



# What Salvation is Not

A Biblical Look at the Roman Catholic View of Salvation

by Jeremy Cagle

In considering what Christian salvation is, it would be helpful to include an article discussing what Christian salvation *is not*. Nothing educates better than a good contrast. We can learn something about democracy by studying communism or theology by studying atheism or creationism by studying evolution. While these studies are limited in their effect, if placed alongside studies of a positive nature, they can be very accommodating. Because of this, the following article will discuss the Roman Catholic view of salvation and compare it with the Biblical view.<sup>1</sup> It is our hope that this will help you better see what Biblical salvation truly is.

## THE ROLE OF WORKS IN SALVATION

*Justification* is “the declaration that the human has been restored to a state of righteousness in God’s sight.”<sup>2</sup> The common teaching among Roman Catholics concerning justification is that our works and deeds are necessary to place us in a “state of righteousness in God’s sight.” The Council of Trent made the following comments about how this justification is possible:

Wherefore, when receiving true and Christian justice, they (new Catholics) are commanded, immediately on being

born again, to preserve it pure and spotless, as the first robe given them through Christ Jesus in place of that which Adam by his disobedience lost for himself and for us, so that they may bear it before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ and may have life eternal.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, justification before God is only found in being sinless. Since this is not possible, what happens if one sins?

There are two major categories of sin within Roman Catholicism: *venial sin* and *mortal sin*. Roman Catholic theologian John Hardon describes

venial sin as, “An offense against God which does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace. It is called venial because the soul still has the vital principle that allows a cure form within.”<sup>4</sup> Hardon describes mortal sin as, “An actual sin that destroys sanctifying grace and causes the supernatural death of the soul.”<sup>5</sup> This sin “deprives the sinner of a right to heaven.”<sup>6</sup>

While venial sins obstruct spiritual progress, they do not do away with the grace given to one at baptism.<sup>7</sup> “It is not even necessary to confess venial sins in the sacrament of confession to the priest.”<sup>8</sup> Mortal sins, on the other hand, destroy the grace given at baptism and will lead the sinner to Hell if unconfessed.<sup>9</sup>

Due to these and other teachings, Roman Catholics believe that, if anyone teaches that salvation is by grace alone apart from works, he is damned:

If anyone says that the justice (justification) received is also not increased before God through good works, but that the works were only the fruits and the signs of the justification received, not also a cause of its increase, let him be anathema.<sup>10</sup>

The Roman Catholic view of salvation

requires works to counteract the affects of mortal sin and damn anyone who thinks otherwise. However, what does the Bible teach about the role of works in salvation?

The Bible teaches that there is one type of sin<sup>11</sup> and only one justification for that sin. “Sin in Scripture is used to describe any act of transgression of God’s law.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the punishment of this transgression – the punishment of sin – is death. Consider the following verses:

**Romans 6:23** – “For the wages of sin is death”

**Romans 5:12** – “death spread to all men, because all sinned”

**1 Corinthians 15:56** – “The sting of death is sin”

As a result of this, the only One Who can justify human beings before God and bring them from death to life is Jesus Christ. Consider the following verses:

**Romans 3:20** – “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin”

**Romans 11:6** – “But if [salvation] is

by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace”

**Titus 3:5** – “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit”

Justification, then, does not occur because of any work on man’s part. It occurs because of Jesus’ work on the cross (Col 1:19-20) and because of the grace of God (Eph 2:8-9). Louis Berkhof describes this justification in saying,

the ground of justification can be found only in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to the sinner in justification . . . In the passive obedience of Christ, who became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13) we find the ground for the forgiveness of sins; and in His active obedience, by which He merited all the gifts of grace, including eternal life, the ground for the adoption of children, by which sinners are constituted heirs of life eternal.<sup>13</sup>

Justification, according to Biblical standards, states that man is dead in his sins and trespasses. God in His grace and mercy has offered salvation to mankind through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Man’s works cannot save him because

the price of one sin is death (Js 2:10). So Jesus Christ, Who lived a perfect life, came to offer His life as an atonement<sup>14</sup> for man’s sins.

