

***He Purged Our Stains:
The theological case for and against the doctrine of purgatory
as officially taught by the Roman Catholic Church***

A very brief summary of official Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory

The Roman Catholic (hereafter, ‘RC’) church officially teaches that:

“All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

The church gives the name Purgatory¹ to this final purification of the elect...”²

The RC Case and Evangelical Responses

Arguments concerning Tradition

Albert J Nevins MM, in his apologia for Catholicism says: “Catholics base the doctrine of Purgatory largely on tradition”³.

The Catholic Catechism states that:

“The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence [1439] and Trent [1563]”⁴

Although these dates seem relatively late, it is argued that the notion of purgatory can be found in very ancient writers. For example, the Catechism shows persuasive instances of this teaching in the works of St Gregory the Great and St John Chrysostom.⁵ Among the earliest writers, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine also speak of the cleansing fire of purgatory⁶.

The Traditional Practice of Prayers for the Dead

Even when the doctrine of Purgatory is not fully worked out, RC commentators point out that the widespread and primitive practice of prayers for the dead⁷ suggest some such notion. There would be little point in praying either for souls who firmly enjoyed the full heavenly bliss or those whose eternal damnation was sealed. The practice necessitates belief in some intermediate phase.

¹ Purgatory – Latin, *purgatorium*, purging.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church ET 1994 sections 1030-2.

³ Nevins, op. cit., p92. According to Boettner p298, Cardinal Newmann concedes the doctrine of purgatory as a clear case of (legitimate) development from a slight scriptural germ.

⁴ Catechism, op. cit. The relevant texts from Florence and Trent are conveniently quoted in Pohle, op. cit. p78.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nevins, op. cit., p90

⁷ Evidence for this practice can be found, e.g., in early Christian graffiti in the catacombs of Rome where those passing are asked to pray for dead relatives and friends. Pohle also directs us to Tertullian, the Acts of St Perpetua, St Basil and St Augustine, op. cit., p81-2.

Although an Anglican, C.S. Lewis also argues for the intuitive propriety of the practice: “Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so *spontaneous*, so all but *inevitable*, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter men.” He adds: “And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?”⁸.

However, evangelicals have contended that the tradition is not as united as some RC writers imply. Calvin argues that the ancients were really more remembering the dead than praying for them, were very doubtful on their state and noncommittal about purgatory, not making it an article of the faith. He says, “Surely any man endowed with a modicum of wisdom easily recognises that whatever he reads among the ancient writers concerning this matter was allowed because of public custom and common ignorance”, which Calvin sees as having been influenced more by pagan superstition than the scriptures⁹.

Boettner sees this tradition as very weak and is scathing: “does any intelligent person believe that if such a place as purgatory is described in the Bible it would have taken the church fathers 600 years to discover it, and another 1000 years to confirm it?”¹⁰.

Even if it could be shown that the doctrine of Purgatory had a universal and unquestioned hold on the church from sub-apostolic days to the present, this would not prove its validity for evangelicals, who hold to the final and supreme authority of Scripture alone, placing it above experience, reason and tradition.

Arguments concerning Scripture

Despite the RC self-conscious dependence on tradition for its doctrine of Purgatory, it is also claimed to be clearly demonstrable from the Bible¹¹.

Some Protestants point out with glee that the Bible never mentions “purgatory”. However, RC authors are quite right to say that this is a relatively weak argument. The Scriptures do not use the word “trinity”, but RC and Protestant writers are agreed that this does not render the doctrine of the Trinity unbiblical.¹²

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, (Fount Collins, Glasgow, 1979), p109. Of course Protestants can still thank God for the dead and talk to him about them, just not intercede for them! Lewis goes on to say: “I believe in Purgatory. Mind you, the Reformers had good reasons for throwing doubt on the ‘Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory’ as the Roman doctrine had then become” referring e.g., to More and Fisher who seem to think of it as a temporary hell, pp109-110.

