
AREAS OF PRACTICAL COOPERATION

Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbors was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Since evangelicals and Roman Catholics have so much in common doctrinally and morally (see Part One), and, in spite of our significant intramural doctrinal differences (see Part Two), we believe that there are, nonetheless, many areas of common spiritual heritage and practical social and moral cooperation possible. This includes fighting our common enemies of secularism and occultism that have infiltrated our culture and public schools. In addition to this there are root moral issues that have emerged in the political arena, such as abortion, pornography, immorality, and special rights for homosexuals, that call for our common cooperation.

In this final section we wish to end on a positive note, firmly believing that a cooperative effort between Roman Catholics and evangelicals could be the greatest social force for good in America. For those who are opposed to any ecclesiastical union between Catholicism and evangelicalism, including the authors, we nevertheless plead for more personal interaction and social cooperation. Our common doctrinal and moral beliefs are too large and the need in America for a united voice on them is too great for us to dwell on our differences to the neglect of crucial cooperation needed to fight the forces of evil in our society and our world.

As one evangelical observer noted, “The real cleavage in Christendom today is . . . between biblical orthodox and heterodox world views. Even the most reactionary of

Protestant fundamentalists has more in common with Cardinal John O'Connor and John Paul II than with Joan Campbell and John Spong.”¹ As to the central issue, “Both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches need to take up again a serious reevaluation of the great questions of the relation between Christ as Savior and as Lord; is it forgiveness or is it change people need? Or both?”²

16

PURGATORY

Another area of significant difference between Catholics and Protestants revolves around the doctrine of purgatory. It must be noted that Martin Luther did not directly reject the doctrine of purgatory early in his ministry.¹ However, Luther later opposed the concept itself, as he perceived that it led to the abuses of his day. As for the Reformers in general, purgatory “was openly rejected by the Reformers, who taught that souls are freed from sin by faith in Christ alone without any works, and therefore, if saved, go straight to heaven.”² Indeed, disputes over it and associated doctrines emerged during the Reformation. Three important topics cluster around this issue: the treasury of merit, prayers for the dead, and good works for the dead. First, we will consider the doctrine of purgatory itself.

THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY

1 J. Daryl Charles, “Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue: Basis, Boundaries, Benefits,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 294.

2 D. Clair Davis, “How Did the Church in Rome become Roman Catholicism?” in Armstrong, *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants*, p. 62.

1 George W. Forell, ed., *Luther's Works*, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), p. 95.

Also see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 4 n. 2.

2 Cross, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1145.

The belief in purgatory is an essential part of the Catholic faith. The Council of Trent declared infallibly: “If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out to every repentant sinner, that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged, either in this world or in Purgatory, before the gates of Heaven can be opened, let him be anathema.”³

THE DOCTRINE STATED

Before discussing purgatory it is necessary to mention that only a few teachings regarding the doctrine are considered infallible by Catholic theologians. These include the fact that: (1) there is a purification that takes place before one enters heaven; (2) this purification involves some kind of pain or suffering; and (3) this purification can be assisted by the prayers and devotions of the living. As to whether purgatory is a place,⁴ what the precise nature of the pain is, or how long one remains there is not part of infallible teaching. Of course, infallible or not, many other teachings about purgatory are widely believed and practiced in Catholicism, since both noted theologians and popes have taught on the topic. Even granting room for poetic license, the current shrinking doctrine of purgatory is a far cry from that in the Roman Catholic classic, Dante’s *Inferno*.

The Nature of Purgatory. In his widely distributed work on Catholic dogma, Ludwig Ott defined purgatory as follows: “The souls of the just which, in the moment of death, are burdened with venial sins or temporal punishment due to sins, enter Purgatory.”⁵ Since purgatory is a preparation for heaven, only believers go there. Unbelievers go directly to hell. Purgatory, then, is a period of temporal punishment for sins after death and before heaven. Many contemporary Catholic theologians downplay and even deny that purgatory is a *place*, thinking of it more as a *process* of purification which leads to heaven.

As to the “fire” of purgatory, the current tendency is to take it in a spiritual sense. One Catholic catechism states that “the talk of purgatorial fire is an image that refers to a deeper reality. Fire can be understood as *the cleansing, purifying, and sanctifying power of God’s holiness and mercy*. God’s power straightens, purifies, heals, and consummates whatever remained imperfect at death.”⁶ This is not quite what Dante had in mind.

The Object of Purgatory. The purpose of purgatory is to cleanse one from venial (not mortal) sins. Following Aquinas, Ott notes that it is for “The remission of the venial sins which are not yet remitted.” Purgatory produces “contrition deriving from charity and performed with the help of grace.” Thus, “The temporal punishment for sins are atoned

3 Henry J. Schroeder, O.P., trans., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1978), p. 46.

4 See Cardinal Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 230.

5 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 482.

6 *A Catholic Adult Catechism* by the German Conference of Bishops, p. 347.

for in the purifying fire by the so-called suffering of atonement, that is, by the willing bearing of the expiatory punishment imposed by God.”⁷

The Duration of Purgatory. Two things are noted here: the punishment of purgatory is temporal, not eternal; and “the purifying fire will not continue after the General Judgment.”⁸ After this there is only heaven and hell. Contemporary Catholic theologians, even conservative ones like Cardinal Ratzinger, shy away from quantifying the time one spends in purgatory. They speak, rather, of it being an “existential time” or “transforming” experience when one “encounters Christ.” Ratzinger claims that it “is the inward necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ.”⁹ The more traditional view, however, is that it is a place in which one spends either longer or shorter periods of time, depending on one’s sins. Even Ratzinger admits that the pronouncement at Trent implies that it is a place, since it uses the preposition “in.”¹⁰

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF PURGATORY

Catholic scholars use both Scripture and tradition to defend the dogma of purgatory. We will examine the arguments based on the Bible first.

Arguments from Scripture. Ott notes that “Holy Writ teaches the existence of the cleansing fire indirectly, by admitting the possibility of a purification in the other world.”¹¹ Several Scriptures are cited in support of purgatory.

2 Maccabees 12:42–46 . In this text from the Apocrypha Ott observes that “the Jews prayed for their fallen [dead] . . . that their sins might be forgiven them.”¹² This indicates that there is both punishment and forgiveness beyond the grave.

Matthew 12:32 . In this passage Jesus said there would never be forgiveness for blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. From this Ott infers that this “leaves open the possibility that sins are forgiven not only in this world but in the world to come.”¹³

1 Corinthians 3:15 . Here Paul declares that “if someone’s work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire.” Ott notes that “The Latin Fathers take the passage to mean a transient purification punishment in the other world.”¹⁴

⁷ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 485.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ratzinger, *Eschatology* p. 230.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 220.

¹¹ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 483.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Matthew 5:26 . In this parable the judge would not release his prisoner until he paid the last penny. Ott comments, “Through further interpretation of the Parable, a time-limited condition of punishment in the other world began to be seen expressed in the time-limited punishment of the prison.”¹⁵

Arguments from Tradition. Ott notes that “The main proof for the existence of the cleansing fire lies in the testimony of the Fathers.” The Latin Fathers in particular are cited, Cyprian and Augustine being two cases in point.¹⁶ In addition to tradition, Roman Catholics offer an argument from human reason in favor of purgatory.

