

Considering Catholicism?

A Brief Examination of The Differences Between Biblical Protestantism and the Church of Rome

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Opening Thoughts...

From time to time, I am approached by someone within the Protestant Evangelical fold with a question about the Catholic Church. It usually goes something like this: "Pastor...have you heard that so-and-so has become a Catholic?" Or "My friend has gone back to the Catholic Church? Why would they do that?" Good questions.

My attempts, as a local church pastor, to comment on the Church of Rome, must be characterized by respect and appreciation. This is especially important to me as I have shared many hours of fellowship with Catholic friends in the Pro-Life movement. In addition, I genuinely believe that many people in the Church of Rome are truly Christians and belong to the family of Christ. Further, Catholics often demonstrate a passion for charity and good works that can only be admired! Nonetheless, I am a Protestant Evangelical by choice. Although I was raised by a Catholic father who was born in Sicily, the Church of Rome does not appeal to me. Thus, I exhort any who ask about Catholicism to examine its doctrines carefully. My conclusion is that those who are saved in the Catholic Church have eternal life despite the confusing and complicated teachings of Rome. God saves His elect people in all Christian communities. But the question remains: what are the main differences between the Church of Rome and say...a typical Evangelical Presbyterian Church? And do those differences...really matter? In a word...*yes!*

This issue has gained new focus with Benedict's assertions as reported in the summer of 2007. He re-affirmed his support for the key doctrines of Vatican 2. Those important meetings for the Church of Rome took place from 1962 to 1965. Many people, both Protestant and Catholic, have misunderstood the outcome of Vatican 2. Thus, Benedict's clarification of the key differences remaining between these religious communities was actually quite timely. In short, in the summer of 2007, Benedict reminded the world of the Catholic view. Namely, that the Catholic Church "is the one true church." He was eager to make it clear that Vatican 2 did not alter the Catholic conviction that Rome is the only true church. He acknowledged that there are other Christian gatherings but he insisted that salvation is found in the Church of Rome. Actually, he suggested that other gatherings, outside of the Catholic Church, are not really churches. Thus, those who suggest that the differences between Catholics and Protestants are "infinitesimal" are quite wrong.

This position taken by Benedict should not surprise the world. In reality, there remains a great chasm between Rome and the Protestant Church. Current Catholic leadership still affirms the Council of Trent which was held from in the 1500's. The key tenets of that council have never been rescinded. Thus, Benedict demonstrated genuine integrity in reminding the world that Vatican 2 did not create doctrinal peace between Catholics and Protestants.

Thus, the Protestant Christian considering the Church of Rome should be encouraged to study carefully. Aligning oneself with Rome is more than just "returning home" to the "Mother church." It is more than just embracing a more "high church" approach to the same Christian faith. Rather, affiliation with Rome means accepting the teachings of the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. Those teachings are often very different from Biblical Protestantism which itself is rejected by Rome as inadequate. This leads us to several questions that often come my way.

In the interest of clarity, I shall examine some of the key issues in a question and answer format. Allow me to remind the reader that caution and respect must be operative in this discussion. Yet, Jesus himself said "The truth will set you free!" (John 8:32)

Questions and Answers...

Question: Why do many Catholics insist that their church is the "true church?" And does this belief have to do with the Papacy?

The Catholic Church believes that the Bishop of Rome is the authoritative head of Christendom on Earth. They argue that this position was ordained by the Lord Jesus Christ himself as indicated in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 16:13-19 (NIV) ¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Protestants believe that the rock referred to here is not Peter personally or any office he might hold. Rather, it is his confession in verse 16 that Jesus was the Christ. There is no indication that Jesus had anything like the Papacy in mind in his comments. In fact, the teaching that Peter was appointed as head of the church on earth and that he would have successors in that same role defies history. First, it is obvious that if anyone was the leading figure in the first century church after the Ascension of Christ, it was Paul not Peter. Second, there is little if any evidence that the early church fathers understood Peter to have received such a role. Quite remarkably, a Catholic historian now deceased wrote the following:

“Of all the Fathers who interpret these passages in the Gospels, (Matt. 16:18, John 21:17) not a single one applies them to the Roman bishops as Peter’s successors...Not one of them has explained the rock or foundation on which Christ would build his Church as the office given to Peter to be transmitted to his successors, but they understood by it either Christ Himself, or Peter’s confession of faith in Christ; often both together.” (Johann Joseph Ignaz von Dollinger; The Pope and the Council, Boston, Roberts, 1869, p. 74; quoted in Roman Catholicism, Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us, p. 279, Armstrong, General Editor, Moody press, Chicago, 1994)

History has revealed some fine leaders of the Church of Rome and also some who were anything but Godly. In any case, I do not find the Papacy in Scripture and I personally struggle with any man allowing himself to be called “Holy Father.” The Lord Jesus Christ said:

Matthew 23:8-9 (NIV) ⁸ "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven."

Obviously, Jesus did not mean that my four sons should not refer to me as their father. He was talking about spiritual titles. Indeed, Jesus himself in his prayer found in John 17, addressed God this way:

John 17:11 (NIV) ¹¹ "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one."

For this reason, I do not address friends in the Priesthood by “Father” but by “Pastor.” But a Catholic response to these points might include the truism that Protestants have “many Popes!” We certainly do have multiple sources of authority and that leads to great differences in how we live out our Christian faith. However, I find exactly that reality in the Word of God and Paul warned against even as he acknowledged it:

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (NIV) ¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

The existence of divisions in the church has always been a problem. But the unscriptural doctrine of the Papacy does not present a compelling solution.

Question: Do Catholics believe the Bible is the Word of God? And what is “sola scriptura?”

Yes, but they do not accept the Reformation Doctrine of “Sola Scriptura,” that is “Scripture Alone.” For the Catholic, the teachings of Rome and its leadership hold the same authority as the Bible. Thus, if an Evangelical asks why Catholics believe in, for example, Purgatory....the

answer may be because the Catholic Church teaches it. If it is pointed out that it cannot be found in the Word of God, the response will be “Yes, but the church teaches it.” It is this kind of thinking and the abandonment of the Reformation Doctrine of Sola Scriptura that has led to the many unbiblical doctrines set forth by Rome.

Following the thinking of Catholic leaders can be quite a challenge. A former classmate of mine years ago at Gordon-Conwell Seminary was Scott Hahn. I knew Scott and his wife Kimberly to be fine and bright people whose company I occasionally enjoyed. Some years back, they joined the Catholic Church and Scott has become one of the major apologists for Rome. In one of his books, he mentions that he came to believe that “Faith Alone” was not taught in the Bible. We do not agree, but setting that aside for a moment, I find his comment curious. In making it, he seems to be suggesting that if a doctrine is not supported by Scripture then it should not be embraced. Yet nowhere in Scripture do we find the exaltation of Mary as Co-mediatrix, Purgatory, and the Catholic doctrine of Sainthood which resembles a religious “Hall of Fame” with Rome designating who is included, and other teachings. Above all we do not find the Doctrine of Transubstantiation.

In short, our Catholic friends love the Bible but see it as sharing authority with the Church of Rome and its traditions. In addition, they consider the books called “The Apocrypha” to be part of the Word of God despite the fact that the Jews of Jesus’ day did not. The Protestant Bible containing 66 books is consistent with the Bible of the early church.

Catholics often argue that the church preceded the Bible itself, so that it is logically in a position of shared authority with the Word of God. This idea has always reminded me of our United States Constitution. The colonies preceded the Constitution but they developed it to be their governing document. The subsequent congresses and legislatures were to be under its authority. It can be amended only in the wake of a laborious and thorough process. In a similar way, Rome seems to “amend” the Word of God with additions and strained interpretations. But the Bible was in no way meant to be amended! For Jesus, what the Bible said, God said!

