

BOX 80A

PURGATORY - II

By D. B. Knox

"The Protestant Faith"

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It is well known that the Roman Catholics believe not only in Heaven and Hell but also in a third place called Purgatory in which the souls of the faithful suffer after death, so that through its cleansing fires they endure any punishment for their sins which was not completed before their death. It is generally taught, following St. Thomas Aquinas, that the cleansing fire of Purgatory is the same fire as that of Hell, inflicting similar pain, the difference being that those in Purgatory do not suffer eternally, though it may be for a very long time.

Protestants do not believe in the existence of Purgatory for two reasons. Firstly because it is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Such silence would be extraordinary if the place were in fact real; because it would then be such an important place to know about. The Bible makes no mention of it because it does not exist!

Roman Catholics themselves recognise that Purgatory is not referred to in the Bible. Thus the Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott in his book "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma" page 483, says "Holy Writ teaches the existence of the cleansing fire indirectly", but the chief verse he quotes for even such indirect teaching comes from the Old Testament Apocrypha and not from the Bible which is used by Christ and the Apostles. On the next page Ott goes on: "The main proof for the existence of the cleansing fire lies in the testimony of the Fathers". By these words he admits that it is not to be proved from Scripture.

The second reason why Protestants reject the doctrine of Purgatory is that not only is it not taught in Scripture, but it is directly contrary to what Scripture does in fact teach about the state of Christians after death. Thus Scripture teaches that at death those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord go to be with Him in Heaven. For example we may recall Jesus' words to the repentant thief crucified with Him at Calvary

"To-day thou shalt be with me in paradise". If anyone needed the cleansing fires of Purgatory, surely it was this murderer, but his repentance, and his faith in Christ as Lord, brought him within the forgiving mercy of God.

The same is true of all who imitate his example of repentance and faith, at death they go to be with Christ in paradise. Thus in Revelation 14:13 we read "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works follow with them". This promise of rest to those who die trusting in the Saviour is very different from the concept of entering into the punishment and suffering of Purgatory at death. Recall our Lord's parable about the beggar, Lazarus who immediately at death was carried by the angels into the presence of the great saints of God, and was comforted, to quote our Lord's words. Or again we may think of what St. Paul said to the Philippians, that death meant being with Christ which is far better. (Phil. 1:21) The Apostle would not have described entry into Purgatory with its intensification of suffering as being far better. So his words to the Philippians exclude the possibility of Purgatory, moreover, we have his plain statement in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, Christ is now in Heaven, so that those who die in Him are present with Him there. Nothing could be clearer, absent from the body, present with the Lord.

But not only does the doctrine of Purgatory contradict the plain statements of Scripture, it also contradicts the main doctrine of the gospel which is that Christ has completely atoned for all our sins on Calvary. His infinite merits are more than sufficient to counter-balance all our demerit, so that there is no need for a place like Purgatory where we can make additional satisfaction for our sins. In fact the Gospel of full forgiveness in Christ and the doctrine of making satisfaction in Purgatory are contrary to each other. We are not therefore surprised that there is no mention of Purgatory in the Bible.



Since the doctrine of Purgatory contradicts plain Scriptural statements as well as important Scriptural doctrine, it is not surprising that it presents some curious problems and inner contradictions. For example, I have never seen any explanation by Roman Catholic writers about what happens to those who have just entered Purgatory at the Second Coming of Christ. When our Lord returns there will of course be no further place for Purgatory. Souls that ought to enter Purgatory on the theory that they need to be cleansed from their sins go straight to be with Christ at His coming. If this will be so at Christ's coming, why do we need to postulate a Purgatory now? for what God will do then He can do for every soul now, as indeed the Bible teaches that He does do, namely He forgives our sins completely, without any Purgatorial punishment.

Then the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences contradicts the purpose of Purgatory. If the soul needs the cleansing purgatorial fires for its cleansing, how can that time be shortened by an indulgence? For a plenary indulgence is said to remit all the punishment due in Purgatory.

