

What Distinguishes Protestant from Roman Catholic Theology?

SUMMARY: There are many shared beliefs between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology including the doctrine of the Trinity, the shared deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the crucifixion of Christ, and the virgin birth. At the same time, there are very important differences between the two understandings. Overall, the crucial distinctions involve the work of Jesus Christ. The question which must be asked is "is Jesus enough or do we need someone or something else?" From the pages of Scripture we see that the person and work of Jesus Christ is absolutely sufficient to provide salvation for God's people. We need nothing more than the gospel of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

No Christian or group of Christians exists in a bubble, secluded from divergent beliefs and separated from the past. We are all a product of historical, cultural, biological, environmental and ideological influences which shape our theologies and philosophies of ministry.

In light of this understanding, believers should have a special concern for learning of the places and peoples from which they come. As 21st century Protestants, we should recognize that our Reformed theology is vastly different from that of Roman Catholicism. At the same time, we must also be quick to affirm that our heritage springs forth from the annals of Catholicism. In the end, there is only one Lord, one baptism, one faith, and one and only one holy and catholic¹ church and it is made up of all who have trusted in the efficacious grace of God through the death of His Son for our sins.

The Problem

Roman Catholic theology is hard to nail down for a couple of reasons. First, it represents almost 2,000 years of doctrine. While many within Roman Catholicism would state that its doctrines have remained consistent (though expanding), such simply is not the case. Second, there exists a plurality of beliefs under the banner of the tradition. Latin American Roman Catholicism differs greatly from Northeastern U.S. or Polish Catholicism, which may or may not be easily distinguished from the official positions of the Vatican. Third, there is the confusing distinction between *ex cathedra* (and therefore infallible) teaching and that which is not.

In light of the above, it is exceedingly difficult to attempt to boil down the chief distortions which are represented by the church's teachings. Should we only look at 16th century documents forged in the fires of the Reformation? Should we only take into account all supposedly infallible teachings of the church? Should we limit ourselves to post-Vatican II understandings? Ultimately, the concern is not over the documents or the church itself, but rather, the erroneous and misleading doctrines which we will consider. Hypothetically, one could call him or herself a Roman Catholic and yet not hold to Roman Catholic doctrine as it is explained below. However, it would have to be asked in what way such a person is Roman Catholic.

¹ Catholic generally means universal. We must be careful to not confuse catholic as an adjective from Roman Catholic which is a noun. All Christians are catholic, but not all are Roman Catholics.

In the end, what we believe is vastly important. John 17:3 tells us that eternal life is knowing the Father and Son. To attribute to God what is not in accordance with reality is to worship falsely. Such idolatry should be desperately avoided in seeking to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). These distinctions are not peripheral, but are central to a proper understanding of Christ and His work upon the cross.

Some Serious Problems with Roman Catholic Theology:

I. Mariology

Far too often Protestants react vehemently against Christ's mother. Rather than being repulsed by corrupted doctrine, some go so far as to bash Mary herself. This is surely perverse and in no way reflective of proper understandings of Jesus' mother.

The Scriptures teach and we believe that Mary was truly blessed in that she bore the Son of God in her womb.² We believe that she was a virgin at the time of conception and remained chaste until after having given birth to Jesus.³ In light of these beliefs, there is simply nothing wrong with a healthy respect for the mother of our Lord.

However, Roman Catholic theology does not stop there. It often goes well beyond healthy and moderate respect and into reverence which borders on worship undue any but the Creator. While a full examination of Mariology might be helpful, such is impossible for the purposes of this paper. Rather, we will focus on three common distortions of God's revelation in regards to the Virgin:

Immaculate Conception – that Mary was preserved

² Given that Jesus is divine, we should have a greater appreciation for Mary as theotokos ("Mother of God"). At the same time, we want to be careful with that phrase because of the baggage that it brings with it.

³ Matthew 1:24-25 *And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took {Mary} as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.*

from the stain of original sin at her own birth.⁴ Furthermore, that she lived a life completely free from sin.⁵

This doctrine in particular rubs against an understanding of the universality of original sin and uniqueness of Christ being kept from such. Furthermore, it finds absolutely no solid support from Scripture. Mary was human and all humanity (Christ excluded) is tainted with sin. While she was particularly graced with the privilege of bearing and raising the Lord, to attribute undefiled purity to Mary is to misappropriate the doctrines of sin and salvation.