⁹ Calvin, *op. cit.* p682-3. In addition to this folk religion, Boettner tries to trace some of these non-Christian influences in the history of the doctrine, e.g., to ancient Persia, Indian, Egypt, the Greeks and Romans (e.g., Plato) and the Rabbis, p295.

¹⁰ Boettner, *op. cit.*, p296

¹¹ . For example, Pope Leo X solemnly condemned Luther’s assertion that “Purgatory cannot be proved from the Canonical Scriptures”, Pohle, *op. cit.*, p79

¹² Thus, e.g., Albert J Nevins, *MM, Answering A Fundamentalist*, (Our Sunday Visitor Publishing division, 1990)

The Catechism refers us to “certain texts of Scripture, [which] speak of cleansing fire”¹³ in support of this doctrine, namely 1 Cor 3:15 and 1 Pt 1:7.

However, the evangelical can convincingly show that these verses are far from establishing the doctrine of Purgatory.

Calvin points out that it is not the consensus of tradition that **1 Cor 3** must pertain to the fires of purgatory. The ancients (e.g., Chrysostom and Augustine) took the fire to be tribulation or the cross¹⁴. It is most natural to see “the Day” as the Day of the Lord, the Last Day or the Day of Judgement, rather than the occasion of each believer’s death, when he enters purgatory. Further, it is primarily the individual’s work, particularly in how he teaches and builds up the church that will be subjected to the testing fire, rather than his person that will suffer in it¹⁵. All without exception seem to face this fire, including the Apostles, so it is difficult to see how it could refer to purgatory as taught by the RC church, which “Saints” by-pass. Calvin turns the tables on his Papist opponents: “Accordingly, anyone who fouls the golden purity of God’s word with this filth of purgatory must undergo the loss of his work”¹⁶.

Despite the RC attempt to associate **1 Pt 1:7** with purgatorial flames, the reference seems to be to the present sufferings of the believers in the “various trials” which they have to face “now for a little while” (v6). Rather than countenancing any intermediate state, the Apostle directs his readers’ attention to the salvation and imperishable inheritance, which are ready to be revealed (vv4-5).

The Catechism proceeds to quote St Gregory the Great who uses **Mt 12:31** to show that “certain offences can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come”¹⁷.

Robert Doyle points out that this verse is not strictly relevant to the RC doctrine of purgatory because it speaks of forgiveness rather than personal expiation, which the Church requires us to distinguish¹⁸.

Further, Wayne Grudem is right in his wholesale rejection of the inference Gregory draws from the verse: “... this is simply an error of reasoning: to say that something will not happen in this age does not imply that it might happen in the age to come! What is needed to prove the doctrine of purgatory is not a negative statement such as this but a positive statement that says that people suffer for the purpose of continuing purification after they die”¹⁹.

¹³ Catechism, op. cit., n605

¹⁴ Calvin p682

¹⁵ Grudem, Systematic Theology, p818

¹⁶ Calvin, op. cit., p681

¹⁷ Catechism, op. cit., n606, quoting St Gregory the Great, Dial 4,39: PL 77,396. Thus also Pohle p80 who cites Augustine’s support for this interpretation.

¹⁸ Robert Doyle, op. cit., p44

¹⁹ Grudem, op. cit., p818. Grudem’s verdict is that “Scripture nowhere says this”.

The clearest candidate for such an unambiguous text indicating purgatory is **2 Macc 12:46**. The Rt Rev Msgr Joseph Pohle calls it “the scriptural *locus classicus* for our dogma”²⁰. It is to this passage that the Catholic Catechism next directs us²¹.

Protestants will, of course, immediately respond that they do not regard 2 Maccabees as canonical. Calvin highlights the questionable reliability of the text by pointing out that “the author himself implores pardon if he has said anything amiss” – not something we would expect to find in an infallible document²².

Nevertheless, Pohle responds: “... the historical authenticity of the incident sufficiently proves that belief in Purgatory, so far from being an invention of the “Papists”, was common among the Jews long before the beginning of the Christian era”²³.

