

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Is the Roman Catholic Church a True Church?

LORAIN BOETTNER

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The elaborate system of doctrine and ritual that has been developed by the Roman Catholic Church apart from or even contrary to the Bible, together with her policy of persecution and her failure to raise the spiritual and economic standards in countries where she has long been in control, has caused many people to ask: Is the Roman Catholic Church a true church?

That the Roman Church has within it much of truth is not to be denied. It teaches the inspiration of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the miracles, the resurrection of the body, a future judgment, heaven and hell, and many other Scripture truths. In every instance, however, it nullifies these truths to a considerable extent by adding to or subtracting from what the Bible teaches.

In regard to the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Roman Church accepts the Bible as the Word of God but adds to it a great body of tradition as of equal authority although in many instances tradition contradicts the Bible and in any event largely supplants it. Tradition is in fact made superior to the Bible since it gives the official interpretation of the Bible. Whereas evangelical Christianity accepts the Bible as its one and only authoritative standard of faith and practice, a standard which consistently calls it back to a true norm when it is inclined to go astray, the Roman Church gives the Bible only a secondary place and in actual practice is governed by a pope who allegedly is infallible in his pronouncements concerning faith and morals and by a rigid system of Canon Law. Coupled with this is Rome's traditional policy of withholding the Bible from the people; or if under pressure from Protestantism she must give the Bible to the people, only those editions which contain her interpretative notes are allowed.

The Roman Church teaches the deity of Christ. But it places Mary and the priest as mediators between Him and the believer, so that there is no way of access to Him except through them. He is usually presented either as a helpless babe in His mother's arms or as a dead Christ upon a cross. In either case He is effectively removed as a strong, virile, living personality, or as a daily companion or Saviour who hears and answers prayer. He has little to do with the problems of everyday life. All are urged to pray to Mary and the saints, who in turn present the prayers to Christ or to the Father and intercede for them.

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The Roman Church teaches the forgiveness of sin, but only as it is confessed to a priest and absolution is received from him. It places a human priesthood between the people and God, while the Bible teaches that the sacrifice of Christ ended forever the work of the priests, that Christ alone is now our High Priest, and that we are to go directly to God in prayer. The complete dependence of the Roman Church upon the priesthood as the heart of the system, while the New Testament teaches that the sacrificing priesthood was abolished and that the universal priesthood of believers was established in its place, means that the system is false at its very center. Though some liberal churchmen talk of an eventual union of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, this point alone, apart from that of acknowledging the authority of the pope, which is the one point that Romanists insist upon above all others, should be sufficient to show how impossible any such union is.

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Instead of the Scripture doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, the Roman Church substitutes a system of grace plus works, in which works have a larger place than faith, and in which one works long and hard for his salvation. In actual practice it has become a system of absolutism, claiming to admit souls to or exclude them from heaven as they meet or fail to meet its demands for confession and penance. Its saving truths are covered over with a mass of human inventions and throughout most of its ritual and practice they are not savingly presented. It gives such false and misleading answers to the crucial questions about the way of salvation that the large proportion of those who trust themselves to it fail to show by their lives that they have undergone a true spiritual change.

The Roman Church teaches that Christ established the church, but it places a man, the pope, at its head and invests him with absolute power. It develops the mass and an elaborate ritualism which had no counterpart in the apostolic church, and makes salvation dependent on obedience to the church. And since the Vatican is itself a union of church and state, it seeks to promote that kind of organization wherever possible.

And finally, the Roman Church teaches a final judgment with rewards and punishments. But its promise of rewards in heaven for the righteous is largely overshadowed with other teaching concerning a hideous place of torment called purgatory, which is of much more immediate concern as throughout his life the person tries to alleviate or shorten his sufferings there through the purchase of indulgences and by doing works of penance. The Bible contains not even the slightest evidence for the existence of purgatory, but instead teaches that the redeemed soul goes straight to heaven.

The condition of the present day Roman Church would seem to be in many ways similar to that of Judaism at the time of Christ. There was much truth in Judaism and there were many sincere believers among the people. But the priesthood was largely indifferent to

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the needs of the people, as were the ruling classes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Like the Roman priests, the Jewish priests withheld the Word of God from the people, and their chief concern was their own advancement. The primary opposition that Christ encountered came from the priests, and it was they whom He denounced most severely, as it was also they who were primarily responsible for having Him put to death. Similarly in the Roman Church the priesthood has departed so seriously from the simplicity of the Gospel, and the teachings of the Bible have been so thoroughly covered over with man-made rituals and canon laws that the features of the apostolic church are hardly recognizable. The record shows that in those countries where Romanism has been dominant and unopposed for long periods of time it has not advanced but instead has become corrupt, and that its tendency has been downward with a consequent weakening of those countries. That was most clearly shown in the first place during the Middle Ages, from about 500 A.D., until the Protestant Reformation, a period of roughly one thousand years when darkness covered the land and the people were largely helpless under the rule of a corrupt, tyrannical church that was more concerned about securing political power and vast wealth for itself than it was about promoting the spiritual and moral welfare of the people. Those conditions of poverty, ignorance, superstition, and illiteracy have continued to some extent even until the present time in Rome-dominated Italy, Spain, Portugal, Southern Ireland, and Latin America. Wherever Rome rules the people become enslaved to the priest. Where it is dominant it establishes but few schools, and in many places none at all unless spurred on to that work by competition from Protestantism. Rather it allows ignorance and superstition to continue among the people as a means of controlling them, and so promotes an anti-Christian way of life.

This is the stinging rebuke to Romanism, which it cannot deny or evade: That in four centuries of undisputed control in Latin America it has failed utterly to raise the spiritual, moral, social, and economic standards of the people, and that most of the progress that has been made during the past two generations has been the direct or indirect result of evangelical missions and of economic aid given to those countries by the Protestant United States. At the present time the United States government is engaged in a vast aid program to those countries which for the most part simply by-passes the Roman Catholic Church.