## THE ROLE OF MASS IN SALVATION

Mass is “a term used mainly in the Roman Catholic Church for Holy Communion.”<sup>15</sup> In Roman Catholic doctrine, the Mass is necessary for salvation, since Jesus called the bread His body and the wine His blood at the Last Supper (Matt 26:26-29). The process through which the bread and wine become Jesus’ actual body and blood is called *transubstantiation*. Wayne Grudem explains transubstantiation in the following way:

According to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, the bread and wine *actually become* the body and blood of Christ. This happens at the moment the priest says, “This is my body” during the celebration of the mass. At the same time as the priest says this, the bread is raised up (elevated) and adored. This action of elevating the bread and pronouncing it to be Christ’s body can only be performed by a priest.<sup>16</sup>

In order to be saved, an individual must partake of this body and blood on a consistent basis.

The Catholic doctrine of Mass also

teaches that Jesus is re-sacrificed on the cross for the sins of mankind every time the Mass is performed. Pope Pius XII in his *Mediator Dei* states that each Mass “reminds us that there is no salvation except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and that God Himself wishes that there should be a continuation of this sacrifice.”<sup>17</sup> This continuation of sacrifice is offered in the Mass. *The Roman Catechism* states that the Mass is offered,

. . . that the Church might have a perpetual Sacrifice, by which our sins might be expiated, and our heavenly Father, oftentimes grievously offended by our crimes, might be turned away from wrath to mercy, from the severity of just chastisement to clemency.<sup>18</sup>

Is such a teaching Biblical, though? Does the bread and wine of communion become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ or do they become a symbolic representation of Jesus’ physical form? This has major salvific implications. For one, if “the real human presence of Christ” was present in the bread of Mass, then His “body, blood, and soul, as well as divinity” would be as well.<sup>19</sup>

The Roman Catholic view of Mass misrepresents the Biblical position in two ways. First, it contradicts clear Biblical teachings about Jesus

being currently seated at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56;<sup>20</sup> Eph 1:20; Col 3:1). Second, it disagrees with Scriptural teachings regarding the discontinuation of Jesus’ sacrifice. Hebrews 9:28 says Christ has been offered once “to bear the sins of many”<sup>21</sup> and Hebrews 10:11-13 goes on to state,

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.

Jesus’ crucifixion and sacrifice occurred *once and for all* to take away sins. His work does not need to be repeated every time the Mass is offered.

## THE ROLE OF MARY IN SALVATION

Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus plays a significant role in the Roman Catholic understanding of salvation. Mary is often asked to offer divine assistance regarding Roman Catholic ministries and, consequently, their work of evangelism. In his *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope John Paul II stated, “I beseech the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Word

and Mother of the Church, to support with her powerful intercession the catechetical work of the entire church on every level.”<sup>22</sup>

Mary is also considered to be the Mother of God and divine herself.<sup>23</sup> She endured no pain in childbirth and engaged in no sexual relations with Joseph after Jesus’ birth.<sup>24</sup> Roman Catholics also teach that Mary did not die but ascended to Heaven with God.<sup>25</sup> As a result Mary, the mother of Jesus, is considered to have special salvific powers that are evidenced in the Rosary and in the practice of indulgences.

