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ROMAN CATHOLIC AND REFORMATION THEOLOGY

By
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The Protestant Faith
As is well known, one of the most contentious issues of the Reformation was the place of holy scripture in the church. There was no dispute about the authority or infallibility of holy scripture. All were agreed that the scriptures were divinely inspired and free from error. Nothing can be clearer than the statement of the Council of Trent, which was reaffirmed by the First Vatican Council one hundred years ago. I quote from this latter council: "The Books of the Old and New Testament are held to be sacred and canonical by the church not on the grounds that they were produced by mere human ingenuity and afterwards approved by her authority nor on the mere score that they contain revelation without error but they are held to be sacred and canonical because they have God for their author and as such they were entrusted to the church." But the dispute was with regard to the sufficiency of scripture. Sola Scriptura, scripture alone, may be called the formal principle of the Reformation, as justification by faith may be called the material principle of Reformation. In emphasising both these twin doctrines of the Reformation, scripture alone, and faith alone, the Reformers were motivated by their determination that the Lord Jesus Christ should be pre-eminent in salvation. The Reformers rejected the idea of any mediator standing between the saviour and the sinner. The mediation of the teaching church interpreting scripture, and supplementing this with its tradition, and the mediation of the priesthood with the continuous offerings of the sacrifice of Calvary, in the Mass, in the Reformers' judgement detracted from Christ's lordship on the one hand and from the uniqueness of his sacrifice.
on the other, "doing despite to His blood" to quote their phrase.

Over against the traditionalist view that the Bible needed an authoritative interpreter, and therefore was not to be read by the ordinary layman (you will remember the Lord Chancellor of England, Sir Thomas More, had to obtain a licence from the Bishop of London before he could read his bible), the Reformers said that the bible was clear and was the birthright of every christian. Tyndale expressed the wish that as a result of his translation of the scriptures into English, every ploughboy would know as much of the scripture as the most exalted ecclesiastic. The Reformers maintained that the scriptures are clear, pellucid, perspicuous, and in this day were surely right. The matter can be put to the simple test of reading the scriptures in a modern translation to see whether the teaching of the scriptures is not abundantly clear. They were of course intended to be understood by their readers, like any other writing. The argument that the scriptures cannot be understood except by an official interpreter does not bear examination. Consequently, the Reformers encouraged Christians to possess and read the scriptures translated into their own languages, for they were aware not only from the Bible but also from their own experience that God speaks to us through the scriptures so that we come into fellowship with him in this way and in this way only. Not that we have, of course, to read the scriptures ourselves, although this is best for those who are literate, but the scriptural truth must be conveyed to our mind; either by reading, or by hearing, or by being taught it.
Christ is the Lord and His sceptre is His word. The Holy Spirit applies that word to the mind of the regenerate Christians and it reaches down to the conscience evoking the responses of love, faith and obedience. Through this response to God's word we come into relationship with God; we begin the experience of eternal life which as Christ says is to know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. If the scriptures and scripture teachings are kept from us there is no possibility of expressing the living relationship with God through regeneration and the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is all too easy for this relationship never to be established even in churches where the scriptures are freely available, but it is very difficult for this experience to be known and entered into where the scriptures are kept from the people as was the case in mediaeval church. For fellowship is the result of communication in the context of mutual concern. Fellowship with God invites communication and response in the area of truth, for God is truth and is unknowable except in truth.

The Reformers were emphatic that the scriptures were not only clear and perspicuous; but also sufficient, sufficient that is, to give us a full and true knowledge of God. They do not need supplementing from outside themselves. This is because Christ's revelation, the revelation of God in the incarnation of Jesus, is sufficient. All that is to be known of God is revealed in Jesus. That revelation comes to us through the apostolic testimony; this testimony is inscripturated in the pages of the New Testament, which completes the revelation and is final and sufficient.
because it was given by the Holy Spirit. In Christ the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily; nothing can be added to this revelation; nothing has been lost. The course of Church History soon makes clear that there was no knowledge of Christ in the early church apart from Holy Scripture. The later accretions of dogma which grew up in the Middle Ages were rejected by the reformers as being aberrations from the truth and not additions to the truth; the truth in Christ does not need additions. For in him the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily.

The sufficiency of holy scripture is a confirmation of the sufficiency and supremacy of the revelation in the incarnation of Christ, witnessed to by the apostles. On the basis of the sufficiency of scripture the Reformers cut away a great deal of mediaeval doctrines; and Article 6 of the Church of England 39 Articles puts the matter succinctly: "Holy scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man, that it should be believed as an Article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."

