rough outlines of a penitential discipline began to take shape but the system which appears to have existed at that time, and for centuries afterwards, involved public and not private penance. It had three features: [1] confession, [2] a period of penance and exclusion from communion, and [3] a formal absolution and restoration. The whole process was known as *exomologesis*.¹⁰ Essentially it was concerned with providing a discipline and way of restoration for those who sinned after baptism,¹¹ and was regarded as a 'second baptism'.¹²

Generally speaking the process entailed a sinner, either voluntarily or under the threat of excommunication, petitioning the bishop for penance. Once granted the petitioner was enrolled in the order of penitents, excluded from communion, and committed to a rigorous course of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The period appointed for this penitential discipline varied according to the gravity of the sin committed. At the end of the appointed time the sinner was adjudged reconciled and restored to the congregation of the faithful.¹³ Kelly draws our attention to three distinctive characteristics of the process as it existed in the third century. First, it was a discipline that could only be undergone once during a person's lifetime. Secondly, it was a formal and public act of reconciliation. And thirdly, it was characterized by open debate as to which sins required public penance. Basil provided a comprehensive list which included sins such as abortion, murder, bigamy and other sexual sins, but Gregory of Nyssa sought to reduce the list of serious misdeeds to the three capital sins of apostasy, adultery and murder.¹⁴ Furthermore, controversy arose over whether the church could offer forgiveness for the grave post-baptismal sins of adultery, apostasy, idolatry and



murder. Tertullian, for example, asserted that only God could forgive these sins, whilst Augustine and Cyprian insisted that there were no sins that the church could not remit. However, like, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, both Cyprian and Augustine were quite clear that forgiveness should be preceded by a long and rigorous period of penance.¹⁵

At least the first of these three features meant that with time the system would run into difficulties. In fact it broke down, and penance came to be postponed until as close to death as possible.¹⁶ That was inevitable if it could only be granted once in a lifetime. However, a new system emerged in the West which did not require a distinct order of penitents, which was not limited by the once in a lifetime rule, and which did not impose lifelong continence. It was administered by means of the Penitential Books which first appeared in the Celtic church in the sixth century. These books contain both directions for confessors, that is the people who heard detailed confessions of sin in secret, and lists of sins with a set of graded penances for each. At first absolution was withheld until the completion of the penance, but with time it was granted at the moment of confession, in other words, before the penance began. The penance itself, though, remained hard, long, and public, but the emerging use of variable and repeated penances was attacked at the Council of Toledo in 589 on the ground that it infringed the ancient discipline of public penance. Canon 11 states that—

In some churches of Spain, disorder in the ministry of penance has gained ground, so that people sin as they like, and again and again ask for reconciliation from the priest. This must no longer happen; but according to the old canons everyone who regrets his offence must first be excluded from communion, and must frequently present himself as a penitent for the laying on of hands. When his time of penance is over, then, if it seems good to the bishop, he may again be received to communion; if, however, during his time of penance or afterwards, he falls back into his old sin, he shall be punished according to the stringency of the old canons.¹⁷

However, within seventy years the new system was commended at the Council of Chalon-sur-Saone, which met between the years 647 and 653. As a result, its popularity and the influence of the Penitential Books spread rapidly in the West in the following centuries.



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These developments, as we have begun to see, were not trouble free. Generally speaking the penance consisted of fasts, of greater or lesser severity, pilgrimages, floggings and even imprisonment. However, long and hard penances inevitably interrupted ordinary everyday life and were frequently far from convenient. As a result, a bewildering variety of inconsistent penalties came to be recommended. The commutation of a penance on the payment of money was allowed. For example, a penance of a lengthy pilgrimage could be compressed into a single day by the payment of an appropriate sum and substitution emerged as an alternative to a specific penance. An appointed penance, for example, could be replaced by the recitation of the Psalter in a position of physical discomfort. These developments were frowned upon by some. The Carolingian reformers denounced certain inconsistent practices at Chalon-sur-Saone in 813, whilst at the Council of Paris in 829 the bishops were instructed to destroy by fire all unauthorised texts used by confessors.

