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BIBLE FORGIVENESS AND  
ROMAN CATHOLIC CONFESSION

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D.B. Knox

"The Protestant Faith"

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## BIBLE FORGIVENESS AND ROMAN CATHOLIC CONFESSION

How are we forgiven by God? That is a vital question.

Confession is the means by which we may obtain forgiveness of our sins because without confession or the acknowledgement of our sinfulness there is no possibility of God forgiving us. But to whom should we make this confession? The Bible is clear that we must confess our sins to God and that if we confess our sins to God we will obtain forgiveness, as God is ever ready to forgive. Thus in 1 John 1:9 we read "If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and in 1 Samuel we read the story of King David who had committed murder and adultery, but when he confessed his sin saying "I have sinned" he received immediately the assurance from the prophet "The Lord hath put away thy sin". Full forgiveness on confession to God of our wrong doing is the message of the Bible Old Testament. For example, in Solomon's great prayer at the dedication of the temple in 11 Chronicles 6 this is repeated time and again. The same message is reiterated in the New Testament "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

As is well known the Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is impossible to obtain God's forgiveness without confessing your sins privately to a priest and describing them in detail. This is laid down in Canon 901 of the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law and St. Alphonse Liguori, a famous Roman Catholic writer who was made a Saint last century, tells the story of an Abbess who died with the reputation of a Saint, full of good works and almsgiving, but who, in fact, went to Hell because of one sin which she failed to confess in early youth, (Liguori on Com. p.247 Dublin 1844- Blakeney).

In recounting this story Liguori was only following the authoritative teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, under the

heading of "The Sacrament of Penance" of which confession to a priest is the principal part, states "It is impossible to obtain or even to hope for remission of sins by any other means", and again the Catechism states that one "is bound to confess his sins to a priest, since there is no other salvation for one whose conscience is burdened with sin".

In view of these statements it is important to see what the Bible has to say about forgiveness. It teaches clearly that if we confess our sins to God He will freely forgive them for Jesus Christ's sake. The Bible, however, never makes any reference to confessing sins to a priest, which would be an extraordinary omission if it were so essential as the Roman Church teaches. Perhaps one illustration will be sufficient to make the Bible teaching clear. In Acts 8 we read the story of Simon the Sorcerer who attempted to obtain the power of conferring the Holy Spirit in return for money. St. Peter rebuked him sharply with the words "Thy money perish with thee and urged "Repent of this baseness of thine and pray to God, in the hope of finding pardon for the thought which thy heart has conceived" vs. 22 (Monsignor Knox's version). By these words the Apostle Peter makes clear that the way of forgiveness is by repentance and confession to God. "Repent and pray to God" he said "that the thought of thy heart may be forgiven". But according to Roman Catholic Doctrine St. Peter ought to have said "Confess your sins to God's priest in order to obtain absolution". But the Bible doctrine of forgiveness in the Old and New Testament is that if we confess our sins to God He will forgive us our sins. It knows nothing of the concept that He has confirmed the dispensing of the grace of forgiveness to an ecclesiastical institution.

The Roman Catholic doctrine about confession is inconsistent. It teaches that the Priest is a judge, passing sentence on God's behalf. This is stated by the Council of Trent (Session 14, chapter 6). That is why it requires those who confess to describe each of their sins in such a way that the priest may know all the relevant facts, because his sentence which he gives regarding the penitent is said to be ratified in Heaven.

However, some important points are overlooked. If the priest's sentence is based on ignorance because the penitent has kept back some of the facts; or if the priest does not know the moral law of God, or if he passes sentence outside his jurisdiction, then it is admitted that his sentence is ignored by God; the sins are not forgiven in spite of what the priest has said. In other words, it is really God who makes the decision about forgiveness, which is exactly what Protestants teach. The priest is not a judge at all, all he can do is to declare the mind of God on the matter and this declaration is of value in proportion to the knowledge that the priest may have of God's mind as revealed in Scripture and his knowledge of the state of heart of the penitent. And yet the Roman doctrine inconsistently teaches that the priest is the actual judge whose decisions are ratified in Heaven.