One of the earliest doctrines to be discarded as contrary to scripture was the doctrine of purgatory; "pickpurse" purgatory as it was dubbed because the doctrine of purgatory was the motivation for people giving money for the masses to be said to get them out of purgatory or paying money for indulgences which were sold for various objectives.
For example, King Henry VII left a great deal of money for the masses to be said for the repose of his soul; on the other hand, Richard Hunn, a wealthy London merchant who died a few years after the King, left no money in his will for masses, saying that his soul did not need these masses. For this he was tried after his death for heresy and his body exhumed and burnt. Simon Fish, who died in 1531 and was one of the earliest English writers of the Reformation, in his book "The Supplication of Beggars" affirmed that there was not one word of purgatory spoken in all the scriptures and added "many men of great literature and judgement declare that there is no purgatory". The book was regarded as sufficiently influential to be answered by Sir Thomas More; it went through several editions which is an index of its influence.

Purgatory is just one of the many doctrines of the Roman Catholic church which were rejected by the Reformers because they had no basis in scripture. Closely associated with the doctrine of purgatory, was the practice of indulgences, where for a payment of money a man might obtain release from the pains of purgatory. You will remember that it was Tetzel's selling of indulgences to assist the financing of the building of St. Peter's Basilica at Rome that stirred up Luther. The theory was that indulgences released from the pains of purgatory though it was commonly believed that they released from hell as well. The theory underlying indulgences is that there is a treasury of merit built up by the Saints who were better than they need have been from the point of view of fulfilling God's commands. The Pope is said to be in charge of this treasury of the saints.
so that he is able to apply these supererogatory merits, that is, merits beyond what is asked for; and he does so if certain conditions are fulfilled which are laid down in the indulgence. The Reformers believed that not a shred of this can be found in scripture. The whole concept of combining our merit with God's grace is foreign to scripture. For example, in a note in the beginning of Matthew's Bible set up in every parish church in England by command of King Henry VIII in 1537 is this statement "Merit: in looking over as well the Old and New Testament, I have not found this word merit. Merit then, is nothing; for to merit is to bind God to His creatures and to obscure the merit of Jesus Christ by which only we are saved; not according to our own works or merits but according to his holy purpose and promise which was given unto us before all time". The whole concept of works of supererogation is contrary to the concept of fellowship with God which is the essence of the Christian religion. Our relationship with God demands that we should love him with all our heart and that we should love our neighbour as ourselves, but none of us can attain to this till we become like Christ, when we see Him face to face. Meanwhile we, though remaining in fellowship with God, through being forgiven by Christ's death, yet we remain sinners in ourselves falling short of God's commandment of perfect love. Moreover, the whole concept of merit, of which purgatory, indulgences and works of supererogation are based, is a contradiction of the concept of fellowship. The concept of merit regards the Christian as being over against God offering Him something, in order to obtain a verdict at the end of the process.
But the Christian Gospel calls us into relationship with God through forgiveness, now.

The Reformers attacked with scorn these works of supererogation, Article 14 puts it— "voluntary works besides, over and above God's commandments which they call Works of Supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety: for by them men do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for his sake, than of bounden duty is required: whereas Christ saith plainly, "When ye have done all that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants." And Article 22 "The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, (i.e. indulgences)..........is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God".

Another doctrine that the Reformers attacked as having no basis of scripture was the papal jurisdiction, by which the pope claimed that all men, if they wish to be saved, must be subject to his jurisdiction, i.e., they must obey his canon law, though he was at liberty to change these laws overnight, if he wished. Boniface VIII declared "It is altogether necessary, for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.

The law of fasting and the law of priestly celibacy are examples, as well as the law requiring parents to send their children to church schools. These laws and many others are based entirely on the Pope's decision, yet you are told that if you break them deliberately, God will send you to hell.
The Reformers believed however, that the Christian's conscience is subject to the law of God only, and they found nothing in scripture to suggest that the papal law was the law of God; only such elements of the papal law seen to be based on God's word had any authority over the conscience, that is, any authority it had over conscience was derived from the fact that it is an exposition of the scripture rather than from any authority residing in it by its own right. The Reformer's position was greatly strengthened by the exposure of the false Decretals and the Pseudo-Donation of Constantine as forgeries, for historically speaking, it was on these documents that the papal jurisdiction has been built.

The statement of the Second Vatican Council on the Eastern Orthodox Churches has been held to have modified the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church and in particular the statement of Pope Pius XII Humani Gorannis that the mystical body of Christ is identical with the Roman Catholic Church, but in fact it confirms it. For example, the Decree on the Eastern Churches of the Second Vatican Council paragraph 2 defines the church in almost identical language to that of Pope Pius XII. "that church holy and catholic which is the mystical body of Christ is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit through the same faith, same sacraments and same government." Notice the "same government", that is, the Papal jurisdiction which is the characteristic government of the Roman Catholic Church.
It is true that the same decree uses the word "churches" to describe the groupings of the eastern Christians not in the Catholic Church but it is a question of the use of language. Pope Pius XII himself had described the Eastern Orthodox Christians as belonging to "churches" though he made it quite clear that these groupings were not as such members of the mystical body of Christ, the holy catholic church. It has, of course, always been the opinion of the Roman Church that sacraments of holy order and the other sacraments continue amongst eastern Christians, but it has also always been the opinion of the Roman Catholic Church that the Greek Orthodox Church are members of the holy catholic church not by virtue of their orders and sacraments or by virtue of their ecclesial communities, though these are called churches, but such as are members of the mystical body of Christ are so by desire and invincible ignorance, as are also Protestants in good faith and indeed pagans and idolators, as the Second Vatican Council makes clear. There has been no change in this matter. Papal jurisdiction is still the touchstone of the Catholic Church, in Roman Catholic theology, as Boniface VIII put it in his famous Bull "Unum Sanctum" There is one holy Catholic and apostolic church, outside of which there is no salvation or remission of sins......of this one and only church there is one body and one head..... Christ, and the vicar of Christ, St.Peter, and the successor of Peter......we declare, announce and define, that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff."

