

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE REFORMERS vs. ROME: THE ISSUES (PART 3)

An authoritative Roman Catholic source declared: “The doctrine of purgatory is an essential element in the belief of the Christ Church. Formulated dogmatically for the first time in the Middle Ages (D 464, 693), later pronouncements do not go beyond this position (D 983, 998, 723a, 840, 2147a). The core of the Church’s teaching is that there is a purification (the term *purgatorium* is expressly avoided for the sake of the Greeks) for all who *vere paenitentes in Dei caritate descereint, antequam dignis paenitentiae fructibus de commissis satisfecerint* [‘who died truly penitent in the love of God before satisfying for their sins through worthy fruits of penance’] (D 464). This doctrine is connected with the utility of prayers for the dead (D 464, 693, 983), and is seen against the background of a profound conviction of the seriousness of death and of the multiplicity of individual eschatological acts (D 840; see *Penance*) in which death itself represents a salutary burden: *poenae purgatoriae*. The decisive documents do not impose any obligation as regards fire, a place of purification, or the duration, kind and intrinsic nature of the punishment.”¹ Another Roman Catholic source writes: “**purgatory**, an intermediate state of purification between death and heaven that provides for the removal of remaining personal obstacles to the full enjoyment of eternal union with God. According to Catholic doctrine, such purification continues and completes the process of sanctification (or divinization) that makes intimate union with the triune God possible for persons justified and reconciled in Christ. The obstacles in view here are both venial sins, unrepented at the time of death, and any enduring dispositional consequences of the repented and forgiven serious sins committed during one’s earthly life. There is no question of a reversal of the direction that one has taken in the course of earthly life. Purgatory is not an opportunity for conversion where none has transpired in earthly life. The eternal destiny of the *holy souls* is not in question. Given that individual judgment follows immediately upon death, purgatory affords an interval of final purification for erasing conditions that would prevent justified persons from enjoying full fellowship with God in the communion of saints.”² Rome declares that sin has a “double consequence”: eternal punishment and temporal punishment. Forgiveness involves the remission of eternal punishment, but temporal punishment remains. “. . . every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory.”³

In our own time, Clark Pinnock wonders why we cannot embrace the notion of purgatory: “I cannot deny that most believers end their earthly lives imperfectly sanctified and far from complete. [Most? How about all!]. I cannot deny the wisdom in possibly giving them an opportunity to close the gap and grow to maturity after death. Obviously, evangelicals have not thought this question out. [We have: It is called the Reformation.]. It seems to me that we already have the possibility of a doctrine of purgatory. Our Wesleyan and Arminian thinking may need to be extended in this direction. Is a doctrine of purgatory not required by our doctrine of holiness?”⁴

Fallen from grace is a phrase that has caused no little confusion in the minds of many Christians. Large numbers of Christians have been taught that this means that believers may actually lose their salvation.

Let's be clear here. Is it possible for a truly born again believer to lose his salvation? All will grant that there are false professors who fall away from the faith and commit apostasy. But can a genuine Christian apostatize? You will often hear people speak of *eternal security* as implying that once a person makes a profession of faith (signs on the dotted line a salvation contract with God), the deal is done – that person is now *saved*, and “once saved always saved” becomes a motto. Regardless of the lifestyle that person leads, despite the fact that he or she may actually renounce Christianity, they are still *eternally secure*. Really? Don't you believe it! The true Biblical doctrine was rightly referred to as *The Perseverance of the Saints*.⁵ True believers will, as the expression implies, persevere in the faith. They may stumble badly. They may go through periods of darkness, but they will not fall away completely from Christ. Well, then, what *does* Paul mean when he declares to the Galatians: “You have fallen from grace?”

- I. ***THE APPEAL TO FREEDOM.*** Christ did not set us free that we might become slaves again. Christianity is freedom, not bondage. But what does Paul mean when he uses the word *freedom*?
 - A. ***Freedom from the Guilt of Sin.*** This freedom comes through the cross work of Christ (Romans 6:18-22).
 - B. ***Freedom from the Law of Moses.*** This is Paul's point in Galatians 3:24-25; 4:4-5. Believers are free from the Law. This does *not* mean that they are free to sin. They are not *over* the Law, but neither are they *under* the Law (4:21).
- II. ***THE ARGUMENT AGAINST CIRCUMCISION.*** Note the imagery Paul uses – the yoke of bondage. The figure of a yoke is an apt metaphor for bondage, since an animal in a yoke has no alternative but to submit to the will of its master.⁶
 - A. ***The Danger of False Doctrine.*** Why is Paul so concerned over the Galatians submitting to the rite of circumcision? Paul enunciates four reasons.
 1. ***Christ is of No Benefit.*** This must have come as a shock to the Galatians! Why would circumcision make Christ of no benefit to the Galatians? Because that would be relying on something else as a means of gaining acceptance before God.
 2. ***Obligated to Keep the Whole Law.*** Circumcision brings with it legal obligations. Note how this is stated in terms of alternatives. It is *either* wholly Christ *or* the whole law.
 3. ***Fallen from Grace.*** To submit to circumcision is to seek justification by law, and that severs one from Christ – thus to fall from grace.

