

## