

## Why I am not Roman Catholic

Each generation of Protestants must re-think the decisions of the 16th century. We must be able to say why we today are not Roman Catholics.” So said Protestant Bishop Hans Lilje of Hannover in 1957. And he was right. In this new millennium we need to clarify again why we are Protestants. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) Protestants have witnessed an extraordinary transformation of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), and an example of which was the 1972 dialogue between Pentecostals and Roman Catholics.

In the last few decades the RC has become increasingly attractive for evangelical Protestants.

Evangelicals admire the strong leadership of Pope John Paul II. They see the RC as a symbol of unity in a broken world – a church daring to be counter-cultural. Some claim we ought to concentrate on what binds us rather than on historical disagreements. The question is, has the RC changed so much that historical differences can be overlooked? Is there evidence of any change in the fundamental doctrines in the Church of Rome? I believe that there has been no change in the doctrines, which divide Protestants from the RCC and there likely will be no change.

### **Various Differences**

The RCC does share a number of doctrines with the heirs of the Reformation. Yet there remains a fundamental doctrinal divide. Why? Because the RCC goes beyond Scripture, adding teachings and practices that either compromise or depart from the Gospel of God's saving grace in Christ. Not all the differences can be covered in this brief article, but we'll mention a few. Although the RCC has a fixed number of seven sacraments, it also has numerous sacramentals – e.g. baptismal water, holy oil, candles, crucifixes, and statues. They are said to cause grace not like the sacraments, but through the faith and devotion of those using them.

The unbloody sacrifice of the Mass is identified with the bloody sacrifice of the cross, in that both are offered for the sins of the living and the dead. The Virgin Mary's divine status as “Mother of God,” the prayers for the dead, papal infallibility, and purgatory are serious and persistent areas of disagreement.

What does the RCC say about the requirement for salvation? Its sacramental theology holds that supernatural life is mediated through the sacraments administered by the hierarchy to whom obedience is due. The document *Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* states that for Catholics, all who are validly baptized are born again and truly, however imperfectly, in communion with Christ. The RCC Catechism says: “The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.” It states: “Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament.” But there is a radical difference between a Church that “gives” belief through the sacraments and one that preaches the Word that causes faith (Rom.10:17).

Reformation Christians believe that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. We can do nothing for our salvation. Any other requirement for salvation is a departure from the Gospel. For post-Vatican II it is still faith plus something else. The RC Catechism states, "Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom." In 1998 the World Lutheran Federation Council and the RCC approved a joint declaration on the doctrine of justification. But shortly after the approval Vatican officials offered several pages of clarifications. One of the most troubling was, "We can therefore say that eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits."

## **A Crucial Difference**

The RCC's view of tradition relativizes the authority of Scriptures. Tradition gained the rank of a second source of revelation side by side with Scripture. Along with the Bible, the Council of Trent declared it wanted to see traditions that define faith and morals "received and venerated with the same piety and reverence." This is the decisive argument for raising the rank of traditions – they have been given "either from the lips of Christ himself or dictated by the Holy Spirit" and "reserved in unbroken succession in the Catholic Church." In 1564 Pope Pius IV declared, "I most firmly acknowledge and embrace the apostolical and ecclesiastical traditions and constitutions of the same church and sacred scripture." The RCC Catechism states that the "Church," to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence." In other words, the RCC develops theological doctrines which cannot be revised but are irreversible and infallible as though Christ Himself were present and speaking in the church of the present. One example of a doctrinal development is the dogma of Mary's assumption into heaven for which there is no direct Scriptural reference.

Why am I not a Roman Catholic? The issues of the Reformation have not been laid to rest.

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