Notwithstanding these problems, it is widely accepted that the developments at that time, and in subsequent centuries, paved the way for the emergence of the modern practice of private penance characterized, as we have seen, by the threefold discipline of confession, absolution and a formal penance. Certainly this procedure was established by the early twelfth century, but it was mandated in a systematic way at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Canon 25 of that Council obliged every Christian to confess in penance his or her sins to the parish priest at least once a year. It is imperative to understand that according to the Roman system post-baptismal sins must, in part, be atoned for by the punishment of the sinner. Two points should be remembered. First, the word penance literally means *poena*, or punishment. Secondly, as Cunningham says—

It is the doctrine of the Church of Rome, that no mortal sin, committed after baptism, is forgiven to any man, except in and through the sacrament of penance, i.e., without confession, absolution, and satisfaction—or unless it be confessed to a priest—or unless he pronounce the words of absolution, and unless the penitent perform the satisfaction imposed upon him.¹⁸

It is true that the essential part played by Christ's atonement on the cross in the redemption of sin is not overlooked but the extent of that atonement is



misunderstood and great weight is attached to the compensation offered by the penitent. Hence the word 'satisfaction' can be said to be a synonym for the penance itself. Consider, for example, this argument presented in the much heralded and contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—

Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sins. This satisfaction is also called 'penance'.¹⁹

Notice that we are told that the penitent sinner must make satisfaction for the sin or sins he has committed. A careful reading of both the Council of Trent and the newest official Catechism of the Catholic Church of Rome reveal that this teaching is cleverly supported, but the arguments used can justifiably be described as specious. To quote Cunningham again—

Rome puts the forgiveness of... all post-baptismal sin, as they call it, upon a different footing, and introduces into this department some new principles and arrangements, which are opposed to the word of God, but admirably adapted to promote the general designs of Popery, and the interests of the priesthood.²⁰

The following fundamental errors may be adduced. First, there is no biblical warrant to assert that Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church; above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion.²¹ It is true that some ingenious arguments have been put forward to support the view that a sacrament of private penance existed from earliest times.²² On the contrary, it is well-established, as Kelly avers, that as late as the beginning of the third century there were 'still no signs' of this so-called sacrament.²³ Moreover, we search the Scriptures in vain to find any record of our Lord's institution of this practice. The Church of Rome relies upon John 20:22-23 and also Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, and uses these passages to teach that Christ has, 'by virtue of his divine authority' given men the power to forgive sins 'in his name', and that he imparted to 'his apostles his own power to forgive sins' and 'the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church'.²⁴ But,



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as A. A. Hodge says, 'the power of the keys, whatever it was, was not made to the ministry as such, for in Matthew 18:1-18, Christ was addressing the body of the disciples, and the primitive ministers never claimed or exercised the power in question.'²⁵

Secondly, there is no biblical warrant to assert that 'the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification'.²⁶ Rome does not embrace the biblical and apostolic understanding of the word justification. In Scripture the word is primarily a judicial or legal term, and refers to a person's standing or status before God. It is declarative in nature. It 'is the act of God whereby a sinner is accepted and set free from all judgment and condemnation on the basis of Christ's righteousness which is accounted to him'.²⁷ The Council of Trent, however, teaches that justification entails not just the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, the instrumental cause of which is the sacrament of baptism.²⁸ Rome proclaims that, as a priest is required for the impartation of grace at baptism, so a priest is required for the restoration of grace at penance. Again, there is no Scriptural warrant for this teaching. This being so, we are obliged to conclude that the claim of the catechism is, at the best, spurious and, at the worst, unquestionably erroneous.

Thirdly, there is no biblical warrant to assert that confession to a priest is essential. The new Catechism, after stating that 'confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance', endorses the teaching of the Council of Trent which states that 'all mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession'.²⁹ The Catechism also says that, although not strictly necessary, the 'confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church'.³⁰ Furthermore, the traditional teaching of the Church of Rome affirms that 'all sins must be confessed without reserve, and in all their details and qualifying circumstances. If a mortal sin is not confessed, it is not pardoned, and if the omission is wilful, it is sacrilege, and greater guilt is incurred'.³¹

Protestants quite rightly point out that the necessity of auricular confession to a priest is not taught in the Scriptures and that it 'perverts the whole plan of salvation, by making necessary the mediation of the priest between the