Sometimes the idea of “Tradition” explains Catholic teaching. But one need not look far to find the Lord Jesus Christ condemning the use of traditions over the clear teaching of the Word of God. A good example:

Matthew 15:1-6 (NIV) ¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" ³ Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ⁵ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' ⁶ he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

It should also be pointed out that the Catholic Church did not decide which books are in the Bible. The process of inclusion took place over a long period in the early church and can be attributed to a number of Holy Spirit led events. But no official council in Rome ever sat down and said “These are the books to include!” Historians tell us that Athanasius, the Bishop of

Alexandria, distributed a list of the books we still consider the New Testament “canon” or collection. That was at Easter in the year 367AD. Ironically, as mentioned above, this list did not include the Apocryphal books accepted by Rome at a later date. The Apocryphal books were never regarded as Sacred Scripture in the early church.

Question: *Why is Rome sometimes called a “Sacramental church?”*

The Church of Rome is essentially a “Sacramental Church.” What do we mean by that? For Catholics, salvation is attained and retained thru the Sacraments as given by the church. For Rome, to be a Christian is to receive the Sacraments as understood by Rome. Failure to be Baptized, go to Confession, and attend Mass and particularly to receive the Eucharist is unacceptable. In Catholic theology, the Sacraments themselves have the power to confer grace. Thus, a baptized child has a secure soul. Receiving the Eucharist is receiving Christ, not merely a symbol of Christ. For Rome, true Christian participation is an ongoing commitment to the Sacraments.

Question: *What do Catholics mean by “Transubstantiation?”*

The Doctrine of Transubstantiation is at the center of Catholic thought. The Mass includes the Eucharist and Catholics must believe in this teaching. In fact, Rome continues to hold to the following view as articulated by the Council of Trent:

(Canon 3) “If anyone says that the sacrifice of the Mass is one only of praise and thanksgiving....and ought not to be offered for the living and the dead, for sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities, let him be anathema.” (Council of Trent; 1562).

It should be clear that this is not just a small difference of opinion as to what we are doing when we receive Communion. For the Catholic, the prayer of the Priest actually brings about a change in the symbols. They believe that the bread and juice (or wine) actually become the body and blood of Christ. Although they remain unchanged in appearance and taste outwardly, they are inwardly changed in their “essence.”

To call others “anathema” (eternally condemned) for not believing this teaching explains why Protestants struggle to have real fellowship with Catholic neighbors. We may have friendships with individual Catholics and even times of worship together. But the Catholic who understands his church’s teaching on the Eucharist is told to see his Protestant neighbor as “anathema.” Fortunately, many Catholics dismiss the idea that those who reject Transubstantiation are cursed. I’ve even had Priests tell me that. My point is that Protestants ought not to over-react to the official teaching and take the view that all Catholics are the “enemy.” Or that Catholics cannot be Christians or that no fellowship can be enjoyed between the two groups. We should, however, proceed to examine the Doctrine of Transubstantiation with respect and integrity.

The critical question is this: is Transubstantiation found in the Bible? I do not think so. My Catholic friends point me to John Chapter 6. There we read:

John 6:51-64 (NIV) ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." ⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ⁵³ Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. ⁶⁰ On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" ⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? ⁶² What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. ⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him.

As the exchange indicates, even some of the disciples found Jesus' words puzzling. Since the Old Testament forbade cannibalism and the drinking of blood, some were scandalized by the very word picture. Do we have any reason to think that Jesus was being literal here? I find none. He makes no mention of a prayer that would change the symbols. He cannot possibly have meant that the bread and cup he was holding were, at that moment, his flesh and blood. He was standing there with them!

Rather, Jesus explained that just as their ancestors had sustained physical life by eating the bread from Heaven, spiritual life would be gained from taking him in, as symbolized by the elements. No first century Jew when celebrating the Passover believed he was consuming the original meal. In the same fashion, it's impossible to believe that those to whom Jesus was speaking would believe they were eating his flesh and blood literally. It is equally unlikely that they were anticipating Transubstantiation.