However, Pohle’s claim that this proves the currency of “belief in purgatory” is rather too bold. As Boettner notes, what we actually have here is prayers and offerings for the dead and no mention of the purgatorial flames. Although something akin to purgatory is apparently implied, the doctrine is not obviously here in a developed way. For this passage to be convincing, one would have to be persuaded that prayers for the dead are proper and effective²⁴. Calvin argues that Judas is not being praised for offering a sacrifice for the dead, but rather because of his firm hope in final the resurrection: “This deed was not without superstition and wrong-headed zeal”²⁵. Further, even if we accept this passage, a number of evangelical writers argue that it proves too much: it contradicts the RC doctrine which teaches that these soldiers, who died in the mortal sin of idolatry, ought to have been damned²⁶.

Boettner fairly concludes: “Surely one who had never heard of purgatory would not learn about it from this passage”²⁷.

RC authors also bring a number of other texts into the exegetical crossfire. In my reading, I have also seen Job 1:5; Mt 3:11; 5:21-26; Jn 14:2; Phil 2:10; 2 Tim 1:17-18; 1 Pt 3:18-20; Jude 22-23 and Rev 5:13 used. In addition, Berkhof mentions Is 4:4; Micah 7:8; Zech 9:11; Mal 3:2-3 and 1 Cor 15:29 as being cited in support of purgatory. He concludes that: “It is evident, however, that these passages can be made to support the doctrine of purgatory only by a very forced exegesis. The doctrine finds absolutely no support in Scripture”²⁸.

Theological and Systematic Considerations of the RC Doctrine

²⁰ Joseph Pohle, *Eschatology or The Catholic Doctrine of the Last Things*, a dogmatic treatise originally published 1917 (Greenwood Press, 1971)

²¹ Catechism, op. cit.

²² Calvin, op. cit., (p679)

²³ Pohle, op. cit. p80, see n15 for further evidence

²⁴ Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, (Banner of Truth, 1966) p234

²⁵ Calvin, op. cit., p679. He adds, “...but utterly foolish are those who extend the sacrifice of the law even down to us, when we know that by the advent of Christ what was then in use ceased”.

²⁶ Boettner, op. cit. p294. For the RC response to this particular objection see Pohle, op. cit., p79, the sin of the soldiers was probably avarice rather than idolatry and was not necessarily mortal. This seems like special pleading.

²⁷ Boettner, op. cit., p294

²⁸ Berkhof, op. cit., p687

The RC doctrine of purgatory depends on (and contributes to) a larger theological matrix.

Imperfect sinners need a Purgatory

The Church rightly teaches that souls must be perfect to enter heaven²⁹. Some souls are as yet unfit for heaven, being burdened by venial sins and/or not having fully expiated the temporal punishment for sin (although their eternal punishment was borne by Christ and their sins are forgiven by grace). This class of souls, if they are not subject to mortal sin, face the purification of purgatory, although its exact nature is not officially defined. It must be admitted that there is a certain inner logic and a degree of coherence to this system.

C. S. Lewis comments: “Our souls *demand* Purgatory, don’t they?” – we wouldn’t want to contaminate heaven by entering it with foul breath and stinking clothes; we want to be cleaned up first³⁰.

Otherwise some people get away with negligence

Aquinas argues that justice demands purgatorial punishments. There must be a final reckoning after death on the basis of works “otherwise the negligent [Catholic] would be better off than the careful [who conscientiously perform penance while alive], if the penalty that men do not pay here for their sins is not to be undergone in the life to come”³¹.

Purgatory displays the justice and mercy of God and teaches us responsibility

Nevins further lauds the usefulness of purgatory in revealing the character and ways of God to us: “Reparation for sin is one way God teaches us responsibility. When God is offended by our acts, his mercy will bring us forgiveness but his justice demands atonement, which, if not done in this life, must be done in the next before entering purgatory”³².