Speculatively, the existence of the cleansing fire can be derived from the concept of the sanctity and justice of God. The former demands that only completely pure souls be assumed into Heaven (*Apoc. 21 , 27*); the latter demands that the punishment of sins still present be effected, but on the other hand, forbids that souls that are united in love with God should be cast into hell. Therefore, an intermediate state is to be assumed, whose purpose is the final purification and which for this reason is of limited duration.¹⁷

So, Catholic scholars believe that the doctrine of purgatory can be found in Scripture, especially in the references to punishment for believers after death. Further, they find support in tradition as well.

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR PURGATORY

By way of introduction to our reply, two things should be observed. First, Ott admits that the Bible teaches the existence of purgatory only “indirectly,” and even then it is only a “possibility” from these Scriptures. Phrases like these reveal the weakness of the biblical basis for this doctrine. Further, he acknowledges that the argument from reason is arrived at only “speculatively.” In short, there is really no direct or positive proof for purgatory from Scripture. Rather, it is based on extra-biblical tradition and human speculation.

Response to Argument from Scripture. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* frankly acknowledges that “the doctrine of purgatory is not explicitly stated in the Bible.”¹⁸ Neither is it taught implicitly in Scripture, since the Roman Catholic use of Scripture to support purgatory does violence to the contexts of the passages employed. A brief examination of them will suffice.

2 Maccabees 12:42–46 . The Protestant response to the use of this text to prove purgatory is simple: 2 Maccabees is not part of the inspired canon of Scripture, and therefore has no authority. It, along with the rest of the Apocrypha, were not accepted as inspired by the Jewish community that wrote them. They were not accepted by Jesus and

15 Ibid., p. 484.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 11:1034.

the apostles, who never quoted them in the New Testament. They were rejected by many important early Fathers of the church, including Jerome, the great biblical scholar and translator of the Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate. Indeed, they were not infallibly added to the Roman Catholic Bible until after the Reformation (A.D. 1546), in a futile attempt to support purgatory and prayers for the dead which Luther attacked. Even then this polemical anti-Reformation council inconsistently rejected some apocryphal books, including one (2 [4] Esdras 7:105) which speaks against praying for the dead (see chap. 9).

Matthew 12:32 . Catholics' use of this passage to support the concept of forgiveness of sins after death fails for several reasons. First, the text is not speaking about forgiveness in the next life after suffering for sins but the fact that there will be *no forgiveness for this sin in "the world to come"* (Matt. 12:32 , emphasis added). How can the denial that this sin will not ever be forgiven, even after death, be the basis for speculating that sins will be forgiven in the next life? Also, purgatory involves only venial sins, but this sin is not venial; it is mortal, being eternal and unforgiveable. How can a statement about the unforgiveness of a mortal sin in the next life be the basis for an argument that non-mortal sins will be forgiven then? What is more, the passage is not even speaking about punishment, which Catholics argue will occur in purgatory. So how could this text be used to support the concept of purgatorial punishment? Finally, even if this passage did imply punishment, it is not for those who will eventually be saved (as Catholics believe is the case with those who go to purgatory) but for those who never will be saved. Again, how can a passage not speaking about punishment for the saved after death be used as a basis for belief in purgatory, which affirms punishment for the saved? In view of these strong differences, it is strange indeed that Roman Catholic scholars cite it in support of the doctrine of purgatory. It only indicates the lack of real biblical support for the doctrine.

1 Corinthians 3:15 . Here Paul is speaking of believers who will one day be given a "wage" (v. 14) for their service to Christ. The texts say nothing about believers suffering the temporal consequences for their sins in purgatory. They are not burned in the fire; only their *works* are burned. Believers see their works burn but they escape the fire. Even Ott seems to admit that this text "is speaking of a transient punishment of the Day of General Judgment, probably consisting of severe tribulations after which the final salvation will take place."¹⁹ If so, then it is not speaking of what has traditionally been called purgatory at all.

It should be pointed out that contemporary Catholic apologists tend to reduce purgatorial pain to the scrutinizing experience of post-mortem sanctification, thus indicating their retreat from the more traditional and objectionable Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory. First, 1 Corinthians was written to those "who *have been* sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1:2 , emphasis added). Since they were already positionally sanctified in Christ, they needed no further purification to give them a right standing before God. They were already "in Christ." After listing a litany of sin, including

¹⁹ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 483.

fornication, idolatry, and coveting, Paul adds, “that is what some of you *used to be*; but *now you have had yourselves washed, you were sanctified, you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 6:11 , emphasis added). From this and other Scriptures (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21) it is evident that their sins were already taken care of by Christ’s suffering (cf. 1 Pet. 2:22–24 ; 3:18) and that they stood, clothed in his righteousness, perfect before God. They needed no further suffering for sins to attain such a standing or to get them into heaven. The fact that God desired them to improve their practical state on earth does not diminish for one moment their absolutely perfect standing in heaven. No sudden rush of practical sanctification (= purgatory) is needed to enter heaven.

Second, the context reveals that the passage is not speaking about the *consequence* or sin but of *reward* for service for those who are already saved. Paul states clearly: “If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation [of Christ], that person will receive a *wage* [or, reward]”²⁰ (1 Cor. 3:14). The question here is not *sin* and its punishment but *service* and its reward. Likewise, as even Catholic theology acknowledges, the “loss” (v. 15) is clearly not referring to salvation since “the person will be saved” (v. 15). Thus, the loss must be a loss of reward for not serving Christ faithfully. There is absolutely nothing here about suffering for our sins or their consequences after death. Christ suffered for all our sins by his death (1 Cor. 15:3 ; Heb. 1:2).

Third, the “fire” mentioned here does not purge our soul from sins; rather, it will “disclose” and “test” our “work.” Verse 13 says clearly, “the *work* of each will come to light, for the Day will *disclose* it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will *test the quality of each one’s work*” (emphasis added). There is literally nothing here about purging from sin. Contrary to the Catholic claim, the aim of the cleansing mentioned is not ontological (actual) but functional. The focus is on the crowns believers will receive for their service (2 Tim. 4:8), not on how their character is cleansed from sin.²¹ It is simply a matter of revealing and rewarding our work for Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

Matthew 5:26 . Ott’s “further interpretation” goes well beyond the context. First, Jesus is not speaking about a spiritual prison after death but a physical prison before death. The previous verse makes the context clear: “Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge . . . and you will be thrown in prison” (v. 25). To be sure, Jesus is not speaking of mere external things but of the spiritual matters of the heart (cf. vv. 21–22). However,

²⁰ The Greek word (*misthos*) used here means a “payment for work done, *reward*, or recompense given (mostly by God) for the moral quality of an action” (cf. 1 Cor. 9:17 ; 5:46 ; 6:1). See William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957) p. 525, emphasis added.

²¹ This is not to say that the experience of being reviewed for our rewards will not have a final impact on the believer’s character. It will be an awesome and character-impacting experience. It is only to point out that the purpose is not to cleanse the soul from sins in order to make it fit for heaven. This is what Christ did on the cross objectively and it is subjectively applied to believers at the moment of initial justification when they are dressed in the alien righteousness of Christ.

nothing in the context warrants the conclusion that he intended the concept of a “prison” to refer to a place (or process) of purgation for sins in the next life, which is what one would have to conclude if this passage is made to speak of purgatory. Even orthodox Catholics like Cardinal Ratzinger shy away from the prison image of purgatory, claiming it is not “some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp.”²²

Further, to make this an analogy or illustration of a spiritual prison after death (i.e., purgatory) is to beg the question, since one has to assume there is a purgatory where you “will not be released until you have paid” (v. 26) before it can be an illustration of it. Illustrations do not *prove* anything; they only *illustrate* something already believed to be true. Hence, this passage cannot be used as a proof of purgatory.