In my view, the real error in Catholic teaching on the Lord's Supper is a failure to appreciate the Literal/Figurative issue in his Gospel. There are many places where Jesus speaks figuratively but he is taken literally. Consider that Nicodemus took Jesus literally about the second birth, when he was obviously speaking in a figurative manner:

John 3:3-6 (NIV) ³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." ⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

Another example is found with the woman at the well. She thinks Jesus is speaking about literal water. We read:

John 4:13-15 (NIV) ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

The enemies of Jesus took him literally and totally misunderstood his response about his authority. We read:

John 2:18-21 (NIV) ¹⁸ Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰ The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

It is important to keep in mind that there are many times in John's Gospel where this Literal/Figurative confusion arises. But, if one wants to "find" Transubstantiation in John 6, one can "see" it there. The text, in my view, in no way yields that understanding. My sense is that Catholics are simply delighted with the mysterious nature of the concept that they have taken Jesus literally into themselves. In contrast, for me, the idea that I would chew upon his flesh and eventually expel it from my body is totally unthinkable.

Someone might ask "But does it matter? So what if they think that and it turns out not to be true?" That question reminds me of a Protestant friend who joined the Church of Rome some years back. It was, apparently, the Eucharist and the Mass that attracted her. She said to me most sincerely "Richard, can you imagine if that is true?" Of course it would be marvelous to contemplate the idea that Jesus is literally nearby in the flesh. But my response was "Yes but can you imagine if it is *not* true? If it is not, you are worshipping bread and juice!" Little wonder that some of the Reformers considered the Mass to be idolatrous.

Beyond that, I've ministered to many Catholics who think they have "received Christ" in the Eucharist. They've had no concept of salvation by faith but rather by Sacrament. I'm sure that many Catholics take the Eucharist as a celebration of genuine faith. But the danger is in presenting the symbol as the means of salvation. [The same is true of Protestants who think they are Christians because they were baptized.]

Another issue arises...many Catholics are fond of saying something like this: "Well, only when I joined the Catholic Church did I learn that the early church definitely believed in Transubstantiation. Everyone agreed on it and it was only the Protestants who later changed it." That seems to be a very popular argument advanced by some Catholics. My response is meant to be polite. If someone wants to believe in Transubstantiation, that is their decision. But no one should argue that "Everyone in the early church believed in it."

The writer William Webster, in his book **The Church of Rome at the Bar of History**, has said this:

"...there was a considerable difference of opinion among the fathers on the precise nature of these things, reflected in the fact that the ancient church produced no official

dogma of the Lord's Supper. Interpretation of the meaning of the Eucharist in the writings of the Fathers must be done with great caution for it is very easy to take a preconceived theology of the Eucharist and read it back into their comments and teachings." (Webster, p. 118, Banner of Truth, 1995)

I highly recommend this book for anyone desiring to study this complex historical issue. In a nutshell, there were some church fathers who believed in some change to the elements but did not use the word "Transubstantiation." Justin and Irenaeus (100AD/140AD) can be understood that way. Yet, Tertullian (155AD) taught that the wine and bread were symbols representing Christ. The great church father Augustine (354AD) insisted that Christ could not be physically present as he is in Heaven. In short, neither Protestants nor Catholics should insist that their view was the "original" view. Webster writes:

"These views of Augustine are obviously in direct opposition to the Council of Trent. In fact, teachings such as his were anathematized by that Council. This highlights once again the lack of patristic consensus on the teaching of this major doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. The view of the transformation of the elements into the literal body and blood of Christ eventually triumphs within the Church but not without consistent opposition." (Webster, p. 121)