Christian and Christ'.³² In the Bible the sinner is encouraged to confess his sins immediately and directly to God. Moreover, he is reassured that, without the necessity of the so-called sacrament of penance, and on the ground of the satisfaction made by Christ by means of the once and for all propitiatory sacrifice of himself on the cross, God 'is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness'.³³ It is true that James enjoins believers to confess their sins to one another³⁴ but that of which he speaks has nothing to do with the obtaining of authoritative absolution. Indeed, as Johnstone remarks, 'by a clearly marked transition, the apostle' passes 'from his reference to the office-bearers of the church, to the *brethren generally*' and, what is more, it is evident that 'the confession enjoined is *mutual*'.³⁵

Fourthly, there is no biblical warrant to assert that 'bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"'.³⁶ The language of the Catechism has been carefully chosen. But we should not be duped by the new presentation. Any reasonable contextual analysis of paragraph 1449 must conclude that Rome still embraces her traditional notion of priestly absolution. The paragraph reads—

The formula of absolution used in the Latin Church expresses the essential elements of this sacrament: the Father of mercies is the source of all forgiveness. He effects reconciliation through the Passover of his Son and the gift of his Spirit, through the prayer and ministry of the Church:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and resurrection of his Son,
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.³⁷

What is significant here is that reconciliation is linked to the ministry, by which is meant the sacramental priesthood, of the church. Hence, it affirms that God is the 'source of all forgiveness', and the absolution itself concludes with the



priest saying, 'I absolve you from your sins.' In the Roman conception of things this absolution is not merely declarative. It is also authoritative and effectual. This is in stark contrast to the Protestant understanding of John 20:23 and the power committed to ministers to forgive sin. Thomas Watson's judicious words represent a fair and accurate statement of the biblical position.

Ministers cannot remit sins authoritatively and effectually, but only declaratively. They have a special office and authority to apply the promises of pardon to broken hearts. When a minister sees one humbled for sin, but afraid God has not pardoned him, and is ready to be swallowed up of sorrow; for the easing of the man's conscience, he may, in the name of Christ, declare to him, that he is pardoned. He does not forgive sin by his own authority, but as a herald, in Christ's name, pronounces a man's pardon. As under law, God cleansed the leper, and the priest pronounced him clean, so God, by his prerogative, forgives sin, and the minister pronounces forgiveness to the penitent sinner. Power to forgive sins authoritatively in his own name, was never granted to any mortal man.³⁸

Fifthly, there is no biblical warrant to assert that the sinner 'must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins'.³⁹ The Catechism is at pains to say that 'only God forgives sins',⁴⁰ and that Christ 'alone expiated our sins once for all'.⁴¹ Yet it qualifies these statements by asserting that the sinful members of the church must go to a priest for absolution and that, having found, through the sacrament of penance, forgiveness and exemption from the liability to eternal punishment which the sin deserved, they remain liable to a temporal punishment to be inflicted by God on account of it. The Church of Rome teaches that the trials and afflictions experienced by justified people are strictly and properly penal in character, and that they are therefore part of this temporal punishment. It is not to be doubted that, in the providence of God, true trials faced by believers aid their sanctification but to assert that they are always strictly and properly penal is to claim something that the Scriptures do not teach. Moreover, there is no scriptural justification to limit the nature and extent of Christ's atoning sacrifice. No matter how much she may protest otherwise, the logical consequence of Rome's teaching concerning penance is that Christ's death has not completely satisfied the demands of God's justice. Yet the apostle Paul teaches that 'when you were dead in your sins and in the



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uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away by nailing it to the cross'.⁴²

He claims, as do the other apostles, that *all* our sins were placed upon Christ and that he has paid the *entire* penalty for them. Hence, as the apostle John states, Jesus Christ is 'the propitiation for our sins'.⁴³ He has fully satisfied God's just demands by bearing the wrath and judgement of God for all our sins in his body on the cross. Because he has paid the complete penalty due no further sacrifice or satisfaction is required by God for any of them.

And sixthly, there is no biblical warrant to teach that penance is a vital element of repentance. Rather, careful consideration of the matter leads one to conclude, with Webster, that the 'dogma of penance is the antithesis of the biblical teaching on repentance, for it denies the very essence of the meaning of grace itself'.⁴⁴ Grace, in Scripture, is always unmerited. On the one hand Rome appears to endorse this when she states that 'grace is *favour*, the *free* and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life'.⁴⁵ But, on the other hand, she clearly undermines the biblical concept when she adds—

since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.⁴⁶

In so speaking she limits grace to being help from God and she turns salvation into an experience that is at least partially earned. Repentance, Packer reminds us 'is a fruit of true faith, which is itself a fruit of regeneration. But in actual life, repentance is inseparable from faith, being the negative aspect (faith is the positive aspect) of turning to Christ as Saviour and Lord'. Hence Webster avers that—

repentance means a heart forsaking of sin and a turning to Christ for forgiveness by trusting in his finished work. Christ has made a full atonement for sin. He has borne the full wrath of God against it. We are, therefore,



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called upon to confess our sins directly to God and to recognize and appropriate the forgiveness already secured in the death of Christ. To add one's own works is to pervert the atonement of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Sadly that is something which Rome does.

Purgatory

Some may object that, thus far, nothing has been said on the subject of indulgences, a subject clearly related to the Roman sacrament of penance. This matter will be taken up, in what follows, as we address the question of purgatory. Webster informs us that—

where the works of merit, penance, indulgences and the eucharist have been insufficient to deal with the temporal punishment due to sin, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sufferings of purgatory are required to 'purge' the soul from the last remnants of sin and thereby enable the individual to enter heaven.⁴⁸

Purgatory, therefore, is a supposed intermediate state, or place, between this existence and heaven. It is the place 'of punishment and purification where the souls of those who have died in a state of grace undergo such punishment as is still due to forgiven sins and, perhaps, expiate their unforgiven venial sins, before being admitted to the Beatific vision'.⁴⁹

The new Catechism is explicit: this process of purification 'is entirely different from the punishment of the damned'.⁵⁰ Griffith Thomas informs us that 'it is well known, and, indeed, universally acknowledged that no doctrine of Purgatory was taught in the primitive church'.⁵¹ Rome admits the doctrine was formulated at the Councils of Florence (1439) and Trent (1545-63), and that it is founded on both tradition and the practice of prayer for the dead.⁵² It is also recognized that although Greek theologians first introduced the idea of purgatory and that the Greek church came to admit the existence of an intermediate state, unlike the Roman church in the west, she refrained from defining it so as not to blur the clear-cut alternative destinies of heaven and hell.⁵³ Webster argues that 'along with the papacy, the immaculate conception of Mary and the *Filioque* it has been a major point of contention between the Eastern Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic Churches throughout the centuries'.⁵⁴

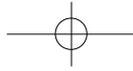


Furthermore, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the Roman doctrine of purgatory and a general belief in the idea of spiritual progress or cleansing in the intermediate state between death and resurrection which some Protestant theologians envisage.⁵⁵ The Roman doctrine, in essence, is part of a penal process. Beckwith reminds us that it is more subtle than the legalistic framework, popular with some Jewish rabbis, which presupposes that salvation is by works and that some special provision akin to purgatory is needed for those whose good and bad deeds are fairly evenly balanced.⁵⁶ As we have seen, Rome asserts that salvation is by grace. However this claim is qualified by her insistence that sin has a double consequence. It renders us, so it is said, liable to both eternal punishment and temporal punishment. The former is remitted through forgiveness, and priestly absolution, but the latter must be paid by the sinner.

Further evidence for the sophisticated nature of this doctrine is derived from the fact that it is taught that if a sinner, by acts of penance, has fully paid the temporal punishment for which he is liable in this life then, on dying, he goes straight to heaven. However, if he has not made complete satisfaction in this life then the outstanding penalty is paid for in purgatory. For completeness, it should be noted that an impenitent sinner is sent straight to hell. This possibility does not just face the unbeliever. It appears that, in the Roman scheme, this is something that may be experienced by the impenitent who are guilty of unforgiven and unexpiated post-baptismal sins. As the Catechism states, speaking primarily to members of the Roman Church—

mortal sin is a radical possibility...It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is of the state of grace. If is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell.⁵⁷

The classic formulation of purgatory is found in the writings of Aquinas. He teaches that in purgatory any unforgiven guilt (*culpa*) of venial sins is expiated and any outstanding punishment (*poena*) for both mortal and venial sins, still remaining at the point of death, is borne. Moreover, he along with other scholastic theologians, taught that the smallest pain in purgatory is greater than the greatest pain on earth.



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This all sounds very depressing but Roman Catholics find some relief in the curious and unsustainable belief that certain works done by saints and martyrs gain extra merit above what is necessary for them personally to earn salvation. This idea arose late in the history of the church, as did the notion that the merit accrued from these works of supererogation are stored in a treasury from which the church, on the authorization of the pope, can draw and apply to individual Christians. Ott is of the opinion that the existence of a *thesaurus ecclesiae*, and the teaching that the church has power over it, emerged at the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁵⁸ There is evidence that indulgences were first introduced some two centuries earlier.

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines an indulgence as—

a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sin whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.⁵⁹

It also informs us that there are two types of indulgences.⁶⁰ A *partial* indulgence removes only part of the temporal punishment due to sin, whilst a *plenary* indulgence removes all of it. Furthermore, it is taught that ‘indulgences may be applied to the living or the dead’.⁶¹ It is a fact of history that the sale of indulgences was a precipitating cause of the Reformation. What is more, it was not just the abuses of the Middle Ages that caused profound concern. Christian people came to see that, along with the notion of purgatory, the whole doctrine is built on an untenable foundation. The following points are surely worthy of mention.

First, the most obvious and decisive argument against these doctrines is that neither are taught in the Bible. As Charles Hodge says, and as we have seen, this fact is virtually admitted by their advocates.⁶² Secondly, both doctrines contradict the scriptural teaching that we are saved by grace and not by works. Works and grace are incompatible for, what is of grace is not of works, whilst that which is of works is not of grace. The whole notion that a person can satisfy divine justice in any way vitiates the biblical doctrine of man and is absolutely incompatible with the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thirdly,



this teaching embraces a concept of vicarious atonement that asserts that individual believers, in addition to the propitiatory atonement of Christ, are able to atone, at least in part, for the sins of other believers. As we have just asserted, the theory finds no sanction in the Christian Scriptures. Moreover, it represents a serious assault on both the exclusive nature and sufficiency of the atonement effected by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fourthly, the idea that the penal consequences of sin are usually carried over into an imagined intermediate state is to deny the fullness and completeness of the atonement of Christ and of the justification that he has merited for those who have faith in him. To illustrate the point a simple question may be asked; What happens to those who die shortly before Christ's return, or who are alive at the moment of his return? Surely there will be no purgatory for them, yet according to this teaching the temporal punishment for their sins will still remain.

Fifthly, common sense teaches that it is inevitable that, in the hands of men, this teaching will lead to abuses. With the best will in the world, you cannot invest frail and sinful individuals with both the power to retain or remit the penalty of eternal death for sins committed and the authority to alleviate, shorten or terminate the sufferings of souls in purgatory, and expect that no one will tempt any of them to abuse the power entrusted to them, or that all who are said to have such supposed power will always resist the temptation to abuse it even in some little way. It is no wonder then that flagrant and frequent abuses have been associated with this teaching over the years.

Sixthly, this Roman doctrines of penance, indulgences and purgatory rob individuals of assurance and peace, and, instead, fill them with fear and uncertainty about the future. But, in contradistinction, the Scriptures declare that 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' and that 'since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand'.⁶³

Conclusion

Sufficient has been said by way of introduction to the leading features of this distinctive Roman teaching. It should be apparent that Article 22 is correct when it states that this Romish doctrine 'is a fond thing vainly invented, and



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grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God'. Moreover, it should be self-evident that, in the words of Cunningham—

this is a magnificent and well-compacted scheme, displaying great inventive genius, and admirable skill in contrivance and adaptation. Each one of the principles or doctrines in the series, taken by itself, is fitted to obscure and pervert the scriptural account of the provision made for the pardoning of men's sins, and saving them from the punishment their sins deserve.⁶⁴

It subverts the doctrine of a free and complete justification through faith in the righteousness of Christ.