The Reformers rejected completely this papal jurisdiction, this usurpation, as they
saw it, of the Pope over the consciences of God's people.

The third area of conflict that arose from the supremacy of scripture and one no less contentious than the question of papal jurisdiction, was the doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass. Papal jurisdiction was rejected as supplanting the Word of God in the consciences. The doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass was regarded as a blasphemous denegation of the sufficiency of Christ's death at Calvary. The Roman Church teaches, in the decrees of the council of Trent, Session 22, Chapter 2 "that in each Mass offered by a priest that same Christ is contained and immolated, Who once offered himself on the Cross, and that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory; through it we obtain mercy, for the Lord appeased by the oblation thereof for-gives even the most heinous crimes and sins". The mass is not numerically the same as Calvary, but "the victim is the same who is now offered by the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the Cross." The chapter concludes "not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions and other necessities of the faithful who are living but also for those who are departed in Christ and are not as yet fully purified, is it rightly offered". The Bible however, states that Christ has offered Himself once for all, and that he is now seated at God's right hand, no longer standing to offer sacrifice in God's presence, for that offering was completed at Calvary. Through it we have been brought by Christ to God. We are now in God's presence, seated with Christ, and are all priests, in the sense that we have entered in the holy of holies, that is to say, into God's very presence, through Christ our great high priest.
The doctrine of the Mass not only obscures but denies this truth, and constantly seeks to repeat the propitiatory offering of Calvary, as though that work were not finished; as though we were not yet standing in God's presence as adopted accepted sons. The joys of assurance and fellowship cannot be experienced by those who are still fearfully hoping to appease an angry God, to propitiate him through offering the Mass, as Trent put it, through their own merit and offerings.

The fourth important area of doctrine which the Reformers found no grounds for in holy scripture is what the Roman Catholics call the Power of the Keys, that is to say, the doctrine that a priest acts as Judge on God's behalf as he sits in the confessional. The Roman Catechism states "with regard to the sacrament of penance, it is so much the special province of penance to remit sins that it is impossible to obtain or even hope for remission by any other means" and again "the absolution announced in the words of the priest expresses the remission of sins which it accomplishes in the soul". Thus the Roman Catholic church teaches, that in order for your sins to be forgiven you must confess to a priest, in order that the priest can understand them fully you must give every relevant detail, so he can as a judge does assess the degree of guilt, pronounce a valid absolution. The Reformers abominated this teaching, for which they found no grounds in scripture. But on the contrary, they taught that the Bible makes clear that if we confess our sins to God He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The soul is in direct relationship with God through forgiveness and the Holy Spirit's presence.
When a Christian realizes he has sinned the Holy Spirit will teach him to abhor that sin and seek forgiveness. Thus, sins do not break our fellowship with God because as soon as we are aware of them we should be sorry for them and turn from them, and also be conscious that God has forgiven them. "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not count his sins" says St. Paul and this blessedness comes from the relationship of faith. Of course, if a man does not repent of his sin when he becomes conscious of it but intends to persist in it, this immediately breaks fellowship. To such a man, the Word of God says "unless you repent you shall perish." But when he repents and confesses his sins to God, his sins are forgiven straight away, as the prophet Nathan told King David. The penitent does not need the intermediary of a judge sitting in the confessional box for only God can really read the heart and only God can truly pronounce forgiveness. The Reformers rejected the mediation of the priests together with the mediation of the saints or the virgin Mary, in salvation. The whole concept of mediation denies the relationship that the Holy Spirit brings us into through the living under the word of God. Not surprisingly, the doctrine of work of the Holy Spirit has not been a strong one in Roman Catholic theological writings. But the New Testament is full of teaching about the Holy Spirit, God's spirit, who is in relationship with our spirit so we are in direct fellowship with God, and need no mediator, no saint, no priest, no sacrifice of the Mass but in Christ we are forgiven and are in God's presence and through His spirit He is present in us,
teaching us his mind through his word and leading us into Christ-like-ness of life as in joy we look for the coming of his Kingdom.

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