A church such as Cornerstone holds to the simple Protestant Reformed view that the Lord's Supper is a very special Sacrament. When Communion is taken, Christ is present in a wondrous way and we are spiritually fed as we celebrate the new covenant in his blood and provided by his body. Our belief is that the symbols do not change but that **we are changed** ever more deeply as we do this "in remembrance of him." (1 Cor. 11:24-25)

One last point. Some Catholic writers are brutally blasphemous in their understanding of Transubstantiation. Their willingness to exalt the Priest at the cost of God's glory is troubling indeed. John O'Brien actually says this:

"...the Priest brings Christ down from heaven, and renders him present on our altar as the eternal victim for the sins of man-not once but a thousand times! The Priest speaks and lo! Christ, the eternal and omnipotent God, bows his head in humble obedience to the priest's command." (The Faith of Millions, John O'Brien, Huntington, Ill Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1974 pp. 255-256; quoted in The Roman Catholic Controversy, James R. White, Minneapolis, Bethany House, 1996, p. 161)

In my view, the idea that the Son of God bows in humble obedience to any man on Earth is unthinkable and ought not to be asserted. Such a failure to grasp the Glory of God speaks for itself.

Question: Do Catholics believe in salvation by works?

Catholics certainly believe that the Death and Resurrection of Christ are essential to salvation. But they do not believe that salvation is by "faith alone" (sola fide). Rome's teaching on the inclusion of works can be very confusing because there is certainly a strong emphasis on "merit" on the part of the believer. A way of understanding this might be as follows: If one had to go from New York to Los Angeles to be saved, the Catholic might see Jesus as taking

them from New York to the California border. Then they would have to somehow travel the last few hundred miles on their own. The Protestant view, and I believe the Biblical view, sees Jesus as taking the believing person from New York to Los Angeles. His own efforts have no role in his salvation.

Does Rome really teach salvation by faith in Christ plus works? That conclusion is hard to dismiss. If nothing else, Rome teaches that the Sacraments are necessary for salvation. But for Rome, righteousness is “infused” into the Christian so that he or she actually becomes righteous to some extent. As such, he or she can please God and earn “merit.” The reformers taught that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. Rome still insists that we are justified by Christ plus our “good works.” Catholic writer Karl Keating puts it this way:

“The Catholic Church, not surprisingly, understands justification differently. It sees it as a true eradication of sin and a true sanctification and renewal. The soul becomes objectively pleasing to God and so merits heaven. It merits heaven because now it is actually good.” (Catholicism and Fundamentalism, Ignatius Press, 1988, pp. 167-168.)

There is nothing new in Keating’s teaching. His words reflect the Council of Trent mentioned earlier. At that meeting, the following statement was crafted:

“If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning thereby that no other cooperation is required for him to obtain the grace of justification, and that in no sense is it necessary for him to make preparation and be disposed by a movement of his own will; let him be anathema.” (Session Six; Canon 9)

This doctrine “Faith Alone” was clearly the main point of contention during the Protestant Reformation. Luther himself (1483-1546) struggled as a young monk trying to find peace with God. He found peace when he grasped that those who are justified (declared “Just”) are indeed justified by their faith and not their works. For Luther, Paul’s teachings by the Holy Spirit were life-giving! In particular:

Galatians 3:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰ All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” ¹¹ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.”

Allow me to re-iterate. Rome teaches that faith is necessary for salvation but not “faith alone.” However, the New Testament teaches that faith alone is sufficient. The place of good works is also important for the Protestant. But he or she understands good works as *the fruit* of salvation and not its cause.