Prayer is often given to the Virgin Mary in the form of the Rosary. The Rosary is “a Marian prayer composed of fifteen decades of ‘Hail Marys,’ with an ‘Our Father’ preceding and a ‘Glory be to the father’ following each decade.”<sup>26</sup> The importance of the Rosary in the life of a Roman Catholic cannot be overestimated. St. Dominic claimed that the Rosary was given as “an antidote to heresy and sin”<sup>27</sup> and Pope Paul VI called it the “compendium of the entire Gospel.”<sup>28</sup> Saint Louis De Montfront went so far as to say that,

Even if you have sold your soul to the devil as sorcerers do who practice black magic . . . if you say the Rosary faithfully

until death, I do assure you that, in spite of the gravity of your sins “ye shall receive a never fading crown of glory.”<sup>29</sup>

The Roman Catholic emphasis on the Virgin Mary is also seen in indulgences. According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, indulgences are “the remission of the temporal punishment due for sins.”<sup>30</sup> This remission is offered because there is a “treasury” of good deeds due to the works of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and all the saints.<sup>31</sup> In other words, Jesus Christ, Mary, and other saints have done so many good works that they have earned an extra “credit” of reward that is at the disposal of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church can bestow this credit on guilty sinners in the form of an indulgence, thus removing the temporal punishment of their sins. Sadly to say, in its doctrine of indulgences Roman Catholics place Mary alongside Jesus Christ Himself regarding meritorious works!

Yet, what does Scripture teach regarding Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ? Did she serve as “an antidote to heresy and sin” and did she play a part in the “compendium of the entire Gospel?” Did her work produce merits that could be used for indulgences?

The Bible makes it very clear that,

though Mary was obedient to the Lord (Lk 1:38), she was not divine nor did she ascend to the right hand of God and assist in salvation in any way. She was blessed of the Lord (Lk 1:42), but this was not due to any work on Mary's behalf but due to the baby she gave birth to (Lk 1:31-33). The Scriptures also teach that no one is to be prayed to but God alone.<sup>32</sup> Consider the following Biblical examples:

**Genesis 20:17** – “Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children”

**Psalm 5:2** – “Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, for to You I pray”

**Psalm 54:2** – “Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth”

**Jonah 2:1** – “Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish”

While Mary was obedient to the Lord and blessed accordingly, she was not divine and was never to. The only One worthy of our prayers is God Himself.

## THE AUTHORITY BEHIND ROMAN CATHOLIC SALVATION

The reasoning behind some of the above statements regarding the role of works in salvation and the role of the Mass and the Virgin Mary may seem strange to Protestant ears. This is because the Roman Catholic Church does not use the Bible as its sole source of authority. It actually claims to have three sources of authority: the Bible, the Apostolic Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which I approved 25<sup>th</sup> last . . . is a statement of the Church's faith and of Catholic doctrine, attested to or illumined by Sacred Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium. I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.<sup>33</sup>

The Apostolic Tradition, according to Roman Catholicism, refers to practices begun by the apostles and preserved by Catholic bishops. This Tradition “was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time.”<sup>34</sup> The Magisterium refers to the bishops' right to interpret the true meaning of divine revelation.

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God,

whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living office of the Church (Roman Catholic Church) alone. Its authority in this manner is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

A fourth source of authority, not mentioned in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (quoted above) would be that of the Pope or head of the Roman Catholic Church. According to Catholic doctrine, when a Pope gives a new doctrine, he speaks with “that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith and morals.”<sup>36</sup>

With the amazing claims of all these authorities, Roman Catholics have no choice but to turn to the Roman Catholic Church for their ultimate authority.<sup>37</sup>

The Bible, however, does not give authority to any written source other than itself. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” The Bible gives this divine inspiration to no other book or to no other individual.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible also states that there will be no further revelation beyond its pages. Revelation 22:18-19 says,

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

There can be no new revelation added to the Bible after the book of Revelation. Apostolic Tradition, the Church's Magisterium, and the Pope himself have no authority over the Word of God and they have no place alongside it.

## CONCLUSION

People have often asked me if an individual could be saved in the Roman Catholic Church. In response to that important question, I have learned to say “Yes. If they learn about salvation from somewhere else.” I also add, “But I don't see how a true Christian could *stay* in the Roman Catholic Church. Its teachings are against true Christianity!”