There is a second inconsistency, namely that the Church of Rome teaches that if a penitent is truly sorry for his sins they are forgiven him long before he reaches the confessional box. This is said explicitly by the Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott on page 428 in his "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma." So that for all who are truly sorry for their sins, the priest's words of absolution, which are said by the Council of Trent to effect the forgiveness of sins, cannot do so in these cases because those sins have already been forgiven. Once again we see that the priest's words "I absolve thee" cannot be judicial, as is claimed, but are merely declaratory.

There is a third inconsistency, in that Roman Catholics acknowledge that during Old Testament times confession of sins to God with true sorrow for them was the way of obtaining forgiveness (see Ott page 428) and also that this is the way by which Protestants may obtain forgiveness of their sins. But this simple method of forgiveness is said to be not available for Roman Catholics. They must confess their sins to a priest or else suffer punishment.

There is another inconsistency in that the modern doctrine of the Roman church is out of keeping with the earlier doctrines on the matter of the priest's power of absolution. Thus Peter Lombard, a famous Roman Catholic scholar, and numerous other theologians of the Middle Ages were of the opinion that the priest's power was that of declaring God's willingness to forgive; rather than passing sentence of forgiveness. Similarly in earlier Christian times absolution took the form of a prayer to God for forgiveness (See Ott 436). These older ways of stating the matter are correct. The minister's task is to declare God's mind about sin and forgiveness, as revealed in Scripture, and to lead the troubled conscience in prayer to the throne of grace. It is not his prerogative to sit in judgment in the place of God.

Roman Catholics base their modern doctrine on our Lord's words to the disciples. In John 20, we read "Whosoever sins ye forgive they are forgiven and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained". These words occur in John chapter 20 on the evening of our Lord's resurrection. St. Luke narrates the same event in chapter 24. Comparing the two passages together we see that all the disciples were present when Jesus said "whosoever sins ye forgive they are forgiven", and not merely the apostles. That is to say all Christians are given this power by Christ. In the sentence immediately preceding, Jesus has promised his disciples the Holy Spirit; every true believer has God's Holy Spirit and this is the reason why he is in a position to know and so can declare authoritatively the mind of God about sin and forgiveness. That is why St. Luke explains these words as preaching the gospel of forgiveness of sins. For the two mean the same thing. For when the gospel of forgiveness through the death of Christ is faithfully preached by Christians, publicly or privately the hearers accepting it or rejecting it, is the way by which their sins are forgiven or retained.

Perhaps the worst feature of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the necessity of confessing sins privately to a priest is the damage it does to the priest's own soul. It is not possible to listen to all the evil thoughts and imaginations of sinful men and women week in and week out without being injured in one's own imagination. I do not elaborate on this point except to say that this danger is well recognised by authorities in the Church of Rome itself, such as in the bulls of August 13, 1632 and by Canon 904 of the 1917 Codex of Roman Catholic Canon Law.

The use of the confessional box as an opportunity for sins of the flesh is referred to in the Catholic Encyclopaedia, vol. 14 p. 134, "Numerous popes have denounced this crime vehemently", and it lists some of the papal declarations on the subject. The frequency of the denunciations is an index to how real the temptation is. It would be strange, and difficult to understand, if God had in fact provided as the only way of forgiveness a method which subjected His ministers to such temptations, but, as I say, the Bible knows nothing about this necessity of confessing sins to anyone but to God, apart from apologising and making restitution to those we have wronged.

The doctrine is full of inconsistencies and the practice has led to gross immoralities. Also, it is quite out of keeping with the teaching of Scripture which invites all sinners to come directly to God through Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man. If we are willing to confess to Him, and to turn from those sins in repentance then, because Christ died for sinners, we will receive, straight away, forgiveness and the assurance that God has blotted them out of his sight. So we have peace with God.

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