Some Catholic apologists argue that the Bible does not use the words “Faith Alone.” That is true. But neither does the Bible use the word “Trinity” and yet we believe in it as a compelling theological deduction about the three persons of the Godhead. As to “Faith Alone” being the focal point of the Gospel, it seems impossible to understand the New Testament apart from that doctrine. If our good works contribute to our redemption in anyway, to any extent, how would we ever know if we are saved? Yet, John writes very clearly that we can be certain of our salvation. Consider:

1 John 5:11-13 (NIV) ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

It should also be said that faith in Christ necessarily leads to the evidence of salvation! Good works and righteousness are the fruit that God expects to see. Not to *get* saved but because we *are* saved! In my view, this was the point that James was trying to make in his much-misunderstood letter. His words are sometimes introduced into the faith discussion as evidence for the necessity of works. He writes:

James 2:18-24 (NIV) ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder. ²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

James was concerned with the "easy-believism" that suggests we can live in disregard for God and his laws. But when James says "²⁴ **You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone**" the reader must not misunderstand. What exactly is it that Abraham "did?" He brought his son Isaac to the altar proving that he trusted God and believed God's promises. The act that justified James was his belief; the evidence was his offering up of Isaac. His was not a faith devoid of works [the "work" of trust in God] In other words, faith will always be observed in our actions....sooner or later.

Question: Why do Catholics show such devotion to Mary?

Their exaltation of Mary is totally unbiblical. To suggest that she was without sin, and remained a virgin her whole life, defies the New Testament itself. While the Lord Jesus Christ clearly loved his earthly mother and arranged for her care, she was in no way Divine and did not play a part in our redemption except to have the privilege of carrying the Christ child.

The words of the "Ava Maria" represent a poor translation of the Biblical text. They are based on the statement of the angel in Luke 1. The angel was not addressing Mary as "full of grace" as if she was inherently righteous and without flaw. We read:

Luke 1:28 (NIV) ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

It literally says "You have found favor with God" or "You are highly favored." And she was! Following this angelic visitation, Mary's own words make it clear that she was a sinner herself eager to serve God. She said:

Luke 1:46-48 (NIV) ⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed..."

Here she has clearly described herself as needing a Savior! Thus, the Catholic teachings on Mary go well beyond the Bible. The New Testament confirms that she did not remain a virgin, and that she had other children. To exalt her as a model of virginal purity may seem respectful and pleasing, but it suggests that she be adored as some kind of goddess. In addition, the Bible makes no apology for the normal nature of her marriage to Joseph. We are reminded that it was a genuine marriage with marital intimacy by these words:

Matthew 1:24-25 (NIV) ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

I am saddened when I hear Catholics encouraged to take their concerns to Mary. But then we are told that this is not actually praying to her. Catholic theologians distinguish between devotion to the Saints, to Mary and prayer to God. Saintry devotion is called "dulia." Devotion to Mary is called "hyper-dulia" and "latria" means worship to God alone. It is difficult if not impossible to argue that speaking to and looking towards any person not present on Earth is not prayer. Since prayer is to be directed towards God alone, these distinctions are not, in my view, compelling. In any case, they are unnecessary if the Christian simply follows the Biblical teaching and casts their cares upon God Himself! (1 Peter 5:6-7)

Question: Why do Catholics promote people to Sainthood? Doesn't the Bible teach that those saved in Christ are Saints!

The Bible makes it clear that Christians are considered Saints by virtue of their connection by faith to the sinless Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ! I will not attempt to explain the unnecessary and unbiblical view of Rome on this point. It should suffice to point out this passage that shows who the Saints are:

Philippians 1:1-2 (NIV) ¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word used for "Saints" is the Greek "hagios" meaning "Holy Ones." The designation of the believers at Philippi and elsewhere as Saints had nothing whatever to do with a church decree or a spiritual "Hall of Fame." Praying to or adoring the deceased likewise is totally outside of the Word of God.

Question: Why does Rome teach that there is a place called "Purgatory?" Is that in the Bible?

No, it is not. Purgatory would be the place to which Catholics go to "work off" their remaining debt of sin. Because Rome does not teach the sufficiency of the Atonement of Christ, the sinner is left in a position whereby he or she must do their part. If they die before that task of merit-

gathering is complete, Purgatory will provide the opportunity to finish the work. The perceived need for "Purgatory" is a function of the notion of incomplete sanctification or becoming Holy.