Finally, if this text is taken as a reference to purgatory it contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture that there is nothing temporal or eternal left to pay for the consequences of our sins. While Catholics acknowledge that Christ’s death paid the penalty for the guilt and eternal consequences of our sins, they deny that this means there is no purgatory in which we pay for the temporal consequences of our sins. But, as we shall see below, Christ’s death on the cross was both complete and sufficient for *all our sins and all their consequences*. To say there is some suffering for sins left for us insults the once-for-all finished work of Christ (cf. Heb. 10:14–15). Once Jesus suffered for our sins, there is nothing left for us to suffer, for there is “no condemnation” for those in Christ (Rom. 8:1). Indeed, even death is overcome (1 Cor. 15:54f .).

Response to Argument from Tradition. Even though Ott admits that the primary proof for the existence of purgatory comes from the testimony of the church fathers, he does not hesitate to reject the testimony of the majority of Fathers on other occasions. He notes that “the Fathers, with few exceptions, vouch for the miraculous character of Christ’s birth [e.g., birth without pain or penetrating the hymen]. However, the question is whether in so doing they attest a truth of Revelation or whether they wrongly interpret a truth of Revelation.”²³ This is a good question and one which we ask of the doctrine of purgatory as well. Indeed, as we have seen in examining the biblical passages used to support the dogma of purgatory, Catholic scholars have misinterpreted Scripture.

In reading through Ott, a standard Catholic authority on dogma, it is interesting to note how many times he admits that this doctrine “is not explicitly revealed in Scripture” or that “direct and express scriptural proofs are not to be had” or “express scriptural proofs are lacking.”²⁴ These phrases are more than a hint to the fact that purgatory has no basis in Scripture.

PROTESTANT REASONS FOR REJECTING PURGATORY

²² Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 230.

²³ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 205.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 200, 208, 214, etc.

Purgatory is a denial of the sufficiency of the cross. Protestants reject the doctrine of purgatory primarily because it in effect denies the all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. Scripture teaches that when Christ died on the cross, he proclaimed, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Speaking of his work of salvation on earth, Jesus said to the Father, "I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4). The writer of Hebrews declared emphatically that salvation by Christ's suffering on the cross was a once-for-all accomplished fact. "For by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated" (Heb. 10:14). These verses demonstrate the completed, sufficient nature of the work of Christ. To affirm that we must suffer for our own sins is the ultimate insult to Christ's atoning sacrifice! There is a purgatory, but it is not *after* our death; it was *in* Christ's death. For "when he had accomplished *purification* from sins, he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3 , emphasis added). "Purification" or purging from our "sins" was "accomplished" (past tense) on the cross. Thank God that this is the only purgatory we will ever have to suffer for our sins. Of course, hell awaits those who reject this marvelous provision of God's grace (2 Thess. 1:5–9 ; Rev. 20:11–15). There are also temporal cause-effect relations in this life that what we sow, we reap (Gal. 6:8–9). There is, however, absolutely no evidence that we will have to pay for our sins in the next life, either eternally or temporally.

To argue, as Catholic scholars do, that purgatory is part of our experiential sanctification is to overlook two important points. First, all *experiential* sanctification occurs in this life before death (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–13 ; 2 Cor. 5:10 ; Rev. 22:12). The only sanctification after death is *actual*. The Bible calls it glorification (Rom. 8:30 ; 1 John 3:2). Second, sanctification is not a process of *paying* for our sins. It is the process through which God, by his grace, *delivers* us from our sins, all for which (past, present, and future) Christ has already atoned. To be sure, salvation is not fully obtained at the moment of initial justification. Salvation comes in three stages: salvation from the *penalty* of sin (positional justification); salvation from the *power* of sin (practical sanctification); and salvation from the *presence* of sin (ultimate glorification). However, in none of these stages do *we* atone for our sins as a condition for entering heaven. Salvation is not something we "do" to obtain heaven. By Jesus' sacrificial death it is done! As the hymn writer put it, "Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. His blood has washed it white as snow" (cf. Isa. 1:18).

Purgatory is contrary to the immediacy of heaven after death. The Bible speaks of death as the final moment of life after which one goes immediately to heaven or to hell. For "it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27).²⁵ Jesus said that "a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing" the border into heaven after death (Luke 16:26). Upon death a person goes directly to one of two destinies, heaven or hell. At death believers immediately "leave the body and go

25 Contrary to the claim of some Catholic scholars, there is no indication of a time gap between death and judgment here in Heb. 9:27 , that is, reading into the text an idea not found in it. Furthermore, many Catholic scholars are conflating the "time" of purgatory and denying that any real time is involved, only "existential" time.

home to the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). That Paul is not merely expressing his wish to be immediately with Christ but a reality is evident from verse 1: “For we know. . . .”

Further, the immediacy of ultimate bliss upon death for a Christian is confirmed by many other texts, including the thief on the cross who went that very day to paradise (Luke 23:43) and Paul’s statement that, when he died, he would “depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23). The same is true of Paul’s last written words when he speaks of his “departure” to receive his “crown of righteousness” (2 Tim. 4:6–8). Likewise, the saints who will be martyred during the great tribulation will go immediately to heaven (Rev. 6:9–10), as did Enoch in the Old Testament (Heb. 11:5) and Moses and Elijah, who appeared with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:30–31). Likewise, unbelievers enter hell at the moment of death. Jesus told the story of how Lazarus died and went to heaven and “the rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment . . . he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me’ ” (Luke 16:22–24).²⁶ There is no indication in Scripture that people will be purified from their sins after death. Scripture teaches that death is final, and a destiny of woe or bliss is immediate.²⁷

THE TREASURY OF MERIT

Another Catholic teaching associated with the doctrine of purgatory is the treasury of meritorious works for the dead. According to Catholic theology, in addition to the merit obtained by Christ on the cross, there is a storehouse of merit deposited by the saints on which others can draw for help. The concept of merit or reward involves the dispersion of mercy over and above justice, but such merit is required for salvation nonetheless. In essence, those saints who have done more good deeds than necessary for their ultimate salvation have put money in the bank of heaven on which others in need can draw for theirs. These good works are called works of supererogation, that is, works over and above those necessary for themselves. By prayers and good deeds on behalf of the dead their stay in purgatory can be shortened as they draw on the surplus in the one big treasury of merit.

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF THE TREASURY OF MERIT

26 Some Catholic scholars try to spiritualize this away by claiming that it is only a “parable.” Even if it were, it still describes some actual reality. Furthermore, nowhere is this called a parable, nor do parables ever use real names in them like “Lazarus” and “Abraham.”

27 A doctrine closely associated with purgatory is “limbo.” Roman Catholicism defines this as “the abode of souls excluded from the full blessedness of the beatific vision, but not condemned to any other punishment” (Cross, *Oxford Dictionary*, p. 823).

According to Catholic teaching, “The possibility of vicarious atonement [of one believer for another] is founded in the unity of the Mystical Body. As Christ, the Head, in His expiatory suffering, took the place of the members, so also one member can take the place of another.” Thus, “the doctrine of indulgences is based on the possibility and reality of vicarious atonement.”²⁸ An indulgence is the remission of a temporal punishment for a sin whose guilt God has already forgiven. According to the Council of Trent, the Church of Rome has the power of granting indulgences.²⁹ There are two kinds of indulgences: partial and plenary (full). A partial indulgence frees one from only part of the temporal punishment due for sin that must be paid for, either in this life or in purgatory. A plenary indulgence frees one from the whole punishment due for that sin. The whole concept that indulgences may be obtained from the church is based on the doctrine of merit, especially that one can merit favor with God for another substitutionally by one’s works or prayers.