While the Roman Catholic Church is one of the largest “Christian”



organizations in the world, its teachings are far from Biblical. In fact, they are an outright perversion of Biblical doctrine. This does not give us the right to lash out at Roman Catholics but, on the contrary, to evangelize them. Roman Catholics are lost and, if we do not find the compassion to warn them, they will stay that way.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is not primarily concerned with what Roman Catholicism has taught down through the ages, as it is with what Roman Catholics are teaching today.
- <sup>2</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2001) 90.
- <sup>3</sup> Council of Trent, session 6, “Decree on Justification.” Quoted in James R. White’s *The Fatal Flaw* (Southbridge, Mass.: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1990) 32.
- <sup>4</sup> *Pocket Catholic Dictionary* (New York: Image Books, 1985) 449.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Matthias Premm, *Dogmatic Theology for the Laity* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Book Publishers, 1974) 433. Roman Catholics teach that new converts enter into a state of grace at baptism.
- <sup>8</sup> James White, *The Fatal Flaw* (Southbridge, Mass.: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1990) 27.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, translated by H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1978) 45.
- <sup>11</sup> In passages such as 1 Timothy 1:10, liars and perjurers are grouped alongside homosexuals and kidnappers. In God’s economy, there is no distinction between a lesser or a greater sin. Because of this, it is impossible to earn any salvation or justification with God apart from Jesus Christ. James 2:10 states, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.”
- <sup>12</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, S. C.: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002) 418.
- <sup>13</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003 ed.) 523.
- <sup>14</sup> Biblically, *atonement* is, “The satisfaction of divine justice by the Lord Jesus Christ in His active and passive obedience (i.e., His life and death), which procures for His people a perfect salvation” (Cairns, 44).
- <sup>15</sup> *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 641.
- <sup>16</sup> *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994) 991.
- <sup>17</sup> Quoted in James G. McCarthy’s *The Gospel According to Rome* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1995) 152.
- <sup>18</sup> John A. McHugh, O. P., and Charles J. Callan, O. P., translators, *The Roman Catechism: The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, 1982) 255.
- <sup>19</sup> Kenneth Ryan, *Catholic Questions, Catholic Answers* (Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Mich.: 1989) 49.
- <sup>20</sup> In Acts 7:56, Jesus is standing at the right hand of God.
- <sup>22</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori Publications, 1994) 6.
- <sup>23</sup> This was due to her creation without a sin nature. See McCarthy, 186.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.
- <sup>25</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Dues*, no. 44. Quoted in McCarthy, 188.
- <sup>26</sup> *International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 859.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913) 187.
- <sup>28</sup> *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary [Marialis Cultus]* (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1974) 31.
- <sup>29</sup> *The Secret of the Rosary*, trans. by Mary Barbour (Bay Shore, New York: Montfront Publications, 1976) 12.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Robert C. Broderick (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978) 291.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> This is in response to the Roman Catholic position on the Rosary. Regarding the Roman Catholic position on indulgences, the Scriptures never teach that there is anything apart from Jesus Christ that can remove sins (Jn 1:29; Rom 6:23; 2 Cor 5:21).
- <sup>33</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1.
- <sup>34</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 8. Quoted in *The Gospel According to Rome*, 292.
- <sup>35</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” no. 10. Quoted in *The Gospel According to Rome*, 265.
- <sup>36</sup> First Vatican Council, “First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ,” session 4, chapter 4. Quoted in *The Gospel According to Rome*, 267.
- <sup>37</sup> John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Protestants and Catholics: Do They Now Agree* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1995). “Catholics turn to the church because they have been promised that the Church exercises an inerrant authority to properly interpret the Bible for them” (116).
- <sup>38</sup> Grudem, 78. “Someone may object that to say Scripture proves itself to be God’s words is to use a circular argument: we believe that Scripture is God’s Word because it claims to be that . . . It should be admitted that this is a kind of circular argument. However, that does not make its use invalid, for all arguments for an absolute authority must ultimately appeal to that authority for proof.”