Evangelical Responses

How Purgatory actually works is mystifying

Official pronouncements have avoided giving detail concerning the nature of purgatory, but this has not inhibited many RC writers who speak confidently on the subject; we must at least ask how we are to think of purgatory. The majority tradition in the West is that the souls in purgatory suffer by a material medium similar to the

²⁹ Quoting Rev 21:27

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, op. cit., p110

³¹ Pohle, op. cit., p77, quoting St Thomas Aquinas, Summa c. Gent., IV, 91 – for the Protestant, this argument shows that RCs have a problem with the free grace of forgiveness c.f. also, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

³² Nevins, op. cit. p88-9. Arguably, at least, the evangelical could say that he learns these lessons just as effectively by observing the cross and seeing the consequences of sin *in this life*.

fire of hell³³. One traditional objection has been to ask how immaterial souls can suffer this physical pain before the bodily resurrection. Some RC theologians have responded that in purgatory the soul takes on a different, undefined sort of body, in which suffering can then be felt. Evangelicals ridicule this expedient: “that is, like the doctrine of purgatory itself, a purely fictitious assumption without any Scripture proof whatever, and in fact contrary to Scripture”³⁴.

The sanctifying and reformative effectiveness of purgatory is questionable

Augustus H. Strong writes: “Suffering has in itself no reforming power. Unless accompanied by special renewing influences of the Holy Spirit, it only hardens and embitters the soul. We have no Scripture evidence that such influences of the Spirit are exerted after death upon the still impenitent, but abundant evidence, on the contrary, that the moral condition in which death finds men is their condition forever...”³⁵.

On this model, Jonathan Edwards argues the most one could hope for as a result of these chastisements is a forced external conformity, but no changed heart and positive love of virtue for its own sake. He pictures a soul in purgatorial suffering who might very well be worse after 100 000 years of pain, rather than better. He also suggests that impenitent souls are likely to continue to sin after death and that when the purgation of the sins they committed in the first life is done, they will then have an even greater debt to pay, and thus never properly escape the pains³⁶.

Even for the RC, Purgatory is not strictly necessary

Even accepting the RC case for purgatory, it is not obvious that it must exist of necessity. The RC church teaches that purgatory will not exist after the last judgement: “The faithful who will be alive at the second coming of our Lord will not, of course, be able to expiate their venial sins and temporal punishments in Purgatory; for there will be no Purgatory after the last judgement. *With regard to these survivors, it is piously believed that God will grant them a general indulgence*, or that the tribulations and sufferings they will have to undergo [in this life] will make up for their deficiencies”³⁷. This seems to imply that God *could* perfectly justly exercise his mercy to grant a general indulgence to all souls on their death and that there is no real *need* for purgatory, even on the Catholic view.³⁸

³³ Pohle, op. cit., p84-85. He adds “Theologians consider it extremely probable that such is the case”.

³⁴ Boettner, op. cit., p285

³⁵ Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology, p1041, quoted in Boettner, op. cit., p285

³⁶ Jonathan Edwards, pp518, 520. It should be noted that Edwards does not seem to be directly and specifically opposing the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Rather, he is writing against annihilationists, universalists and those who see the sufferings of *hell* as purgatorial. RC writers would stress that souls in purgatory are not impenitent but are already converted and love God. They co-operate with the Spirit in their further sanctification, rather than needing to be persuaded not to kick against it.

³⁷ Pohle, op. cit., p91, emphasis added

³⁸ The RC church also teaches that Purgatory is under the special jurisdiction of the Pope who can grant indulgences to alleviate, shorten or terminate its sufferings. Why doesn't he exercise his powers more fully or even abolish purgatory? Boettner, op. cit., p282

The system is open to abuse, as history shows

Protestant polemicists find fertile ground in suggesting a money motive in the doctrine of Purgatory. Boettner writes: “It is safe to say that no other doctrine of the Church of Rome, unless it be that of auricular confession, has done so much to pervert the Gospel or to enslave the people to the priests as the doctrine of purgatory.... The result, particularly among ignorant and uneducated people, has been that the Roman church sells salvation for money, not outwardly and directly, but nevertheless in reality”.³⁹

The connection of the doctrine to the false practice of indulgences and prayers for the dead

Much to the scandalization of Protestants, the Catechism explicitly links the doctrine of purgatory to the Eucharistic sacrifice, almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance on behalf of the dead. The Church bases these practices on the Communion of the Saints that allows it, by the Power of the Keys, to dispense grace from its treasury of merit.