NOTE: Could the Galatians become *unjustified*? Paul's language will not allow this. He is simply saying that after having believed in Christ (as the Galatians did when Paul first preached the gospel to them), to turn away from Christ alone and faith alone is to turn to a *legal method* of gaining acceptance before God. Instead of relying on Christ, they were now relying on something else. Thus, they have fallen from grace. Any time we trust in our efforts (or feelings or whatever) as the grounds for God's favor, we have fallen from grace. Leon Morris points out: “*Grace* is one of Paul's important words (he uses it 100 times out of 155 times in the whole New Testament). Over and over again he insists that salvation is due entirely to God's grace, so it is not surprising that he points out here that the position of the Judaizers meant falling away from the central truth of the Christian way. It was spiritual disaster.”⁷

4. ***Excluded from Righteousness.*** Legality does not bring righteousness. You remember the character Mr. Legality from *The Pilgrim's Progress*? He was rightly referred to as a *cheat*

and could never produce righteousness. It is faith in Christ only that saves, and this faith issues in love, and this love is effectual.

III. **THE ADMONITION AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS** (5:7-8). Having exposed the nature of false doctrine, Paul now exposes the true character of false teachers. They had *detoured* the Galatians. Paul now reveals them for what they really are.

- A. **They Hinder the Truth.** False teaching will always be detrimental. Note how it takes only a *little* bit of false doctrine to corrupt.
- B. **They Are Not of God.** They are, in fact, ungodly, and Paul does not hesitate to say so!
- C. **They Will Be Judged.** Because the Judaizers were seeking to displace Christ (although they would have claimed otherwise), the Apostle declares that God will judge them.

NOTE: One of the characteristics of false teachers is that they oppose the truth, and that means that they will aggressively persecute true teachers like Paul. The Church today is full of arrogant, self-proclaimed (and infallible) teachers. “Christian” television (most of it is anything but Christian) is overrun with false teachers who claim divine inspiration for their teachings. This is not new. Calvin wrote over four hundred years ago: “It is an illusory belief of the Enthusiasts that those who keep reading Scripture or hearing the Word are children, as if no one were spiritual unless he scorned doctrine. In their pride, therefore, they despise the ministry of men, and even Scripture itself, in order to attain the Spirit. They then proudly try to peddle all the delusions that Satan suggests to them as secret revelations of the Spirit. Such are the Libertines and frenzied individuals like them. The more ignorant a man is, the greater the pride with which he is bloated and puffed up.”⁸ Paul’s final words in verse 12 may strike us as coarse, but it expresses his utter contempt for the pernicious teaching the Judaizers had introduced in the Galatian churches.

CONCLUSION: Edward Boehl, an older Reformed theologian, has convincingly argued that if the grace of God in justification only operated in the beginning stages of salvation, then we would indeed be in a constant state of concern and apprehension, always in doubt of our final state. “The conscience has no rest and every faint shock from sin – which, notwithstanding all, still dwells in our members, -- would bring into question the whole edifice of our salvation, yea, hurl it into the abyss. The more conscientious would then make the return to grace as difficult as possible, while the lax would make it as easy as possible (as indeed these phenomena took place in the Church, cf. the controversy of the Pietists with the death orthodoxy). But what a state of grace is this, which may be entered at man’s pleasure and then be irretrievably lost? This is just the crambe recocta (reboiled cabbage) of Rome without even the sacramental expedients of the Romish Church, by which with the help of God one is enabled to rise again, if only he has received grace unto contrition and repentance and if the latter are sincere.”⁹ In other words, the grace of God only functions on this side of the grave. After death, justice, not grace, kicks in once more. This is what purgatory is all about. Philip Eveson has noted: “In summing up the present position of Rome on this crucial subject it is important to stress that there has been no shift whatsoever from the definitive statement made at Trent. The Roman Catholic view of justification involves two main states: an initial activity which includes the sacrament of baptism and then a process throughout life which includes the *sacrament of penance* and after death in the fires of purgatory. In the end the Roman position is a reliance on oneself and the clergy of the Roman Church. Though justification is said to be by God’s grace it is also by human activity. Though it is through Christ’s merit it also involves human merit. It is administered by the Roman Church first through baptism and can be renewed again through penance. Though Rome’s doctrine of justification is meant to bring glory to God in reality it bolsters human pride and glorifies the Roman system.”¹⁰ Paul warns believers in Colossians 2:8 to beware of being taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends upon human tradition and the basic principles of this world, rather than on Christ. Purgatory is a philosophical concept which finds its source in the teachings of men, rather

than the Word of God. It stems from a perversion of the biblical teaching of the sacrifice of Christ and on the way forgiveness of sins is appropriated. Scripture teaches that a believer is complete in Christ and that the work of Christ is sufficient to deal with the entire penalty for sin. It is a contradiction of this to add the works of man and the idea of expiating sin through suffering as a basis of salvation.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ K. Rahner, editor, *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (Crossroads, 1982), p. 1320.

² R. P. McBrien, general editor, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (Harper Collins, 1995), p. 1070.

³ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995), p. 148.

⁴ As cited by M. S. Horton, *The Reformation Then and Now* (Hendrickson, 2017), p. 144.

⁵ L. Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (IVP, 1996), p. 156.

⁶ cf. The Fifth Head of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort found on p. 109 in the back of our Psalter hymnal.

⁷ “It is significant,” writes Donald Guthrie, “that Jesus used the same word for the submission of his followers to him (Matthew 11:29). Not all yokes chafe, but the Judaizers’ yoke could only be described as slavery, very different from that of Christ.” *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 128.

⁸ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 377.

⁹ E. Boehl, *The Reformed Doctrine of Justification* (Eerdmans, 1946), p. 198.

¹⁰ P. H. Eveson, *The Great Exchange: Justification By Faith Alone in Light of Recent Thought* (Day One, 1996), p. 87.

¹¹ Wm. Webster, *The Church of Rome At The Bar of History* (Banner of Truth, 1993), p. 116.