We have said that Romanism carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. This has been shown in one European country after another where, after gaining complete control, it has proved morally defective and has degenerated. Unrestrained by the power of strong civil governments, it perpetrated the horrors of the Inquisition in Spain and Italy. The excesses of the French Revolution were the end result of a long period of degeneration, and the hatred of the people was directed as much against the Roman Catholic Church as against the oppressive state as hundreds of priests were killed and

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hundreds of churches were burned. At the close of the Second World War the Roman Catholic Church in Italy found itself very unpopular because it had supported Mussolini's fascist policies, and today one-third of the Italians vote Communist. Although present day Spain is quiet under dictator Franco, the situation there apparently is not much different. We have cited the report of cardinal Spellman concerning the remark of a well informed Spaniard some eight years ago to the effect that if police protection in Spain were withdrawn the life of every priest and nun would be in danger. What a tragedy that an organization professing to be the church of Christ should be guilty of such flagrant abuse that the people would want to kill its clergy and destroy its edifices! What a tragedy that the church should be the principal source of strength for a clerical-fascist police state! And what a tragedy that in one country after another its actions have incited anticlericalism!

In most of the Latin American countries today the Roman Church has lost its hold, with the rank and file of the people indifferent toward it and the intellectuals openly opposed to it. A few years ago the government of Mexico confiscated the vast properties of the Roman Church in that land and put serious restrictions on its clergy, particularly on the foreign priests who were living in luxury at the expense of the people. Even today the government retains ownership of the churches. So strong was the resentment of the people that they made it illegal for the priests to appear on the streets in clerical garb—many did not want to see a priest anywhere.

The Roman Church thus has such serious inherent defects that over the broad course of history it cannot possibly emerge successful. Clearly it has lost its power to evangelize the world, and instead has become so confirmed in its present course that it cannot be reformed either from within or from without. In the main it is as antagonistic and as much an obstacle to evangelical Christianity as are the pagan religions. Admittedly there have been many high-minded and saintly souls in the Roman Church, as on the other hand many in the evangelical churches have not been true to their profession. In every church some are better and some are worse than their creed. But a church must be judged, not by individuals, but as a *system*.

We have pointed out that the early church had no priests. We have also pointed out that during the fourth and fifth centuries great masses of people pushed into what had then become the official church, in order to obtain the benefits that such membership bestowed. The pagan priesthood, which was losing the battle in behalf of the old religion, readily sensed the trend of affairs and began to scheme as to how it too could share in those benefits. The result was that it too began to push into or infiltrate the church, at first cautiously, and then more openly and boldly. Some of the pagan temples were rededicated as Christian churches. This crafty, invading priesthood gathered to itself

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more and more power until it completely displaced the apostolic Christian ministry. It usurped the right of the people to direct the affairs of the church and centered that power in itself. Naturally it could not tolerate the Christian Scriptures, for they contradicted practically everything that it taught. Hence it sought to do the only expedient thing possible, which was to keep the Bible from the people. Then followed an agelong struggle as the people sought access to the Bible while the priesthood used every stratagem to keep it from them and finally resorted to the expediency of placing it on the Index of Forbidden Books where it remained for centuries. But so basic was the Bible to the life of the church, and so deeply had it embedded itself in the writings of the early church fathers, that it could not be entirely displaced. That struggle continued for more than a thousand years, or roughly from the fall of Rome in A.D. 476 until the dawn of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, at which time a large part of Christendom threw off the yoke of the priesthood and its elaborate ritual and returned to the simplicity of the first century apostolic church. The Roman Catholic priesthood was, therefore, in its origin nothing more nor less than the pagan priesthood of ancient Rome which by skillful subterfuge had fastened itself upon the Christian church.

Nor should it be thought strange that an event such as that just described should have occurred. In our own twentieth century, with its much richer store of theological knowledge and its much wider circulation of the Bible, a quite similar event has taken place in several Protestant denominations. What we term "Liberalism" or "Modernism" in those churches has quite effectively displaced the evangelical Christian faith with a non-doctrinal "social gospel" which tends to discard the supernatural and which for the historic Christian doctrine of salvation through a crucified and risen Redeemer substitutes a naturalistic religion in which man, by his own good works, supposedly raises himself to a higher economic and social level and so saves himself and builds a better world. When such a development takes place it makes little difference whether it is accomplished through the work of a usurping priesthood or through the promotion of a false philosophy which accomplishes the same result.

The admonition in Scripture is: "By their fruits ye shall know them." Surely the fruits of Romanism as they have been manifested throughout history and in the various parts of the world are sufficient to disprove its arrogant claim that it is "the only true church." Indeed, when seen at its best it is a badly deformed type of Christianity, and when seen as it more often manifests itself in lands where it has long been dominant it is primarily not a church at all but a gigantic business and political organization that merely uses religion as a cloak. In those lands it makes little effort to hide its greed for power and its avarice for wealth. It victimizes first of all its own people and then all others who come under its sway. In general it has sought to weaken or destroy free governments. Its traditional policy toward other churches and other Christians who do not acknowledge

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its authority has been one of bitter opposition, oppression, and, when expedient, persecution, with tens of thousands having been put to death for their faith and millions more subjected to unspeakable physical torture and mental anguish. Such actions are contrary to the teachings of the Bible and they certainly are not the marks of the true church. Its interpretation of the Scriptures is so erroneous and its practices are so persistently unchristian that over the long period of time its influence for good is outweighed by its influence for evil. *It must, therefore, as a system, be judged to be a false church.*¹

¹ Boettner, L. (1962). *Roman Catholicism*, 455–460. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.