

The Mediator and the Forgiveness of Sins

This is chapter VIII of a book written in 1941 entitled, "[Our Priceless Heritage Christian Doctrine In Contrast With Romanism](#)" by Henry M. Woods, D.D, LL.D.

How many Mediators are there between God and men?

The Word of God declares there is *only one Mediator and Advocate*, the Lord Jesus Christ. "There is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." I Tim. 2:5. He is the Mediator of the New Covenant. Heb. 9:15, 8:6. "Ye are come to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant." Heb. 12:24.

The Lord Jesus Christ is also the only Advocate for sinners. "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me." "If any man sin, 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." I John 2:1,2. "As Mediator and Advocate, Christ *ever lives to make intercession for all who come unto God by Him.*" Heb. 7:25, 9:24, Rom. 8:34.

Why is Christ the only Mediator and Advocate for all mankind?

Our Lord is the only Mediator and Advocate for all men, because He alone has both a divine and a human nature, standing between the holy God and sinful men; and also because of the perfect atoning sacrifice for sin which *He alone as the Son of God could offer*, and did offer, on the cross. Through Him alone our unworthy prayers, praises and service become acceptable to the Father; and through Him alone All grace and blessing are conveyed from the Father to us. "Through whom we have access by one Spirit unto the Father." Eph. 2:18. "By whom we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand." Rom. 5:2, Heb. 4:15, 16. "Accepted in the Beloved." Eph. 1:6.

What does the Roman Church teach concerning mediators?

The Church of Rome, *directly contrary to Holy Scripture*, teaches "That there are other mediators beside the Lord Jesus Christ. Bellarmine *De sanct.*, *beat.* I, 20. So also Council of Trent. Such supposed mediators are Joseph, Mary, saints and angels, etc.

Does not the Church of Rome, in teaching that there are other mediators beside the Son of God, commit a great sin?

The Church of Rome, in teaching that there are other mediators beside the Son of God, commits a great sin, not only in directly contradicting the Word of God, but also in *making sinful beings usurp the position which belongs to Christ alone.*

The Roman Church also contradicts Holy Scripture in *falsely asserting* that

"the departed saints know our hearts and secret thoughts." Bellarmine *De sanct. beat.* I, 20. Note that the Word of God declares exactly the opposite. "Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men." Acts 1:24. "For Thou, even *Thou only*, knowest the hearts of all the children of men." I Kings 8:39. "For *Thou only* knowest the hearts of the children of men." II Chron. 6:30.

Did the early Christian Church hold that there was any other Mediator but Christ, or did they worship or invoke saints, angels and Mary?

No, they did not. The Fathers of the early Church *opposed all such worship and invocation.* There are only 4 instances in the New Testament of acts of reverence being offered to saints and angels, and in all of these reverence and worship were promptly rejected and forbidden as disloyal to God. Cornelius the Centurion wishing to worship Peter, the people of Lystra intending to sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul, and twice in Revelation John wished to worship the angel who showed him great things, but they all refused to allow it, and the angel said twice, *Worship God.* Acts 10:25, 26, 14:13-15, Rev. 19:10, 22:8, 9.

Irenaeus, A.D. 180, said, "The Church *does nothing by invocation of angels,* but by directing her prayers to God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." So also St. Clement.

Origen, A.D. 230, declared, "Every prayer and supplication, intercession and thanksgiving is to be sent up to God. It is not reasonable to invoke angels. If they knew, *they would not suffer us to pray to any other but God.*"

Similarly, Athanasius *opposed calling on any created being in prayer.* A.D. 870.

St. Augustine, A.D. 389, taught, "Let not our religion be a cultus of dead men. The saints are to be honored by way of imitation, *not worshipped by way of religion.*"

The Council of Laodicea, A.D. 360, decreed, "Christians *ought not to invoke angels.* To do so is to forsake Christ and be guilty of idolatry. Let such a one be anathema."

Forgiveness of sins

According to the Word of God, who can forgive sins?

Only Almighty God can forgive sins, for He alone is Judge and lawgiver. It is His holy law we have broken. The Lord Jesus Christ has power to forgive sins because He is God. Psalm 51:4. Is. 33:22, Micah 7:18, 19, Mark 2:7, 10.

According to the Church of Rome, who can forgive sins?

The Church of Rome *falsely teaches that its priests can forgive sins.* It further declares, "that they pardon sins, not only as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, but as *Judges, and by way of jurisdiction!*" Bellarmine, *De Poenit.*, 3:2.