Pope Clement VI was the first to declare in the Jubilee Bull (A.D. 1343) the doctrine of the “Treasury of the Church.” According to Ott, it speaks of “the merits (= atonements) of Mary,³⁰ the Mother of God, and of all the chosen, from the greatest to the least of the just, [who] contribute to the increase of the treasure from which the Church draws in order to secure remission of temporal punishment.”³¹

At Trent the church proclaimed infallibly that the bishops are to “instruct the faithful diligently in matters relating to *intercession and invocation of the saints* . . . to invoke them and to have recourse to their prayers, assistance and support in order to obtain favors from God through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”³²

Argument from Scripture. Catholic scholars claim that “Even in the Old Testament the idea of vicarious atonement by innocent persons for guilty is known. . . . Moses offers himself to God as a sacrifice for the people who sinned (Ex. 32:32).” Further, “Job brings God a burnt offering, in order to expiate the sins of his children (Job 1:5). Isaias prophesies [in Chap 53] the vicarious suffering of atonement of Christ as a ransom, as an offering in atonement for the sins of mankind.” Likewise, “The Apostle Paul teaches that also the faithful can rend[er] expiation for one another.”³³ Ott also cites 2 Corinthians 12:15 , Colossians 1:24 , and 2 Timothy 4:6 as proof texts.

Argument from Tradition. Catholic scholars point to early Fathers such as Ignatius and Polycarp in support of their belief in a treasury of merit. Ott also notes that “Origen teaches that the Apostles and Martyrs by their death remove the sins of the faithful” and

28 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 317.

29 Schroeder, *Canons of the Council of Trent*.

30 Of course, by “atonements” of Mary, Catholics do not deny the eternal atonement of Christ but add the temporal atonement of sins suffered by saints (like Mary) and thus made available for others to draw upon from the storehouse of merit.

31 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 317.

32 Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*.

33 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 317.

“Cyprian says expressly that sinners can be supported with the Lord by the help of the martyrs.”³⁴ Aquinas argued on the basis of Galatians 6:2 (“bear one another’s burdens”) that, “in so far as two men are one by charity, one can render [temporal] atonement for the other.”³⁵

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENT FOR THE TREASURY OF MERIT

Protestants reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of a treasury of merit by noting that it is based on a misinterpretation of Scripture and is contrary to the all-sufficiency of Christ’s atonement.

Response to Argument from Scripture. The Catholic arguments for a treasury of merit are seriously lacking. Each passage cited is, on closer examination, taken out of context.

Exodus 32:30–32 . In this passage Moses tells Israel, “I will go up to the LORD , then; perhaps I may be able to make atonement for your sin.” Then he prays to God, “If you would only forgive their sin! If you will not, then strike me out of the book that you have written.” Even a casual look at this passage reveals that it does not support a treasury of merit.

First, there is absolutely nothing about any storehouse of merit in heaven, literal or figurative, to which one can contribute through doing good deeds and upon which others can draw.³⁶ At best, the passage merely reveals that highly commendable desire of one person who is willing to suffer in the place of another.

Second, God did not accept Moses’ offer to be blotted out of God’s book for Israel’s sake. What God did accept was Moses’ sacrificial desire as an indication of the sincerity of his heart, as he also did in the case of Abraham (cf. Gen. 22).

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p. 318.

36 Catholic scholars appeal to Rev. 19:8 to support the idea of a storehouse or collection of the good deeds of the saints. But speaking of the white robes of the saints in heaven as “the righteous acts of the saints” is a misunderstanding of this verse. First, it is only a symbol, as is indicated by the fact that the text interprets it for the reader and the fact that the whole book announces itself as a symbolic presentation (Rev. 1:1) and proceeds by giving and interpreting many of them for the reader (e.g., 1:20 ; 17:9 , 15). Second, the text says nothing about there being any collection of these works but simply that each person has his own works that follow him (Rev. 22:12 ; cf. Rom. 14:12). Third, Holy Writ makes it clear that “each of us shall give an account of himself [to God]” for his own works (Rom. 14:12 ; cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). Finally, nothing in this passage suggests that the righteous acts of the saints are available for others to draw upon for their sins.

God did not accept Moses' offer to give up his place in God's book in exchange for the sins of Israel, his life as an atonement; God accepted Moses' *willingness* to be sacrificed for them. Moses never suffered having his name taken out of God's book, to say nothing of any temporal suffering for Israel's sins. Likewise, Paul expressed a willingness to go to hell if Israel could be saved (Rom. 9:3). This too was an admirable but unfulfillable desire. It indicated Paul's deep passion for his people.

Job 1:5 . While Job did offer sacrifices for his children, here again this passages falls far short of supporting the doctrine of a treasury of merit in heaven. There is no mention of any such treasury in the text, and nowhere does it say that God actually accepted such a solicitous act of Job on behalf of his children. The passage could be descriptive, not prescriptive, informing us about what Job did but not whether this is what ought to be done. This is true of the advice of Job's friends, which is only descriptive of what they said, not of what God thought.

In any event, a careful study of the context reveals that the meaning of the passage is to show us how righteous Job was (cf. v. 1), not whether atonement can be made for someone else's sins. Certainly God hears the prayers of a righteous person (Job 42:8 ; James 5:16). But this in no way implies that they can help atone for the sins of another. The virtue of one human being is not transferable to another. Scripture declares that "the virtuous man's virtue shall be his own, as the wicked man's wickedness shall be his" (Ezek. 18:20).

Finally, even if the acts of one righteous person like Job were in some way efficacious for his family or friends on earth, it in no way supports the Catholic belief that this is effective for the departed. *Job offered sacrifices for the living, not for the dead!*

Isaiah 53 . This is a great passage on the substitutionary atonement of Christ for us, but it does not teach the substitutionary atonement of one sinful human being for another. Rather, it teaches that the sinless Christ is the substitutionary atonement for a sinful world. For "he [Christ] was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins. Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole. . . . We had *all* gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; But the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us *all* " (vv. 5–6 , emphasis added).

Notice also that it is not simply our guilt for which Christ died but also our "chastisement" or punishment (v. 5)—which is directly contrary to the Catholic claim that we need to pay for the temporal consequences of our sins in purgatory. Why, if Christ paid for both? Either Christ did not pay for the temporal consequences, in which case his death is not all-sufficient for our sins, as this text declares, or else Christ paid for both the eternal and temporal consequences of our sins, in which case there is no need for purgatory. So either the Catholic view of Christ's death is deficient or purgatory is unnecessary.

Galatians 6:2 . In this passage the apostle exhorts us to “Bear one another’s *burdens*,” but he does not say we can bear the *punishment* for someone else’s sin. There is solidarity here but no substitution for sins. We are to bear our “own load” (v. 5) and then to help bear our brother’s load. Clearly we cannot bear another’s sins because Paul reminds us that “a person will reap only what *he* sows” (v. 7 , emphasis added) and that “each of us shall give an account of himself (to God)” (Rom. 14:12).