We began with a quotation from the testimony of a former Roman Catholic priest, the Mexican Cipriano Valdes Jaimes. The quotation was not complete. Certain crucial words were omitted. They must now be supplied, and the quotation itself extended. In speaking of his ordination in 1951 he says that—

on that day, through the laying on of hands by the bishop I was given the incredible, the deceitful, the false powers which the Roman Catholic Church pretends to give to man to delude others. I was granted the ability to forgive men's sins, both inside and outside the horrible confessional box. On that day I received the power to sacrifice Christ over again on an altar at my whim and fancy. I could now release souls from purgatory, a place invented by Rome, through a lying and lucrative liturgy. This is the undeniable teaching of the Roman Church, that before going to heaven men's souls must pass through such a lake of fire. How far from the truth! What error! Yet that is what I believed as the result of four years of painstaking, incisive work in dogmatic and moral theology. So when I was told that I had power to forgive the sins of my fellow men, I accepted the fact with all my heart, not realizing that the forgiving of sins is a divine attribute. It cannot be delegated to a man. The Scripture says, 'I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins' (Isa. 43:25). For twenty years in the Roman Catholic priesthood I performed the ridiculous, shameful, anti-scriptural practice of daily listening to the frailties of society, including military men, professional and politicians...I had aides and assistant priests who helped me carry out my absurd duties.⁶⁵

Some may object that, as a convert from Roman Catholicism, Jaimes at the best exaggerates, or at the worst misrepresents, the teaching of his former church. Our survey shows that he most certainly does not do the latter. Rather, to use the words of another former Roman Catholic, it is evident that, clearly the Roman Catholic Church has fallen into the same error as that of the scribes and Pharisees during the days of Jesus. It has become guilty of teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (Mark 7:7).⁶⁶ Whilst that is the case it is impossible to conclude that differences do not remain. Sadly, there is still an impasse between Rome and Protestantism.

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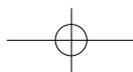
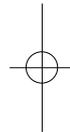
ENDNOTES

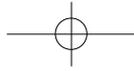
1. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III (London & Edinburgh; Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1873), p. 494.
2. C. V. Jaimes, "An Irresistible Call," in R. Bennett and M. Buckingham, *Far from Rome, Near to God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), p. 80.
3. L. Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (London; Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), p. 326. Rome lists the sacraments as: [1] baptism, [2] confirmation, [3] mass, [4] penance, [5] extreme unction, [6] marriage, and [7] orders.
4. W. Webster, *The Church of Rome at the Bar of History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), p. 100.
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9. For this distinction see L. Boettner, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
10. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (4th edn.) (London: A & C Black, 1968), p. 216.
11. *Ibid*, p. 198.
12. F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd edn.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1250.
13. *Idem*.
14. J. N. D. Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 436f.
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 19. *Op. cit.*, p. 328.
 20. *Op. cit.*, p. 91.
 21. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 325.
 22. See e.g., P. Galtier, *L'Eglise et la remission des peches* (Paris, 1932)
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 24. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 324.
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 26. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 325.
 27. W. Webster, *op. cit.*, p.138.
 28. *Idem.*, p. 209.
 29. *Op. cit.*, p. 327.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 327f.
 31. A. A. Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 491f.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 492.
 33. 1 John 1.9.
 34. James 5.16.
 35. R. Johnstone, *James* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), p. 423, author's italics.
 36. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1461, p. 329.
 37. *Op. cit.*, p. 326.
 38. T. Watson, *The Lord's Prayer* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972) p. 216.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
 40. *op. cit.*, p. 324.
 41. *Op. cit.*, p. 328.
 42. Colossians 2.13f.
 43. 1 John 2.2.
 44. *Op. cit.*, p. 107.
 45. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1996, p434 (emphasis in original).
 46. *Ibid.*, §2010, p. 437 (emphasis in original).
 47. *Op. cit.*, p. 108.
 48. *Op. cit.*, p. 110f.





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49. F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone, *op cit*, p.1349. cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 1030, p. 235.
50. *Catechism of the Church*, §1031, p. 235.
51. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology* (6th edn.) (London: Vine Books, 1978), p. 301.
52. *Ibid.*, §§1031 & 1032, p. 235.
53. F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone, *op cit*, p. 1349. cf Griffith Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
54. *Op. cit.*, p. 115f.
55. See R. T. Beckwith, "Purgatory," in S. B. Ferguson & D. F. Wright (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 549. cf. Griffith Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
56. *Idem.*
57. *Op. cit.*, §1860, p. 410.
58. Quoted by Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 109f.
59. *Op. cit.*, §1471, p. 331.
60. *Idem.*
61. *Idem.*
62. *Op. cit.*, p. 757.
63. Romans 8.1 & 5.1f.
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65. *Op. cit.*, p. 80.
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