Although Purgatory cannot be based on any teaching of Scripture, Roman Catholic theologians appear to base it on two separate concepts, firstly on the justice of God which requires satisfaction, and secondly, on the need of the soul to be purified. But as I have said neither of these principles holds when Christ comes again, so why should they be insisted upon when Christ calls His child home to Him at death?

Purgatory is a terrifying prospect to the ordinary Roman Catholic. To mitigate the fear of Purgatory a little pamphlet is circulated amongst Roman Catholics in Australia entitled "Escaping Purgatory" (No. 478 of the Australian Catholic Truth Society Record). The pamphlet teaches that it is possible to escape Purgatory completely through the sacrament of Extreme Unction, that is, through the anointing of the dying person with holy oil by the Priest. In establishing its case, the writer has some difficulty with the fact that so many Roman Catholic saints have

claimed that they have had visions confirming that almost all Roman Catholics go to Purgatory. The writer has to dismiss these visions as unreliable; even though they are vouched for by such Roman Catholic saints as St. Bernadette.

In dealing with the problem that the justice of God requires the soul to go through Purgatory the writer reminds the reader that Christ's death is more than sufficient for all our sins, which of course is what the Reformation affirmed, and Protestants see no reason why Christ's benefits should only be obtained through Extreme Unction, since the Scripture teaches that we obtain these benefits through faith. The pamphlet concludes with a prayer for a happy death, that is to say a death which would include the sacrament of Extreme Unction and thus free the soul from Purgatory; and rather inconsistently, it adds at the bottom of this prayer "seven years indulgence for each time recited" as though forgetful that the person who prays the prayer is asking not to go to Purgatory at all! These additional words do not reflect much confidence in the efficacy of the prayer!

One of the most extraordinary teachings with regard to Purgatory is that which concerns the scapular. A scapular is a small piece of stuff about two inches square suspended round the neck by woollen strings; though nowadays a metal medal may take the place of the piece of cloth. It is taught on the authority of the Papacy that those who wear the scapular in honour of the Virgin Mary will be freed from Purgatory on the first Saturday after their death; but it is sometimes taught (e.g. in the book "The Holy Scapular" by Duffy, published in Dublin in 1882, and I quote from page 16) "this privilege can only be counted on if subscriptions to the Confraternity are not in arrears".

Then again in connection with the doctrine of Purgatory there is the extraordinary teaching with regard to what is called the heroic act of charity. This is a form of flagellation of the soul. It is taught in "The Dictionary of Moral Theology" produced by Cardinal Roberts on page 570 that a Roman Catholic may "offer to God on behalf of the souls in Purgatory all the satisfactory works which he will perform during his lifetime



and all the suffrages that his prayers may accrue to him after death. This offering is an act of true charity, indeed of heroic charity, because the offerer is prepared to assume undiminished pains in Purgatory in order that other souls may be released the sooner from Purgatory". We see here what an extraordinary picture of God results from this doctrine of Purgatory when it is thought that God is pleased by the self inflicted torment of our souls to help release from the purgatorial prison other suffering souls.

The objections to the doctrine of Purgatory are manifold: it diminishes the greatness of Christ's death for us, for purgatory means that His death is not regarded as sufficient to cover all the satisfaction due to our sins: but we must also make our own satisfaction in purgatory.

It undermines the peace and joy which God intends His children to experience as they contemplate the future in the knowledge that not even death can separate us from His love and fellowship, but perhaps the most serious result of the teaching about purgatory is the distortion which it gives to the character of God for it effectively obscurs His overflowing mercy and forgiveness.

It is good to know that the doctrine is a chimera, corresponding to nothing in reality. In contrast, our minds should constantly reflect on the sure promises of God in Scripture, that if we trust in Christ death will not bring separation from Him but only closer fellowship in His presence in Heaven.

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