A complex corruption of the gospel

For the Protestant, the Roman soteriological system is a grotesque and malignant deformation that destroys the pure and simple gospel of justification by faith alone. The most fundamental objection to purgatory is the good news that in dying Jesus secured perfect righteousness for those who trust in him. Pohle concedes that the Reformers’ rejection of purgatory is “quite consistent with their false idea of justification. If a man is justified by faith alone, and all his sins are “covered up” by the grace of Christ, there can be nothing left for him to expiate after death”⁴⁰.

Perfect holiness is given to the believer by Christ instantaneously on death when he goes to be with Him, not achieved in purgatory

The evangelical, who agrees with the RC that we must be perfect to enter heaven, argues that the believer shares in Christ’s spotless saving merits and is made perfect in holiness at the point of death by Christ’s instantaneous transforming power⁴¹. The Bible seems to teach that those who die in Christ go immediately to be with him on death, and speaks of this in such a way that it would be misleading if the (majority of) souls were only with Christ in some lesser sense in purgatory⁴².

The distinction between mortal and venial sins is false

³⁹ Boettner, op. cit., p286; 283, Indeed, speaking of the Papal power to grant indulgences, Boettner thinks: “The evils that have flowed from this doctrine, and which are its inevitable consequences, make it abundantly clear that it cannot be of divine origin”

⁴⁰ Pohle, op. cit., p78

⁴¹ Thus Boettner, p299, quoting the Westminster Standards: “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness” and citing Mt 8:3 to show that Jesus has the power to cleanse instantaneously.

⁴² 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; Lk 23:43

Evangelicals oppose a number of the assumptions that constitute the doctrine of purgatory. They claim the Bible makes no distinction like the RC division of sins into mortal and venial⁴³. It is Jesus' death that provides forgiveness, cleansing and purification from *all* sin⁴⁴.

The separation of forgiveness and punishment is false and undermines the efficiency of Christ's saving work

Further, Boettner and others argue that it is both un-Biblical and illogical to think that God forgives our sins and yet still requires us to face (temporal) punishment for them, as the RC doctrine of purgatory demands. This would certainly be unacceptable in our own judicial system⁴⁵. It is basic to Christ's saving work that he faces our punishment as our substitute so that we do not have to face it. The RC seems to limit the effective scope of Christ's saving work unbiblically to mortal sins and their punishment and the guilt of temporal sin, but not its punishment⁴⁶.

A practical denial of salvation by grace alone

Although RCs seek to affirm salvation by grace alone, it is clear that their doctrine of purgatory involves semi-Pelagianism. Our sufferings are a necessary condition of our entering heaven. We pay part of the price for our sins.

Conclusion

The official RC doctrine of purgatory is scripturally and systematically indefensible and poisonous to Biblical theology. Calvin is right in urging upon Bible-believers the necessity of the refutation of the doctrine: "...since purgatory is constructed out of many blasphemies and daily propped up by new ones, and since it incites to many grave offences, it is clearly not to be winked at.... When expiation of sins is sought elsewhere than in the blood of Christ, when satisfaction is transferred elsewhere, silence is very dangerous. Therefore, we must cry out with the shouting not only of our voices but of our throats and lungs that purgatory is a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the cross of Christ, inflicts unspeakable contempt upon God's mercy, and overturns and destroys our faith"⁴⁷.

⁴³ James 2:10

⁴⁴ 1 John 1:7-2:2

⁴⁵ Boettner, p282

⁴⁶ The unacceptable alternative is for the RC to impugn the justice of God, having us think that our sins are punished twice, once in Christ at Calvary and then again in us in the fires of purgatory.

⁴⁷ Calvin, op. cit., III, v, 6. p676. Note that Calvin differed from Melancthon whom he says dissembled on this point thinking that the result of speaking out would be fierce conflicts but little edification, n13.

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