

THE PENTECOST

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CATHOLICISM
AND CHRISTIANITY

When people think of Roman Catholicism they often think of priests, nuns, mass and majestic cathedrals. What is the relationship between Christianity and the ancient religion of Roman Catholicism? We love Catholics and we will explore this relationship in this issue of *The Pentecost* of June, 2012. God bless you.

Shawn Stevens

Many people believe that being a Catholic is synonymous with being a Christian. Yet, there are some major differences. What does the Bible have to say about these? Explore with us together, as you read.

Ramona Stevens

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CATHOLICISM AND CHRISTIANITY

There are nearly one billion Catholics in the world today. Catholics testify to believing in Jesus Christ, believing the Bible and participating in Mass. However, are Catholics Christians? That is a question best left to the Lord Himself, but we can ask the question; Is the teaching of the Catholic Church Christian?

The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century clashed with the Roman Catholic Church on a number of issues. One of those issues was on the authority of the Bible. Reformers argued that Scripture itself was the only infallible and proper source for doctrine. The Catholic Church took the position that extra-biblical material, church councils and traditions within the Church also held authority alongside of Scripture. It is interesting in the gospels to see Jesus' emphasis upon the Scriptures and His reaction to the traditions of the religious leaders of His day. Sometimes, when He conflicted with the Pharisees, He would comment or ask them a question, such as these; "... (and the Scripture cannot be broken)," (John 10.35) or; "... 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: ...'" (Matthew 21.42) and; "... 'You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God.'" (Matthew 22.29). Again and again, Jesus taught His disciples the Scriptures. Even after He rose from the dead, we see Him doing this to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We read; "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to

them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." (Luke 24.27). From this we see Jesus using the Scriptures to teach doctrine. While Jesus used the Scriptures to teach doctrine, He had a negative response to many of the traditions of the religious leaders of His day. We read of a time when the Scribes and Pharisees confronted Jesus with the question; "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?..." (Matthew 15.2). We read further; "He answered and said to them, 'Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?'" (Matthew 15.3) and; "... Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition." (Matthew 15.6). In Jesus' day, Jesus placed authority on the Scriptures rather than on tradition. If we just use the Bible as our source, then we have a very narrow path to salvation through repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ, through what He has done for us at Calvary. If we use the whole body of Catholic teaching as our base, this narrow way becomes much broader to include a religion of rituals and sacraments which are thought to be instrumental and important in experiencing God's grace.

In Roman Catholicism, the saving work of Jesus Christ is believed to be communicated through the Roman Catholic Church. The catechism of the Catholic Church states; "Christ manifests, makes present and communicates [H]is work of salvation through the liturgy of [H]is Church."¹ More specifically, it is taught that Christ's work of salvation is passed through the Church by means of seven sacraments. These sacraments are

Confirmation, Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony.²

These sacraments are viewed not merely as symbols. Rather, it is viewed, by the practicing of the sacraments, that the grace of Christ is activated and made beneficial to Catholic participants. Catholicism teaches that “[c]elebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ [H]imself is at work: it is [H]e who baptizes, [H]e who acts in [H]is sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies.”³ If they confer the grace that they signify, sacraments in Catholicism become enormously important. We are told that “[t]he Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.”⁴

What does the Bible teach concerning the mediatorship of salvation? We are told, in the book of First Timothy; “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,” (1 Timothy 2.5). Christ, alone, mediates between God and man, granting salvation to those who receive Him. His salvation is not contingent upon religious rituals or the authority of men. He clearly declares; “...‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’” (John 14.6). In the Old Testament, the Jewish people also had a system of priests that performed religious rituals and duties. In the New Testament, we learn that Christ takes the

position of priest to mediate a New Covenant. Hebrews records:

But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Hebrews 9.11-15

Since the time of Christ's sacrifice, men are women are not required by God to go to priests to have sacrifices offered for their sins. Christ's sacrifice became the perfect sacrifice, offered once, for all. Christ now fills the position of High Priest, and the New Testament teaches that we are to go to Him for salvation. Scripture further contrasts the function of Old Covenant priests with the work of the Man, High Priest Jesus Christ; “And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same

sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God,” (Hebrews 10.11-12). Christ's work of atonement, and saving grace, is not contingent upon the priestly operation of the religious rituals of Catholicism, just as it is not contingent on the priestly operation of Jewish sacrifices. This is good news, for it means that we can come to Him, directly, for salvation. We read; “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2.1).

Dear friend, salvation is not ritualistic. Salvation is about becoming born again.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5.1-2

Jesus, on one occasion, asked; “... 'Where is your faith?'... ” (Luke 8.25). I believe that Jesus asks men and women this same question today. God has ordained that the receiving of salvation is by faith. We read that God's righteousness is revealed from faith to faith (see Romans 1.17). In fact, when we come to God by faith, Jesus Christ

comes to dwell within us. The Apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesian church “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; ...” (Ephesians 3.17).

What then, is faith? It is believing. We are told that it pleased God to save those who believe the Gospel (see 1 Corinthians 1.21). How does one come to true faith in God? Firstly, it is by believing the truth that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again. He not only died on the cross but, after three days, God resurrected Him. Just as Jesus died on our behalf, for our sins, He rose from the dead to conquer death on our behalf. Because He was raised back to life, He can grant spiritual life to those who come to Him by faith. In this way, those who are spiritually dead in sin can be born again to life.