Perpetual Virginity – that Mary remained a virgin and had no further children⁶

This doctrine goes against the clear testimony of Scripture in such passages as Matthew 13:55-56 “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” In response, the Roman Catholic position would most likely state that those “brothers” were merely kin or that they were the children of a previous marriage of Joseph.

In the end, inventing circumstances to fit our interpretations of Scripture is dangerous at best. Given that no passages describe her continued virginity and that many passages speak of brothers and sisters of Christ, it is sloppy interpretation at best to affirm the weaker and completely unattested position.

Mediatrix – that Mary functions as a mediatrix between man and God⁷

This doctrine probably represents the most destructive element of Mariology. This is particularly seen in the following excerpt from the Rosary:

“**HAIL, HOLY QUEEN**, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!”

Is Mary our hope? Is she our advocate? The Bible clearly states that we have one mediator⁸ and our advocate⁹ is Jesus Christ!

Along with the Roman Catholic understanding of Mary, we can lump in prayer to the saints for the excess of their righteousness. Roman Catholic doctrine in this area is simply false and misleading. While undoubtedly many have engaged in a number of good works, not one (Christ excluded) has ever served to achieve righteousness by those works and none of our own works can be applied on another’s behalf. We are all individually accountable for our belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ and, consequently, how we act upon such faith. Praying to those who have gone before us simply negates the unique roles of Christ and the Holy Spirit in making intercession on our behalf. Rather than praying to saints who have allegedly stored up an excess of righteousness, let us pray to the only One Who has ever lived a perfectly righteous life – Jesus Christ, our substitute, our High Priest, our Lord and Savior.

II. Purgatory

Purgatory in Roman Catholic theology functions as a place where the punishment for sins is paid. Though they believe that forgiveness for those sins is in some sense already given, they also believe that some sort of punishment remains which must be worked through. Purgatory is seen as the final purification of the elect.

In Protestant theology, the lack of Scriptural attestation for purgatory (Maccabees being apocryphal) combined with a general understanding of complete forgiveness and payment on the cross leads us to dismiss such doctrinal corruption.

Hebrews 9:27 *And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.*

Hebrews 9:18 *Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

Christ’s work was finished upon the cross and believers are

8 1 Timothy 2:5 *For [there is] one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*

9 1 John 2:1 *My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

4 *The most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin. - [Inef-fabilis Deus](#) the [Apostolic Constitution](#) of Pope Pius IX on the Immaculate Conception (December 8, 1854), in the Acta Pii IX, pars 1, Vol. 1, p. 615.*

5 *By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long. – Catechism of the Catholic Church #493*

6 *The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary’s real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ’s birth “did not diminish his mother’s virginal integrity but sanctified it.” And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as Aeiparthenos, the “Ever-virgin”. – Catechism #499*

7 *This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. . . . Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. – Catechism #969*

therefore even now under no condemnation. His punishment on our behalf was completely effective and final. He has for all time absorbed the wrath of His Father on behalf of those who believe.. Whatever purification or sanctification will necessarily take place in the believer will occur in the one life which precedes glory and the glorification which comes after death or the return of Christ.

III. Indulgences

The sale of indulgences¹⁰ represented the watershed event of the 16th century. The practice and doctrine is part of the “infallible” teaching of the church such that whoever may deny the right of the church to dispense them is declared anathema.¹¹ The role of indulgences continues today and was recently enacted by Pope Benedict in the August 2005 Youth Day in Germany.

A Biblical understanding of indulgences merely follows the argument of purgatory. Since Christ’s death was a sufficient and efficient payment, there remains no need for punishment and therefore no need for man-made documents or declarations which release us from such a sentence.

Furthermore, to even hint at the ability to purchase or earn salvation smacks of self-righteous legalism. Lest we fall into this error, we do well to heed the words of Peter to Simon the magician in Acts 8:14-24.¹²

IV. Transubstantiation – Eucharistic Mass

The Eucharist is particularly difficult to nail down an exact Roman Catholic understanding of. However, the two most common elements to the Catholic mass with which we would dispute would be the efficacy of the event and the actuality of Christ’s presence. Basically, we would say that communion neither inherently conveys grace nor is it a participation in Christ’s actual sacrifice.