Note that in this declaration the Roman priest *not only usurps God's prerogative* of pardoning sins, but also *usurps His place as Judge!*

The Council of Trent in 1557 declared in its 14th session, Canon 9, "Whoever shall affirm that the priests' sacramental absolution is not a judician act, but only a ministry to pronounce and declare that the sins of the person confessing are forgiven, so that he believes himself to be absolved even though the priest should not absolve seriously, but in jest; or shall affirm that the confession of the penitent is not necessary in order to obtain absolution from the priest,— let him be *accursed*." Again, Canon 10, "Whoever shall affirm that priests who are living in mortal sin, do not possess the power of 'binding' and 'loosing' (that is, of condemning, or forgiving sin)— let him be *accursed*." What a repulsive dogma this is, *insulting to a holy God!* that absolution even when given hypocritically, or "in jest" is still efficacious, or the case of a priest Living in mortal sin, that is, himself destitute of divine grace, yet is still supposed to have the power of God to forgive — does not such doctrine prove that the Church which declares it is *apostate?*

Does Holy Scripture anywhere countenance such teaching?

God's Holy Word *nowhere gives any ground for such sinful teaching*. According to Scripture, no human being can forgive sins, and no human being can act as Judge. All such power belongs to God alone. It is the height of folly and impiety thus to put a sinful priest in the place of God!

God Alone Can Forgive Sins

If a human priest cannot forgive sins, what is the meaning of "the keys," of "binding and loosing," or of "remitting and retaining sins?" Matt. 16:19, John 20:23.

These expressions indicate a DECLARATIVE POWER ONLY; the right to proclaim in Christ's name and with His authority, that all who truly repent of sin and trust in Him for pardon and salvation, shall surely be forgiven and saved. But it is Christ alone, and not the minister, who forgives. According to God's Word, the minister is only a herald to announce what the King will do, on condition of the faith and repentance of the sinner. This was the teaching of the apostles, and of the early Church, before papal followers had corrupted it.

Remember Tertullian's declaration in the third century, that *all Christians have, like Peter, the "power of the Keys,"* to proclaim forgiveness and salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. And this has always been the doctrine of the Reformed Church.

The liturgy of the Church of England, after the general confession of sin, rightly declares, "He pardoneth and absolveth all who truly repent and unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel," showing plainly that it is Christ alone who pardons and absolves, not the minister.

What other Scriptures show that the power of the apostles and of all Christ's

ministers was declarative only?

Many texts which show that forgiveness and cleansing are God's prerogative. "There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared." "My soul waiteth for the Lord"; "Let Israel hope in the Lord"; "and He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." Psalm 130, the whole Psalm. Rev. 1:18 and 3:7, show that only Christ "opens" and "shuts" the door of mercy and of heaven. He alone can forgive, He alone can condemn.

Did the apostles ever claim the power to forgive sins?

Never. They spoke of themselves merely as Christ's messengers. St. Peter expressly exhorted Simon Magus to pray to God for forgiveness of his great sin. "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee." Acts 8:22-24. St. Peter thus declares it was God alone who could forgive sins. So also St. Paul. "Who is Paul, or who is Apollos, but ministers?" So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase." This is as much as to say: "We are nothing God is everything; all power and grace, forgiveness and salvation are His alone." I Cor. 3:5-7, II Cor. 5: 18, II Peter 4:11. Forgiveness is all of God alone.

The Ground of Forgiveness of Sins

What is the ground on which sinners may receive forgiveness of sins?

The Word of God teaches that the only ground or plea on which sinners may receive forgiveness and acceptance with God, is the perfect atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore our guilt, paid our debt, fulfilled the righteousness of the law for us, and set us free from condemnation forever. John 1:29, 5:24, Rom. 8:1, Phil. 3:9, I Peter 2:24.

What does the Church of Rome declare to be the ground on which sinners may receive forgiveness?

The Church of Rome teaches that not only is Christ's merit and atoning death, but *also the merit and good works of saints and the Virgin Mary are the ground of forgiveness*. These works are called "super-abundant satisfactions," or "works of super-erogation."

What is meant by "super-abundant satisfaction," or "works of super-erogation"?

The papal Church teaches that the saints have "*done works more perfect than God's law requires*"; and that "*good works merit eternal life.*" Bellarmine, *De Indulg.*, 3:2, 3. *Tolet. De Instruct. sacerdot.*, 6:21. On the other hand, God's Word declares that no man has merit, or can win eternal life. "All our righteousness (our imagined meritorious works) are as filthy rags." Isa. 64:6. "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all these things which are commanded you, say: "*We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do.*" Luke 17:10.

In the Roman service commemorating Thomas Becket is found this petition; "O

good Jesus, forgive us our debts through the merits of Thomas, and raise us up from the three fold death. O good Jesus, release us from our sins that bind us, through Thomas' wounds. All things give place and obey Thomas—pestilences, diseases, death and devils; fire, air, earth and the seas. Thomas filled the world full of glory. He maketh the lepers clean. He looseth them that are bound from the bonds of death." It would be difficult to find elsewhere, in the same compass, more nonsense and falsehood than these words contain! St. Peter exhorts all Christians: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the King as supreme," etc. I Peter 2:13. Thomas Becket was guilty of grave disobedience and rebellion against his King, breaking both the law of God and of the realm. How then can a criminal be worshipped as a saint, and how can it truthfully be said that "Becket filled the world with glory" when he really filled it with shame and crime?