So, firstly, we must believe this truth and, secondly, we must believe in Jesus Christ Himself. Believing in Jesus means beginning a personal relationship with Christ. This can be done by coming to Christ in prayer, acknowledging to Him that you are a sinner, expressing to Him your remorse for sin and asking Him to forgive you; it is also acknowledging that you believe that He died for you, that He rose from the dead for you, and committing to turn from your own way to follow His will.

Dear Reader, have you believed in Jesus? The Bible tells us; “And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.” (1 John 3.23).

Remember the discussion between Jesus Christ and Nicodemus (see John, Chapter 3) on being born again. In that discussion, Jesus said:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 3.16-18

Many today try to come to, and be accepted by, God on the basis of the good things that they have done. However, good works do not earn us salvation. Salvation comes another way. The Scriptures teach; “ ... But the just shall live by his faith.” (Habakkuk 2.4).

Biblical faith leads to, and is an expression of, obedience to God. In fact, “belief,” or “faith,” seems to be used as a synonym in this verse for “obedience”: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, ...” (John 3.36 RSV). In fact, the New King James translation renders it this way: “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, ...” (John 3.36 NKJ). Faith is not an involuntary act, on our part, that just simply occurs due to the sovereign act of God. Faith is a response which we must make to God and to His Gospel. Faith is not merely affirming a set of doctrines or believing in a creed. Faith is an experience where a man or woman expresses trust. Wesley described it as “a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he [is] reconciled to the favor of God.”⁵

Faith is a response from man to God. It is a change from the common course of unbelief that humanity is traveling on. Faith is necessary for salvation, for one must believe in Christ to be saved. Paul says this about the message of faith which he preached: “But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10.8-9). “Confess” is a term for acknowledging, agreeing and affirming. A man first believes in his heart that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus died for our sins and that He rose from the dead and, then, because

his heart believes, he eagerly confesses this to God and to others.

Faith is absolutely indispensable. We must have faith if we are to please God. Scripture teaches; “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (Hebrews 11.6). In order to come to God, we must believe in Him. We must believe that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. That means we must believe that God will hear the cry of, and reward, those who are truly seeking Him.

Faith is more than a mental act of understanding that something is true. Faith is tied to repentance and surrender to God. One thief on the cross, beside Jesus, exercised faith. The Scriptures tell of how there were two criminals who were crucified along with Jesus. As they hung on crosses, one of these criminals blasphemed Jesus. The other criminal then rebuked the blasphemer, saying; “... 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.'” (Luke 23.40-41). The next verses say; “Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’” (Luke 23.42-43).

In this amazing account we see a man putting faith in Jesus and receiving forgiveness, salvation and hope. What did he do? First, he acknowledged his sin; he said that he was deserving of the penalty he was suffering. He acknowledged that his deeds had led him to judgment. Next, he acknowledged that Jesus was pure and innocent. Then he called out to Jesus, calling Him Lord. This thief put faith in Jesus. Jesus saved the soul of this thief and blessed him with the promise of being with Jesus in Paradise.

Oh, the salvation which came to the thief on the cross; how wonderful and good and extensive is the grace of Jesus Christ. The thief called out to Jesus. The thief was humble and confessed that he was deserving of judgment. He knew that he was a sinner needing God's forgiveness and he called out to Jesus. He put his faith in Jesus Christ and was saved. Today he is with Christ.

Friend, how about you? Have you made this all-important choice to repent and put faith in Jesus Christ? Jesus has gone to great lengths to save you from hell, a place of judgment and suffering. Have you called out to Him in prayer? Remember Jesus' question earlier: “Where is your faith?” Where is it, and what is it in?

Friend, if you do not know the Lord, then it is time to put your faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is a voluntary act.

You must choose to believe, or you do not believe. You must choose to obey God, or you disobey Him. Faith is not merely affirming a creed. Faith is an experience. It is a trust and a confidence in God. Faith is a response from man to God. Is faith your response to the Lord's love for you?

Friend, you are a sinner, just as the thief on the cross was a sinner. Jesus, the pure and innocent Son of God, died in your place and mine. Then He rose from the dead, showing His authority and power over death. Now Jesus calls men and women to put faith in Himself. Faith is two-fold; firstly, it is believing in the truth of the Gospel, that Jesus died on account of our sins and that He rose from the dead. Secondly, faith is actively putting your trust in Jesus Christ, Himself.

Friend, do you have faith, as I have described it here? You may have good deeds, or even religion, but without faith it is impossible to please God. God is, and He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Call out to Jesus Christ now. Call out to Him in prayer. Call out in faith.

Friend, if you are Catholic and are reading this now, I want, in as loving a way as possible, to challenge the validity of Catholic theology. I love Catholic people, and I believe that most of them sincerely want to follow God. Following God begins with believing in God's message or

gospel. The gospel of God is that salvation is available to man through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. Good works, and ceremonies and sacraments, can't bring salvation to your soul. Only Jesus Christ, God's one Mediator, can bring that to you. Call out to Him today. Consciously choose to trust Him for salvation. Commit your life to Him. Receive His grace. Make Him your High Priest, your Savior, your Lord. Take your direction from His infallible word, the Bible. God bless you.

Shawn Stevens

ENDNOTES :

1 Catechism of the Catholic Church (Ottawa: Publications Service, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), 237.

2 Ibid., 245.

3 Ibid., 247.

4 Ibid., 247.

5 John Wesley, quoted in A Compend Of Wesley's Theology, Robert W. Burtner, Ed. Et al (New York:Abingdon Press), 160.

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