

T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

by
D. B. KNOX

In a discussion of the Protestant faith it is important to remember that Protestants and Roman Catholics are agreed on many of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. For example, both agree in affirming the creeds, which cover so many points of Christian doctrine, such as the sovereignty of God, that God is a loving and all-controlling Father so that nothing happens in the lives of His children which He does not see will turn out for the best, for God has promised that all things work together for good for those who love Him and that no trial will enter our life which we are not able to bear. So too, all Christians believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, and in the fact that God the Son for our sakes became man that through His death He might save us from our sins and their consequences. So too, all Christians believe that Christ will come again to bring to its culmination the ups and downs of the history of our world. At His coming He will vindicate His people and establish perfect righteousness. His coming is the great hope to be looked forward to with certainty by every Christian.

Roman Catholics and Protestants also agree that it is through Christ's death on the cross that our sins are forgiveable; but differences arise on the question of the application of Christ's redemption, that is, on the question how it is that we may obtain forgiveness through His death. You will recognise that this matter is a most important and practical one, and errors at this point have vital, far-reaching consequences. As we might expect there is a good deal of teaching in the Bible about how we obtain forgiveness for our sins. Its essence is that we are to be sorry for our sins and to ask God for forgiveness for Christ's sake. Thus St. John says in chapter 1

of his First Epistle "If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness". A few verses later the same apostle says "If anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world". Or as St. Paul put it in Romans 3 "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". When the warden of the gaol at Philippi realized his sinfulness and called out to the apostles who were his prisoners "What must I do to be saved?" St. Paul's reply was prompt and simple: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and your house". So we read in Acts 16. We may sum up the Bible's teaching as saying that Christ's death is a complete and perfect offering for our sins and that nothing needs to be added to it as the ground of our forgiveness; but that all of us will be forgiven if we come to God through Christ, being sorry for our sins and looking to God for forgiveness. It is wellknown, however, that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that not the merits of Christ only, but our own merits also are an essential part of the ground for our forgiveness. Thus Cardinal Bellarmine in his book on Justification 5/7 stated that "our chief hope and confidence must be placed in God yet some also in our own merits"; and Canon 32 of the Council of Trent on Justification stated clearly that the merits of a Christian man's life "in truth merit eternal life". Roman Catholics believe, of course, that our merits obtain their value from the death of Jesus, yet they place them alongside those of Christ, and teach that they play an essential part. The Bible however says quite definitely in Ephesians 2:8 "By grace have you been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: not of works, that no man should glory."

The Roman Catholic doctrine that our salvation depends at least in part on our own merits has two far-reaching consequences. Firstly, it destroys any sure confidence that we might otherwise have that we are saved. So long as our salvation is thought of as depending on ourselves at least in part, we will always be involved in uncertainty about our salvation, for who but the presumptuous person would dare to think that his life is good enough for God's approval.

If our going to Heaven depends on the goodness of our own lives, then none of us can know for sure what our present state is with regard to Heaven, much less what it will be when we die. Indeed Roman Catholics consider this uncertainty about our future state as characteristic of true Christianity, and the Council of Trent has anathematized in Canon 16 of Session 6 anyone who is certain of his salvation.

But on the other hand, you will recognize that if our salvation depends on Christ's merits only, and on God's promises to us as a consequence of those merits, then we may be as sure of our salvation as we are sure of the perfection of those merits of Christ and of the truth of God's Word and His promises. The Bible is full of such assurance. To give one instance only, St. Paul's statement to his friend Timothy "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day". Here there is a ring of complete certainty. St. Paul knows he is going to Heaven. If that assurance were based on his own merits it would be presumptuous, but St. Paul makes clear it is based entirely on the unchanging character of God. He says "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able". The Bible teaches us to put no confidence at all in our own merits. "All our righteousnesses" it says "are as filthy rags", and the Apostle Paul stated unequivocally "I know that in me dwells no good thing" (Rom 7:18). We are to put our whole trust and confidence in God's unchanging promise based as it is on the death of Christ, our perfect

Saviour. This hope is a sure hope, filling us with joy in the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and complete reconciliation with our Heavenly Father.

Lack of assurance is the first important consequence that follows directly from the Roman Catholic doctrine that our own merits are an essential part of the ground of our salvation. There is a second. This is the doctrine of purgatory. For if we cannot be saved without our own merits playing a part in the satisfaction for our sins, it may turn out that we have not had enough time in this life to make sufficient satisfaction ourselves. We may need further time to get ourselves ready for Heaven. Consequently the doctrine of purgatory follows. Roman Catholics believe that ordinary Christians go to purgatory after death and stay there till a full satisfaction for their sins has been made. The common teaching in the Roman Catholic Church is that this purgatory is a place of fearful torment. St. Bonaventura in his commentary on the sentences (4D 20 A1 Q2) said that "the severest pain of purgatory exceeds the most violent known on earth" and St. Thomas Aquinas, the most famous Roman Catholic theologian, asserted in the Summa Theologica that "even the slightest torture of purgatory is worse than all the sufferings one can endure in this world" (S.T. Supp. Q 70 (Appen 2) A 3C). I have taken these two quotations from a text book by a former Roman Catholic Coadjutor Archbishop of Sydney, used in Roman Catholic schools in N.S.W. so you can see that a painful purgatory is a doctrine still being taught to the children. Such a thought of a painful purgatory if it were true, would make the approach of death most terrifying. Yet St. Paul teaches us to think of death quite differently. He calls Christian death a falling asleep in Jesus and he said that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" and that such a departure was "very far better" to quote his words. Such sentiments cannot be reconciled with the thought of purgatory and of course it is wellknown that there is no teaching about purgatory in the New Testament at all. The reason is simple. The doctrine of the Bible about salvation excludes the possibility of a purgatory because the Bible teaches that we are saved by the merits of Christ only and not by our own works.

already been made. Thus we do not have to add our merits or satisfaction to those of our Lord in order to be forgiven. The work of our salvation was finished by Christ on Calvary. All that remains is for us to receive it from God with joy and gratitude. Consequently there is no such place as purgatory.

To sum up, the fact that the Bible teaches that the Christian should be full of confidence in his salvation confirms the truth that salvation depends on Christ and not on ourselves. For such confidence can only be present when it is realized that Christ has done all that is necessary and that we simply receive through faith with thanksgiving the salvation He brings to us. Naturally, then, a note of confident joy in His gift characterises the Christian life. Then again, the fact that the New Testament knows nothing about purgatory is a further confirmation of the truth that our merits do not play any part in our salvation, because the doctrine of purgatory is a natural consequence of believing that we must make some satisfaction ourselves, in addition to that of Christ. The fact that the Bible knows nothing of this doctrine establishes and verifies the truth that our hope of salvation is to be placed in the merits of Jesus Christ alone.

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