Salvation By God's Free Grace Alone

Human merit and good works are *the opposite of God's free grace* which is found in *Christ alone*.

Only by His perfect merit and righteousness can men be saved. "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified." Rom. 3:20. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us—being justified by His grace through Jesus Christ our Saviour." Titus 3:5-7. "By grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast." Eph. 2:8, 9. "He hath saved us—not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." II Tim. 1:9, Rom. 3:24, 26, 6:23, Gal. 2:16, 21, 3:10, 13.

The Apostle Paul repeatedly points out the irreconcilable antagonism there is between human merit and divine grace; between trusting to one's own good works for salvation, and trusting in the righteousness of Christ. These are mutually exclusive; salvation cannot be partly by human merit and partly by Christ's righteousness. It must be wholly by Christ's death and righteousness, or not at all. Rom. 4: 4, 5, 11:6, Gal. 1: 6-8, 5:4.

What other grave errors does the Church of Rome teach in this connection, which are entirely opposed to the true Gospel?

The Church of Rome teaches:

1. "That men may satisfy the justice of God by their sufferings." Council of Trent, sess. 4. Bellarmine, De Indulg., 1:2, De Poenit., 4:7.
2. "That there are persons who endure more punishment than their sins deserve." Bellarmine, De Indulg., 1:2.
3. "That men's good works do merit eternal life, not only by the promise of God, but also by their own worth and dignity!" Bellarmine, De Justif., 5:7.
4. "That men may merit not only eternal life, but also an increase of glory." Council of Trent, sess. 6. Bellarmine, De Justif., 5:20.

5. "That there are men perfectly righteous in this life." Bellarmine, *De Justif.*, 4:10, 12, 13.

Human Merit and Good Works Are "Filthy Rags"

What Scriptures show that the Church of Rome's whole position regarding human merit and good works is vicious, and that everyone of these points is opposed to the true Gospel?

The Bible plainly states that the best of men have sin: none are perfectly righteous. 'There is not a just man on earth that doeth good and sinneth not.' There is none righteous, no, not one. Eccles. 7:20, Prov. 20:9, Rom. 3:10, Phil. 3: 12.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." I John 1:8, Jas. 3:2.

"We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags." Isa. 64:6.

So far from men suffering more than their sins deserve God's Word says: "Thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve." Ezra 9:13. "Know therefore that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth." Job 11:6. To trust in any degree to human merit or one's own good works is a false hope that will lead to eternal ruin; it is the "wood, hay and stubble," that will burn up before our eyes in the Day of Judgment! If salvation is sought in any degree by works, then it is not of grace. Rom. 11:6. Trust in good works or human merit makes the cross of Christ of none effect. Gal. 5:4.

Does the Reformed Church teach this great Gospel truth, of the utter failure of human merit and good works, and that salvation is received only through the atoning death and perfect righteousness of Christ, which is "imputed to the sinner, and received by faith alone"?

The Reformed Church does *joyfully proclaim this blessed truth*, just as the Apostolic Church proclaimed it in the first century; Augustine in the fifth century; Bernard in the 12th century; and Luther in the 16th century, proclaimed it. We dare not proclaim any other Gospel, for that would be treason to our Lord; it would make His cross "of none effect," and would by false hopes lead multitudes down the broad road to perdition. Gal. 1:8, 9, I Cor. 1:17, II Peter 2:1.

Good Works Necessary As Evidence of Saving Faith

Does the Scripture doctrine that we are saved solely by what Christ has done for us, and not by our own merit, imply that good works are not vitally important?

By no means. Good works are indispensable, not as the ground of forgiveness and salvation, but as the evidence of it. "Faith without works is dead,"—is a hollow, spurious faith. Good works show that we truly believe and obey God; without them, a profession of faith is empty and useless. Christ redeemed us that we shall be a people "zealous of good works." After declaring that men

are saved “not by works of righteousness which we have done,” St. Paul adds, that “they who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works”; and later repeats: “and let ours also (Christian believers) learn to maintain good works—that they be not unfruitful.” Titus 2:14, 3:8, 14, I Tim. 2:10, 5:10, 6:18, II Tim. 2:21, 3:17, Jas. 2:17, 20, 26.

John Calvin admirably said: “It is faith alone that justifies; and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”

Thus Holy Scripture reveals that Christ is the only Mediator between God and men; that God alone can forgive sin; and that the ground of His forgiveness is not human merit or good works, but the atoning death of the Son of God upon the cross, and His perfect righteousness fulfilling the law of God for us. Gal. 2:16, Rom. 11:6.

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