For the Catholic, "Sanctification" leads to "Justification." That is, once made Holy enough the sinner can be saved. In contrast, the Bible teaches that Justification happens immediately upon rebirth. The Sanctification process then continues throughout the Christian's lifetime on Earth. Once again, this idea is readily dismissed once it is understood that the work of Christ is more than sufficient to redeem the penitent sinner. Purgatory cannot be necessary if one's sins are forgiven fully while still in the flesh. Salvation is granted upon genuine rebirth by faith alone. Otherwise the words of Jesus would make no sense:

John 11:25-26 (NIV) ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

In other words, you are justified when you truly believe! Little wonder the New Testament knows nothing of a place called Purgatory. (Catholic support for Purgatory may be found in the apocryphal book known as 2 Macc. 12: 39-45.) The Lord Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers speak of no such need. As an example, consider the penitent thief on the cross next to Jesus. We read:

Luke 23:42-43 (NIV) ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

If remaining sin had to be worked off in Purgatory (or if Baptism was necessary for eternal life) could there have been a more likely candidate to be sent there? Yet, upon his simple confession of faith, he was saved! In short, Purgatory is totally unbiblical and unnecessary.

Question: In view of the many unbiblical teachings of the Catholic Church, why then do Protestants join it? What is the attraction?

I have had many pleasant times of interaction with Catholic friends. As I said earlier, I'm sure that many Catholics are saved. I must also say that more than a few Catholics have attacked me as a heretic and anathema because of my pulpit comments over the years. There are people in each group, Protestant and Catholic, who are devoted to being contentious. Hence, I urge any Protestant Evangelical engaging in discussions with Catholics or those considering the Church of Rome to be Christ-like, patient and thoughtful. There are some genuine reasons that Rome has a continued appeal. Consider:

PROTESTANTISM is a curious blend of denominations, worship styles and theological preferences. In contrast, Rome presents a central authority and, theoretically, the opportunity to worship "together" in a worldwide communion at the same time. The hierarchy in Rome is clearly understood and Catholic clergy understand submission to those in authority over them.

Too often, Protestant clergy and worship leaders are totally independent and virtually "uncovered" in their ministries. For all of the scandalous sexual behavior of some in the

Priesthood, Protestants regularly fall into disrepute in their own pursuit of power, wealth and pleasure. Thus, for some people, Rome represents a clear alternative.

HISTORY and the role of the church are often disregarded by Protestant Evangelicals. The most independent among them, especially in the seeker movement, almost act as if the church of Jesus Christ started a few years ago when they started “their church.” Very often they are dismissive about creeds and the important milestones of the church thru the centuries. Even more often, poorly trained clergy do not understand the relationship between Word and Sacrament. If Rome errs on the side of too much “Sacramentalism” some Protestants tend to see the Sacraments as incidentals.

It fascinates me when visitors to our church indicate surprise at the use of the Apostle’s Creed. I’ve even had some say they thought that was from their grandmother’s church years ago. Such a person has no idea that the use of that Creed and others goes back nearly twenty centuries! Rome shows an appreciation for the church as an historical institution with deep roots.

MYSTERY seems to be a common factor among those who embrace Catholicism. The Mass and Transubstantiation in particular go beyond the sometimes sterile understanding found in Protestant worship. Where Protestant Evangelicals are cognitive in all things, Catholics are more able to allow for the unexplainable. Thus, they are more “open” to ideas and doctrines not found in Scripture but declared by the church. More than a few people have commented on the dignity and dimension of Catholic worship as opposed to Protestant worship. At times, Protestant worship more readily resembles a pep rally than an entrance into the awesome presence of God.

Quite often those who join the Church of Rome reveal an extraordinary experience in the Holy Spirit such as tongues-speaking or other remarkable interactions. In their view, they were then “led” to the “one true church” ...that is Rome. This kind of subjective experience is interesting but proves nothing. I myself had several remarkable experiences in the Holy Spirit but have never been inclined to embrace Rome. Furthermore, I have pastored many people whose life-changing experiences have led them *away* from Catholicism. Thus, for either Catholic or Protestant to say that the other side just doesn’t “get it” is not only ill-mannered by inaccurate. In the end, God saves His elect in different churches.