Colossians 1:24 . Paul speaks here of “filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church,” but this in no way supports the Roman Catholic dogma of purgatory. First, this does not mean that Christ’s atoning sacrifice is not efficient in paying both the eternal and temporal consequences for all our sins. But if it is sufficient, as Catholics say they believe, then we cannot add to this sufficiency. If we could it would contradict the clear teaching of many other passages (e.g., John 17:4 ; 19:30 ; Heb. 10:14) discussed in chapter 13 .

Second, there is a certain sense in which Christ continues to suffer. Jesus said to Paul, “Why are you persecuting Me?” Since Christ was not then literally on earth, this must be a reference to his body (the church) which Paul was persecuting (cf. Acts 8:1 ; 9:1–2). In a similar sense, we too can suffer for him, “For to you has been granted, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him” (Phil. 1:29). In no sense, however, is our suffering for Christ a means of atoning for sin. Only Jesus suffered *for* sin. We suffer *because of* our sin, never *on behalf of* the sin of others. Each person must either bear the guilt of his own sin (Ezek. 18:20) or else accept the sacrifice that Christ suffered for his sin (2 Cor. 5:21 ; 1 Pet. 2:21 ; 3:18). When we “suffer” for Christ, we are undergoing pain as part of his spiritual body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:26), the church, but only what Christ suffered in his physical body on the cross is efficacious for our sins. Our suffering, then, is in *service* for Christ; it is not efficacious for the *salvation* of others.

Finally, even in the nonsalvific sense in which this verse declares that we can suffer for others, there are no verses in the canon of Holy Scripture (see chap. 9) which say we can do this on behalf of those *who are dead!* Our sacrificial lives can only be exercised on behalf of the living (cf. Rom. 5:7).

2 Corinthians 12:15 . Paul does say to the Corinthians, “I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes.” One must make several significant leaps to get from here to the Roman Catholic teaching that the living can offer prayers and indulgences on behalf of those suffering in purgatory. First, neither this nor any other passage cited above speaks of purgatory. Second, the action on behalf of others in this text is for the living, not the dead. Third, the suffering is not for their *sins* or their temporal consequences but in order to bear their *burden* or help minister the grace of Christ to them. Thus, there is no real support in this text for the doctrine of purgatory.

2 Timothy 4:6 . When Paul speaks of being “poured out like a libation” he is referring to his death as a martyr. Absent is any reference to purgatory, indulgences, prayers for the dead, or anything supporting the Catholic doctrine of a treasury of merit contributed to by good deeds on which those in purgatory can draw. The truth is that there is no scriptural

support for this Catholic dogma. It is biblically unfounded, and, as we saw in chapter 12 , it is contrary to the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

Other Biblical Arguments against a Treasury of Merit. The most important reason to reject a treasury of merit by which one human being can do good deeds that can be credited to the account of another is the very concept of merit. As we have demonstrated in chapter 12 , salvation is not merited; it is obtained by grace through faith. Paul said explicitly, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). Likewise, in Romans 4:5 the Scriptures declare: “when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” It is important to note that Paul does not speak merely of the works of the law, as Catholic scholars often claim, but of any kind of work in general. It is “not because of *any righteous deeds* we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us” (Titus 3:5 , emphasis added). Merit and grace are an either/or (see Rom. 11:6).

The whole idea that one can buy³⁷ an indulgence, the very reason that prompted Luther’s reaction against the abuses in the Church, is repugnant. The inspired words of St. Peter himself will suffice: “. . . *you were ransomed from your futile conduct . . . not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb*” (2 Pet. 1:18–19 , emphasis added).

Response to Argument from Tradition. Our response to the Catholic arguments from the Fathers for the treasury of merit can be brief. First, the Fathers were not unanimous on this point (a problem, considering Trent’s demand that the Bible be interpreted according to the “unanimous consent” of the Fathers). Second, even great Catholic scholars, such as Augustine and Aquinas, rightly taught that the Fathers were not inspired and infallible, only Scripture is (see chap. 10). Augustine declared that “it is to the canonical Scriptures *alone* that I am bound to yield such implicit subjection as to follow their teaching, without admitting the slightest suspicion that in them any mistake or any statement intended to mislead could find a place.”³⁸ Likewise, Aquinas affirmed that “we believe the successors of the apostles and prophets *only in so far as* they tell us those things which the apostles and prophets have left in their own writings.”³⁹ Third, like the official Jewish traditions that grew up around the Old Testament, Roman Catholic official tradition has often strayed from the Word of God. Jesus accused the Pharisees and scribes saying, “You have nullified the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matt. 15:6), and the same could be said of Roman Catholics. Finally, the official (infallible) pronouncement of this doctrine at Trent is late (A.D. 1546) and ill-founded, having only

37 Catholic scholars insist that indulgences are not really bought; one simply gets them by making a donation for charitable causes. But “a rose by any other name. . . .” Whatever it is called, there is still an exchange of money for merit, however unequal the exchange may be.

38 Augustine, *Letters* 82.3, in Schaff, *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, emphasis added.

39 Aquinas, *De veritate* XIV, 10, ad 11, emphasis added.

scant support from the early church fathers. Thus, neither Scripture nor the unanimous teachings of the Fathers affirm a treasury of merit.

Other Reasons for Rejecting the Treasury of Merit. There are many other arguments against the Catholic doctrine of the treasury of merit. A few are briefly stated here.

First, it undermines the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. The most important reason for rejecting the Roman Catholic dogma of a treasury of merit by which the good deeds of the righteous on earth can be applied to the account of the righteous in purgatory is that it is contrary to the all-sufficiency of the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Christ not only died for the guilt of our sins but also for their consequences, eternal and temporal. His atoning sacrifice is both sufficient and efficacious, sufficient for all and efficient for those who believe. There is nothing more that needs to be done to save us from the condemnation and consequences of our sins than what Christ already did for us, which we cannot earn but must accept by faith as a free gift. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). And insofar as it is a gift it cannot be worked for; only wages can. For "a worker's wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due. But *when one does not work*, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, *his faith is credited as righteousness*" (Rom. 4:4–5 ; cf. 11:6 , emphasis added).

Second, it is contrary to Romans 8:1 . According to the Word of God, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Catholics believe that those who go to purgatory are "in Christ," that is, they are believers. But if they are believers then no condemnation for anything having to do with their sins (their guilt or consequences) awaits them after death. Jesus took upon himself all our condemnation at the cross (2 Cor. 5:2 ; Col. 2:13–14 ; 1 Pet. 2:24 ; 3:18).

Third, it is inconsistent with other Catholic doctrines. Catholic theology teaches that (1) there will be no purgatory after the second coming; (2) all believers need to suffer for the temporal consequences of their sins in purgatory. But, unless we assume that of the millions of believers alive when Christ returns not even one has any unpaid consequences of his or her sins then it follows; (3) that purgatory is not necessary for those who die just before Christ returns. Indeed, we must assume further that since God is absolutely just the consequences of these sins must have been suffered for by someone else. But there are two problems with this. First, it reveals that purgatory is not really necessary for the individual who commits the sin, since someone else can substitute for that person. Second, if substitutionary atonement for the temporal consequences of one's sin is possible, why not accept the substitutionary atonement of Christ, which is precisely what Scripture affirms (Heb. 1:2–3)?

