

AN ANSWER TO ROMAN CATHOLICS

What do you think about the new Pope?

Many today have questions about Pope John Paul II and his replacement, Pope Benedict XVI. Although I have opinions about them, I know neither of them personally and whatever opinions I might have are not worth more or less than anyone else's. Based on my understanding of the word of God, I have taken the approach of answering those who want to discuss John Paul's life and death strictly on a "What does the Bible say?" basis. I have not been particularly interested in debating the benefits of the man's travels, his political achievements, to what extent he discouraged communism, how good he was, or how many people he elevated to "sainthood".

I have long believed (from the Scripture first and also from my experience in being raised as a Roman Catholic before my conversion to belief in Jesus Christ alone), that the primary points in understanding the differences between Roman Catholicism and Christianity are **authority** and **human effort**.

I have no difficulty in agreeing that there are points of similarity between Roman Catholic beliefs and the Bible. Christians and Roman Catholics both believe there is one God; revealed in the tri-unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the deity of Jesus Christ; the virgin birth; and the return of Christ in glory personally. Both believe in the sure reality of heaven and hell.

The difficulty arises when our **hearts** bow to the fear of man (Prov.29:25; Jn.12:42; Gal.2:12) and our **thinking** bows to the philosophical culture of our day which tells us that we are to emphasize the similarities we have with all groups and downplay or even forget about the differences (pluralistic, relativistic syncretism).

Over the years, I have studied the Bible together with Catholics, shared the gospel with Catholic priests and nuns, and sought to answer questions Catholics might have as to the differences between us. Without exception, I have noticed two things. No Roman Catholic has ever spoken to me of their **certainty of inheriting eternal life** (I Jn.5:13), and no Catholic has ever spoken to me of their **certainty of authoritative truth** (II Pet.1:20,21; II Tim.3:16,17; Jn.17:1-5; never have I met a Catholic that even believes all the Pope says or what their church teaches, let alone the Bible). I conclude from this that Roman Catholics (like many others) **look beyond** what Jesus has done to give them eternal life, and they hold to no **ultimate authority** outside of themselves.

So it is the differences we need to discuss, not the similarities, not the political agendas, not the number of countries the Pope visits or how many times a day he prays. Out of a love and concern for my Catholic friends, I have sought to help them see that it is **impossible** to be knowledgeable of and hold firmly to Roman Catholic teaching and at the same time be knowledgeable of and hold firmly to the Bible. One or the other has to go. **It is when a person lacks understanding of Roman Catholicism, the Bible, or both, that he formulates ideas of a person (Pope or otherwise) going to heaven after**

spending his life as a devout Catholic. I say this in all humility, choosing to stand on what the Bible says over what men say. As you witness to Catholics, do not be afraid to use the Scriptures over and over. We all must answer to the Word of God, not the traditions of men (Matt.15:1-9). We could site dozens of conflicting statements between Bible teaching and Roman Catholic teaching, but just a few will help you understand the problem as you seek to speak with Catholics.

References to Catholic teaching are from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (organized by the present Pope Benedict XVI and signed by the previous Pope John Paul II), *Code of Canon law*, and *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*.

Concerning authority:

The Catholic Church teaches that "*'Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God' (DV10), in which, as in a mirror, the pilgrim Church contemplates God, the source of all her riches.*" [97]

The Bible teaches that Scripture is the Word of God (**John 10:35; II Tim.3:16-17; II Pet.1:20-21**) and tradition is the words of men (**Mark 7:1-13**)

Concerning salvation:

The Catholic Church teaches *that salvation is attained by cooperating with grace through faith, good works, and participation in the sacraments [183, 1129, 1815, 2002]*

The Bible teaches salvation is attained by grace through faith apart from any works (**Eph.2:8-9; Titus 3:5**) resulting in the works God prepared in advance for us to do (**Eph.2:10**).

The Catholic Church teaches *that impure Catholics must achieve holiness to enter heaven by going first to Purgatory for their final purification. This tradition is based partially on the practice of prayers for the dead. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken of behalf of the dead.* [1030, 1031, 1032]

The Bible teaches that Jesus made purification for the sins of His people on the cross. (**Heb.1:3**)

Concerning the Mass:

The Catholic Church teaches that *Christ himself, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. And it is the same Christ, really present under the species of bread and wine, who is the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice. As sacrifice, the Eucharist is*

also offered in reparation for the sins of the living and the dead and to obtain spiritual and temporal benefits from God. [1410,1414]

The Bible teaches the sacrifice of the cross is a historical event that occurred once **(Mk.15:21-41)** and is the finished work of Jesus in obedience to His Father. **(Jn.4:34; 19:30)**. The Scriptures teach that Jesus, our High priest, was "sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him". **(Heb. 9:28)** Jesus, as our high priest, "offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever to those who are being made holy." **(Heb.10:12-14)**

Concerning Mary:

The Catholic Church teaches that in some sense all men (and especially Mary the mother of Jesus), participates in the sacrifice and redemptive of suffering of Christ on the cross. Mary in a "wholly singular way, cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is the mother to us in the order of grace." The Church teaches that Mary is the co-redeemer of salvation. [618, 964, 968, 970]

The Bible teaches that Christ alone is the redeemer, for he alone suffered and died for sin. **(I Pet.1:18-21)**

What can you do to help Roman Catholics know the living an true God? Pray diligently for them, develop friendships with them, engage them in conversation about the Bible, promote their participation in Bible study, faithfully and consistently refer to Scripture truth, and encourage them to make a clean break from all teaching that is against the Word of God. Roman Catholic teaching steers a person away from heaven by promoting an authority that is not from God and encouraging individuals to trust in their own efforts for eternal life. May we be faithful in pointing our Roman Catholics friends to believing in and receiving Christ alone for their salvation.

If I can be of further help to you, please feel free to contact me at any time.

For the cause of Christ,

Pastor Michael Eckstein