Having said these things, I repeat that I am not a Catholic but a Protestant by choice. Why? Because despite the shortcomings of Evangelical Protestantism, I cannot accept the extra-biblical teachings of Rome. The appeal of mystery, especially Transubstantiation, may be attractive but it is unconvincing. Beyond that, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome being given the title Jesus used for his Father simply horrifies me (see John 17). Hence, while there is much that I respect about Catholicism, I believe it turns a basically simple Biblical faith into a highly mysterious religion that lends itself to the worship of the church and its leadership more than the Son of God. Many Catholic funerals over the years have manifested this unfortunate peculiarity. Whether by a Pope or a celebrity, the plain Gospel of salvation by faith alone often seems to be unheard. Rather, the exaltation of people and even the encouragement to petition the dead that have passed on are prominent and dangerous elements.

I suspect that Rome in the Middle Ages tried to keep up with the grandeur of many powerful states and the elements of other religious. The adoration of Mary and the great cathedrals may

have been accommodations to cultural challenges. Thus, a Christian from the early centuries might be stunned at modern Catholicism (and modern Evangelicalism as well.) I also believe that many Catholics who insist that the early church was “always that way and always believed in these doctrines” are quite in error. Indeed, it interests me that that the fine British historian Paul Johnson, himself a Catholic, says this:

“The basic framework of the Mass existed in the second century...it consisted of readings from the memoirs of the apostles and the Old Testament; a sermon; a prayer followed by the kiss of peace and the distribution of the blessed bread and water. This Sunday Eucharist had become an absolute obligation by Justin’s time and the words of the central prayer became formalized in the next generation or two...the effect was to change an essentially simple ceremony into a much lengthier and more formal one, involving an element of grandeur...some of the ceremonial aspects were taken over from pagan rites, others from court practice, which became far more elaborate after the transfer to Constantinople...the object was to replace the magnificence of pagan ritual in the public mind...at the end of the fourth century John Chrysostom spoke of the Lord’s Table as ‘a place of terror and shuddering’...” (**The History of Christianity**, Paul Johnson, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976 p. 99.)

In my view, the simple Gospel message of salvation by faith alone, in Christ alone, is obscured by such trappings as the Mass and Catholic worship. I recall the testimony of a woman who told of her childhood when she had to sit by the Tabernacle where the unused bread from the Lord’s Supper was stored. Terrified, she wondered why “Jesus would be in there?” I doubt if that helped her understand God’s offer of salvation but it did leave her afraid of the church.

Too often, Catholic apologists argue that if Protestants would just study church history and really examine the teachings of Rome, they would embrace the Catholic Church. I have done so quite thoroughly and I have become more certain of my Biblical faith as expressed in Reformed Protestantism. In short, my own decision to be an Evangelical Protestant is summed up by writer Kim Riddlebarger who states:

“I have asked many of the same questions and spent many sleepless nights wrestling with God, as many who have made the journey to Rome...But I need to point out that the answers I found in the Scriptures are diametrically opposed to the arguments raised by those who have converted to Catholicism. I unashamedly side with the Protestant Reformers generally, and confessional Calvinism specifically, on all the issues central to this debate.” (**Roman Catholicism, Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us**, Armstrong, General Editor, Chicago, Moody Press, 1994, p. 222)

In the same manner, I have examined the issues and I happily remain committed to a Biblical Christianity. While I respect my Catholic friends and their zeal, I am convinced that on many important issues their doctrinal teachings are outside of the Bible and therefore dangerous and misleading. And I am reminded that it was the Lord Jesus Christ himself who said: **Matthew 22:29 (NIV) "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."**

God be Praised!