Further, those who have a deathbed conversion but die just about the time of the second coming cannot pay for the temporal consequences of their sins, since there is no purgatory after the second coming. It matters not whether they were baptized before they died since it is still true that they did not pay for the temporal consequences of their sins. Again, since God is just and must punish sin, the death of Christ must cover the temporal

as well as eternal consequences of sin, and therefore there is no need for purgatory to pay for the temporal consequences of anyone's sins. Christ paid it all. Of course, this does not mean that there are no temporal consequences for sin and that God does not use events in this world to chasten and purify his own; he does (cf. 2 Cor. 4:17 ; Gal. 6:7 ; Heb. 12:4–11). It simply means that there is no need which stems from some unsatisfied justice in God that we must placate, either in this life or in the next. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross completely satisfied God's justice on behalf of the sins of the entire human race (Rom. 3:21–26 ; 5:18–19 ; 2 Cor. 5:21 ; 1 John 2:2).

PRAYERS TO AND FOR THE DEAD

A sixteenth-century Roman Catholic salesman of indulgences named Tetzl advertised that the moment you hear your money drop in the box, the soul of your loved one will jump out of Purgatory. Nothing was more repugnant to the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther than the sale of indulgences. While even current Catholic scholars acknowledge that this is extreme, it did focus attention on the Catholic belief in prayers for the dead and indulgences, which are closely associated with the doctrine of purgatory and the treasury of merit. They are in fact their parasite. For there is no need to pray for the dead to be released from purgatory unless there is such a place (or condition) and unless prayers can obtain merit on their behalf.

CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF PRAYERS TO AND FOR THE DEAD

It is a matter of Catholic dogma (*de fide*) that “The living Faithful on earth can come to the assistance of the souls in Purgatory by their intercessions (suffrages).”⁴⁰ Ott explains that “suffrages are understood not only as intercessory prayers, but also indulgences, alms and other pious works, above all the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.”⁴¹ The Council of Trent pronounced infallibly that “there is a purgatory, and that the souls there detained are aided by the suffrages [prayers] of the faithful and chiefly by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar.”⁴² They insisted that the bishops “instruct the faithful diligently in matters relating to intercession and invocation of the saints . . . to invoke them and to have recourse to their prayers, assistance and support *in order to obtain favors from God through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*”⁴³

Argument from Scripture. The Scriptures cited in support of this doctrine are scant. Other than the apocryphal text from 2 Maccabees 12:42–46 , Ott gives only 2 Timothy 1:18 : “May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day.” Other Catholic

40 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 321.

41 Ibid.

42 Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*.

43 Ibid., emphasis added.

scholars appeal to 1 Timothy 2:1 and even Matthew 17:3 for support. We will examine these texts shortly.

Catholic arguments from Scripture are more speculative and inferential than exegetical. For example, Patrick Madrid speculates: “(1) The Church is Christ’s body; (2) Christ has only one Body; not one on earth and one in heaven. (3) Christians are not separated from each other by death. (4) Christians must love and serve each other.”⁴⁴ Therefore, we must serve even those who have died by continuing to pray for them.

Argument from Tradition. The primary arguments in favor of praying for the dead are taken from tradition. Ott boasts that “tradition abounds in testimony in favor of the doctrine.”⁴⁵ Strangely, he cites what he admits is the “apocryphal Acts of Paul and of Thecla” in support of praying for the dead.⁴⁶ Tertullian and Cyprian are also cited as early witnesses.

PROTESTANT RESPONSE TO PRAYERS TO AND FOR THE DEAD

Response to Argument from Scripture. Protestants reject both purgatory and prayers for the dead. They find no support for either in Scripture.

2 Maccabees 12:42–46 . The dispute is not over whether this passage affirms praying for the dead—it does. It says clearly that “it was a holy and pious thought” to “pray for them in death,” for “thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin” (vv. 44–46). The debate is over whether it belongs in the canon of Scripture. Since we have already given our objections to the Roman Catholic canonization of this and ten other apocryphal books (see chap. 9), we will not repeat them here. The dead may be praying for us (cf. Rev. 6:10), but we are not to pray for the dead.

There is no sound biblical, historical, or theological reason for accepting the inspiration of 2 Maccabees. The book does not claim to be inspired and the Jewish community that produced and preserved it never claimed it to be inspired. It also was rejected by many notable Fathers of the early church, including Jerome, the great Roman Catholic biblical scholar and translator of the Latin Vulgate. Finally, it was not infallibly proclaimed part of the canon until A.D. 1546, in an obvious attempt to support the very doctrines that Luther attacked in his reformation. To reveal the arbitrary nature of the decision, at the same time 2 Maccabees was canonized by Rome another apocryphal book, 2 (4) Esdras, which opposes prayers for the dead (see 7:105) was excluded from the canon.

2 Timothy 1:18 . The fact that Paul prayed that God would have mercy on Onesiphorus on the day of his reward cannot support praying for the dead for one very

44 Patrick Madrid, “Any Friend of God’s Is a Friend of Mine,” *This Rock* (September 1992): 8.

45 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 321.

46 Ibid.

fundamental reason— *he was still alive when Paul prayed for him!* Praying that someone alive will receive mercy on the Day of Judgment is a far cry from praying for a person *after* he or she has already died. There is no indication in the Bible that anyone ever prayed for another after the person died. In fact, there are, as we shall see, clear indications to the contrary.

Response to Argument from Inference. Let's consider now the speculative argument proposed by Madrid that since (1) the church is Christ's body and (2) Christ has only one body, and (3) death does not separate us from other members in it, and since (4) we have an obligation to love and serve others, (5) we must continue to ask them for help, even after they die.

From a biblical perspective there are several serious problems with this argument, a few of which will be briefly mentioned here. While a Protestant has no objection to the first or fourth premises, there are serious objections to the others.

First, the second premise, while true, can be easily misconstrued. For example, just because there is only one body does not mean there is no real distinction between the visible and invisible dimensions of it. Likewise, it does not mean that our duties of love to each dimension can be performed in the same way. For example, I cannot (and need not) perform my duty to physically care for my departed father and mother now as I could and should were they living on earth. Nor can I perform my duty to engage in friendly conversation with a departed friend, since he is in the invisible realm, and such conversations are not possible. Likewise, prayer cannot (and should not) occur between the living and the dead.

Second, the third premise is flatly false. According to the Bible, this is precisely what death is, namely, separation from others, including believers. Paul speaks of the dead as being "away" from the visible bodily realm (2 Cor. 5:6). In Philippians 1:23 he says the dead "depart" from this world. Paul comforted the bereaved Christians at Thessalonica, assuring them that they would be "with them" again when Christ returns (1 Thess. 4:17). It is simply false to claim that we are not separated from other believers at death. With that separation comes some real differences, such as no longer being able to speak to them.

Third, the fourth premise of the argument is not true, at least in one of its major implications. For while we must love and serve one another, we should not (and cannot) always do so the same way. Even on earth, when a loved one is not available, I cannot speak with them. According to Scripture, the dead are unavailable to the living until the second coming (Luke 16:26).

Finally, there are several other mistakes made in this argument. Space only permits a brief mention of some of them. (1) The assumption that because God has revealed to the dead *some* things that transpire on earth (e.g., Luke 15:10) they therefore can hear us if we speak to them (or know our mind if we pray silently). (2) The highly debatable assumption that true *prayer* and *asking* another are the same. In fact, there is no real

biblical support for this assumption, since prayer is always to God in the Bible and never to any creature, even an angel. While prayer is not identical to worship, it is part of it, and worship should always be directed to God. (3) There is the invalid inference that because the saints in heaven may be praying *for us* (Rev. 6:10) that we should be praying *to* them. There is no logical connection between the two since they would be praying *to* God, not a creature. So, if anything, this would prove just the opposite of what Catholics believe. Namely, that this is what we should do too. (4) Finally, there is a false analogy used, namely, that since Jesus' mother *on earth* interceded to him at the wedding that believers on earth should have Mary intercede to God *in heaven* on their behalf. As the underlined words reveal, there are significant differences between them, to say nothing of the part that in the text even Mary pointed them to Jesus, saying, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5).