The celebration of the Eucharist as a sacrifice¹³ is contrary to the clear testimony of Scripture that Christ’s work is finished. By one sacrifice He has done His work. Furthermore, Christ is not physically present in the elements. Rather, having been offered up for sins, raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, Jesus has sat down at the right hand of the Father. There He sits until

10 *An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins 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...An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin. The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.* – Catechism #1471

11 Council of Trent, *Declaration on Indulgences*

12 Verse 20 *But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!”*

13 *If anyone says that in the mass a true and real sacrifice is not offered to God; or that to be offered is nothing else than that Christ is given to us to eat, LET HIM BE ANATHEMA.* – Council of Trent, 22nd Session

the time of His return.

Hebrews 10:10-14,¹⁸ *By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified...* Hebrews 9:18 *Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer {any} offering for sin.*

V. Justification and/or Perseverance by works

The official position of the Roman Catholic church is that man is not justified by faith alone, but rather through works and faith together.¹⁴ This clearly contradicts the testimony of Scriptures such as Romans 3:28 *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*

Some, wishing to distance themselves from such obviously false teaching, would state that though man is justified by faith, he is preserved or kept in a state of grace through works. This too will not pass the scriptural litmus test as evidenced by Galatians 3:1-3 *You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed {as} crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

Ultimately, it is faith alone which justifies us.¹⁵ Works are certainly important and are evidence of true and saving faith, but are not necessary to preserve or earn salvation. Unfortunately, this clear testimony of Scripture is antithetical to Roman Catholic teachings on the matter.

VI. Centrality of the church

The Roman Catholic Church within her theology serves as the repository of grace. While they have come quite a long way in embracing more ecumenical positions, they still maintain that only they serve as faithful interpreters of Scripture, having kept a pure and unbroken line of apostolic succession.

This last issue evidences a failure to differentiate between the visible and invisible church. In the end, it is not those who pray the rosary, obey the pope or attend mass who are saved. Rather, it is those who have looked to Christ, and Christ alone, for the

14 *If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, LET HIM BE ANATHEMA.* – Council of Trent, 6th Session

15 James is not contradictory to this position. His concern is not faith itself, but rather “dead” (false) faith which produces no works.

hope of salvation.

Conclusion:

Once again, we must remember that not all who wave the banner of Catholicism do so with the understandings above. However, what is presented above is as faithful a reflection of the teachings of Roman Catholicism on the whole as we can manage. Undoubtedly there are those who would disagree with the teachings which are espoused by Roman Catholicism and yet still choose to associate with the church. For such a person who dismisses Catholic doctrinal understandings and yet still clings to the institution, it should be asked if liturgical, traditional, or stylistic preference is really worth such a compromise in belief.

No Christian can claim exhaustive knowledge of the revelation of our great God and King. However, while confessing an incomplete understanding, it is still possible to cling to an accurate awareness of God's nature and actions as expressed within the Scriptures which He has superintended.

As we examine the doctrines which form the pillars of Roman Catholic thought, we often find no support within the pages of our canon. While lack of explicit support does not always negate doctrine in and of itself, if it can be shown that such doctrine is contrary to the testimony of Scripture then we must dismiss such speculation. This is certainly the case with many problematic portions of Roman Catholic doctrine and dogma.

In the case of the six doctrines outlined above, they all have a particular element which is entirely deceptive and deleterious to proper and God-centered reflection. All six take the focus away from the all-sufficient, completely efficacious sacrifice of Christ. They all force those who hold to such views to remove their gaze from the cross and place it on some peripheral matter.

Why do we need to venerate and pray to Mary and other saints?

Because Jesus is not unique and/or He is not enough

Why will we suffer in purgatory and why should we therefore accept indulgences?

Because Jesus' payment and suffering is not enough

Why must we participate in a continued sacrifice of Christ through the Eucharist?

Because the sacrifice on Calvary was not enough

Why must we keep ourselves in grace through works?

Because faith is not enough

Why must we go through the church?

Because Jesus is not enough

The truth is that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in the gospel alone. Mary should be respected, communion should be celebrated, works should be accomplished, and tradition should be cherished, but none of these negate the all-sufficient work of the sacrificial and atoning death of Christ Jesus some 2,000 years ago. Let us fix our eyes and affections on Him and Him alone.

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