Response to Argument from Tradition. Here again tradition is not always a reliable test for truth. First, there are contradictory traditions, even from other apocryphal books and the early Fathers. Second, unlike the Bible, tradition is not infallible; the tradition of praying for the dead is a case in point. Third, the fact that there were traditions from the second century proves nothing—there were false traditions even in the first century! The apostle John debunked a false tradition that took Jesus' words in John 21:21–23 to mean that John would never die. There were even many false teachings that the apostles condemned in their day (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1–3 ; 2 Tim. 2:16–18 ; 1 John 4:1–3). Early traditions do not necessarily prove that they were apostolic truths; they simply have been early errors.

As for the Roman Catholic appeal to 1 Timothy 2:1 in support of praying for the dead, the passage teaches no such thing. Paul urged believers to pray for the living, namely, "for kings and for all in authority" (v. 2). Likewise, to draw from the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration that we should pray to the dead is a misuse of the passage. For one thing, the disciples never even spoke to them, let alone prayed to them. Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus (Matt. 17:3), not with the disciples. Indeed, the text says explicitly, "Peter said to Jesus" (v. 4), not to Moses or Elijah. For another, this was a miraculous contact, not representing a normal way we can be in contact with the dead.

Finally, it does not follow that because we should serve each other that we must do it by praying for the dead. There are other ways to serve fellow believers than talking to them. We can do many things in honor of the dead and their memory without attempting to communicate with them.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST PRAYING TO THE SAINTS

There are many reasons the Scriptures forbid praying to Mary and the saints or even venerating their images. Among these several stand out as noteworthy.

God is the only proper object of our prayers. Nowhere in Scripture is a prayer of anyone on earth actually addressed to anyone but God. In fact, *the only prayer in the Bible addressed to a saint was from hell, and God did not answer it* (Luke

16:23–31)! Prayer is an act of religious devotion, and therefore only God is the proper object of such devotion (Rev. 4:11). There are prayers from Genesis (4:26) to Revelation (22:20), but not one is addressed to a saint, angel, or anyone other than a member of the Trinity. Jesus taught us to pray to “Our Father who art in heaven. . . .” The God of Isaiah the prophet emphatically declared: “Turn to me and be safe, all you ends of the earth, for I am God; there is no other!” (Isa. 45:22). Indeed, there is no other person but God to whom anyone anywhere in the Holy Scriptures ever turned in prayer.

Some Catholics appeal to Psalm 103:20–21 as an exception: “Bless the LORD , all you his angels. . . . Bless the LORD , all you his hosts.” This passage is no more an actual prayer to angels and saints than is the poetic appeal in the doxology: “Praise Him above ye heavenly host.” Both the poetic nature of the psalms and the context of this passage indicate that the psalmist is merely using a literary device to appeal to all of creation to praise God. The idea that this God-exalting text proves that angels or dead saints should be the object of our prayers is totally foreign to the meaning of this passage.

It is an idolatrous practice. Prayer is a form of worship, and only God should be worshiped (Exod. 20:3). It is idolatrous to pray to mere human beings or to bow down before them or an image of them or any other creature. The first commandment declares: “You shall not have other gods besides me. *You shall not carve idols* for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; *you shall not bow down before them or worship them*” (Exod. 20:3–5 , emphasis added). Praying to saints, making images of them, or even bowing down to them are violations of this commandment.

Sophisticated distinctions about different kinds of worship (see chap. 13) will not suffice, since most devotees do not observe such distinctions in practice. Furthermore, regardless of any distinctions one makes in theory, the Bible forbids the *practice* of making images and bowing down to them or to any creature. When John bowed down to worship “at the feet of the angel” he was rebuked by the angel who said, “Don’t! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers the prophets. . . . Worship God” (Rev. 22:9).

It is forbidden as witchcraft. The Old Testament condemns all attempts to communicate with the dead along with other condemnations of witchcraft (Deut. 18:10–12 ; cf. Lev. 20:6 , 27 ; 1 Sam. 28:5–18 ; Isa. 8:19–20). Those who violated this command were to be put to death. In all of Scripture there is not a single divinely approved instance of a righteous person praying to a departed believer—not one. Indeed, Saul was condemned for his attempt to contact the dead Samuel (1 Sam. 28 ; cf. 15:23). Given the danger of deception and the lack of faith that the practice of necromancy and idolatry evidence, it is not difficult to understand God’s command.

The Catholic response to the charge of necromancy rings hollow. First, it attempts to narrow the focus of the condemnation against contacting the dead (cf. Deut. 18:11) to the practice of divination (Lev. 19:26). But God forbids communication with the dead regardless of whether it is associated with occult practices. Deuteronomy separates “divination” from one “who consults the dead” and condemns both! Second, the contention that asking a deceased believer to intercede on our behalf is no different from asking a friend here on earth to pray for us is an unsubstantiated claim. There are substantial differences. For one thing, one is in heaven and the other is on earth. Also, there is a huge difference between asking an earthly friend to pray for us and praying to a dead friend! Finally, friends on earth *are in the body* and have senses by which they can get our message, friends in heaven do not: they do not have a physical body (2 Cor. 5:8 ; Phil. 1:23 ; Rev. 6:9).

It is a practical denial of the mediatorship of Christ. Evangelicals believe that to use any mere human being to mediate with God is an insult to the all-sufficient, divinely appointed mediatorship of Jesus Christ. Paul declared emphatically, “There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Tim. 2:5 ; cf. John 10:9 ; 14:6). Hebrews 4:15–16 assures us that in Jesus “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.” Because of this we are urged to “confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” There is no reason to go to Mary or any other saint with our requests. Indeed, it is the ultimate insult to Christ’s human suffering, mediatorship, and high priestly ministry to go to anyone else for grace or help.⁴⁷

Catholic apologists attempt to avoid the sting of this argument by distinguishing between Christ as the *sole mediator* and all believers as *intercessors*. This distinction does not, however, help their cause (of proving we should pray to saints) because all the passages they use are about direct intercession to God, not to other creatures. In Ephesians 2:18 , which they cite, it says explicitly that our access in prayer is “to the Father” not to the saints. Nowhere does Scripture state or imply that we should pray to the saints, and the Roman Catholic dogma which affirms infallibly that we should is a good example of putting tradition over Scripture, thus proving how fallible the alleged “infallible” teaching magisterium really is.

It is an insult to the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Much of the practical Catholic justification for praying to the saints is based on the seemingly plausible argument that, because of their position in heaven, dead believers may be better able to intercede on our behalf. This is a practical denial of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose task it is to do

47 This does not mean that we ought not ask other believers on earth to pray to Jesus for us. Indeed, we should. But there are important differences here. First, we are simply asking other believers on earth to pray for us; we are not communicating with the dead which the Bible forbids. Second, we are not asking these believers to give us grace or mercy, as Catholics ask of Mary, but to ask God for grace. Finally, we are not *praying* to them but merely *asking* them to pray for us.

this very thing on our behalf. And who is better able to intercede for us than another Person of the blessed Trinity? The Bible says, “we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Rom. 8:26). Paul adds that through Christ we “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18). Since beyond our own prayers to God the Holy Spirit intercedes for us perfectly “according to God’s will” (Rom. 8:27) there is no need to call on anyone else in heaven to do so. It is wrong to expect that any human being could be more efficacious with God the Father than God the Son and God the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:1–2). To think so is to insult his divinely appointed role.

PROTESTANT ARGUMENTS AGAINST PRAYING FOR THE DEAD

Not only is it unbiblical to pray *to* the dead, but we believe that it is also wrong to pray *for* the dead. There are several Protestant objections to praying for the dead. The most important ones are the following:

Praying for the dead contradicts the separation of death. The Bible speaks of death as separating the living from the departed. Paul speaks of death as “departure” from earth and being with Christ (Phil. 1:23 ; cf. 2 Tim. 4:6). It is when we “leave the body” (2 Cor. 5:7). Luke 16:26 speaks of a “great chasm” between the living and the dead. Paul speaks of death separating loved ones until they are reunited at the resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13–18). In all of Scripture death is a veil that seals off the living from the dead. Any attempted contacts with the dead are not only futile but forbidden (Deut. 18:11) because of the possibility of demonic deception (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1).

Praying for the dead contradicts the example of David. When David’s baby was alive but seriously ill he prayed for it fervently. However, when the baby died he ceased praying for it immediately.⁴⁸ When asked why, he replied, “While the child was living, I fasted and wept, thinking, ‘Perhaps the LORD will grant me the child’s life.’ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to be with him, but he will not return to me” (2 Sam. 12:22–23). It is clear that David, who as a prophet of God claimed that “the spirit of the LORD spoke through me” (2 Sam. 23:2), believed that prayers for the dead were ineffective. For if he believed that any prayer for the dead was

48 Catholics respond that David only stopped because God turned down his request to keep the child alive, not because he believed praying for the dead was wrong. This is unconvincing for several reasons. First, David’s love for the child did not cease when the child died; the natural momentum from this love would surely have led him to continue to pray for the child if he thought it was right to do so. Second, there is no record of David or any other Old Testament believer ever praying for the dead on any other occasion. Third, David states his reason for stopping, namely, he knew he would be reunited with the child at the resurrection (2 Sam. 12:23 ; cf. Ps. 16:10). This hope of resurrection (cf. Job 19:25–26 ; Isa. 26:19 ; Dan. 12:2) made it unnecessary to pray for the dead.

effective, he certainly would have attempted it in his most desperate hour. In fact, in all of his many spiritual writings in the Psalms about how to communicate with God David never once even suggested that we pray for the dead.

Praying for the dead contradicts the example of Jesus. When Jesus lost his close friend Lazarus by death he never prayed to God for him.⁴⁹ He simply resurrected him with the command “Lazarus, come forth!” Rather than pray for the dead, *Jesus prayed for the living*. At Lazarus’s graveside Jesus prayed, “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41–42). Ironically, many reverse this by weeping for the living who stray and praying for the dead, while Jesus wept for the dead (John 11:35) and prayed for the living (11:41–42). The practice of praying for the dead is not the only time that humanly initiated religious practice has made void the teaching of Sacred Scripture (cf. Matt. 15:6).

Praying for the dead contradicts the sacrifice of Christ. As we have already noted, the whole idea that our prayers or works can do anything on behalf of the dead is contrary to the all-sufficiency of the completed work of Christ on the Cross. His mediation and intercession for them (1 John 2:1–2) are more than sufficient. When Jesus died and rose again the work of salvation was “finished” (John 19:30 ; cf. 17:4 ; Heb. 10:14). When he purged our sins he “took his seat” at the right hand of God (Heb. 1:3) since there was absolutely nothing more to do for our salvation. The whole concept of praying for the dead “that they might be freed from sin” is an insult to the finished work of Christ, “who freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). Jesus not only obtained salvation from all our sins at one time but, as our great high priest (Heb. 7), he alone implements it for all time (see chaps. 12 and 13).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In view of the unbiblical nature of purgatory it is understandable that some contemporary Roman Catholics are de-emphasizing some aspects of traditional thinking on this doctrine. For example, one Catholic scholar insists that, “In spite of some popular notions to the contrary, the Church has never passed judgment as to whether purgatory is a place or in a determined space where the souls are cleansed.”⁵⁰ And as to its importance,

⁴⁹ Some have suggested that Jesus was praying for the dead here since he acknowledged that God always hears him just before he resurrected Lazarus. However, even if true, this would not support the Roman Catholic doctrine of prayers for the dead. Jesus did not pray that Lazarus be released from his sins, as Catholics believe we should from the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees 12:45 (46). Further, at best this is simply a prayer for God’s power to raise the dead, not to deliver him from purgatory. Finally, the whole thrust of Jesus’ prayer is directed toward the living, not the dead. He said his prayer was “because of the crowd . . . that they may believe” (John 11:41–42).

⁵⁰ Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, p. 274.

Catholics are confessing that “In the hierarchy of revealed doctrines, purgatory does not rank as high as the Trinity or the Incarnation.”⁵¹ A popular Catholic lay-evangelist writes that some Catholics fall into the “legalism of Purgatory,” thinking of it as a second chance. However, “Sacred Scripture indicates that there’s really only one punishment for sin—and that’s death.” The Bible teaches “that we’re off the hook. Jesus paid that awful price on the cross—our punishment was laid upon him. Purgatory is not a ‘place’ but a ‘process.’ ”⁵² These speculations, however welcomed by Protestants as a move in the right direction, are quite different from traditional Catholic teaching and practice. It is of interest to note that Eastern Orthodox theologians for the most part do not incorporate purgatory into their dogmatics (see Appendix A).

The doctrine of purgatory and its accompanying dogmas are a crucial area of difference between Catholics and Protestants. We have examined the biblical basis for these beliefs and found them seriously wanting. They are not only extra-biblical but anti-biblical, since they run contrary to fundamental teachings of Scripture, such as the all-sufficiency of the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the uniqueness of God as the sole object of all our devotion and prayer. The only real bases for pronouncing them dogma are conflicting traditions and human speculations often based on apocryphal books that have been rejected from the canon of Scripture by both Catholic and Protestant scholars (see chap. 9). These matters were at the heart of the Reformation and continue to be seemingly insurmountable theological obstacle between orthodox Catholics and orthodox Protestants today.

Perhaps we could conclude by the observations of an articulate contemporary Catholic about this practice of venerating and praying to the saints. “I visited a prominent Catholic cathedral dedicated to St. Joseph . . . and it sure seemed that one going through the cathedral could easily get the impression that St. Joseph was a Savior . . . in a way that all but obscured the unique role of Jesus as Savior and Lord.”⁵³

51 Ibid., p. 278.

52 Albert H. Boudreau, *The Born-Again Catholic* (Locust Valley: Living Flame Press, 1983), p. 139. Another well-known charismatic lay-leader mentions changes in Catholic practices that should gladden evangelical hearts: “The reform of various rites, the restoration of the catechumenate for adult baptism, the beginning restoration of baptism by immersion are all hopeful signs.” And in some areas of Latin America, “infant baptism is being withheld if there is no assurance that the child will grow up in a community of faith and genuine Christian life” (Ralph Martin, *Hungry for God* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974], pp. 69–70). Martin also bemoans the effect that “cultural Catholicism” has had on faith (p. 137).

53 Martin, *Hungry for God*, p. 136.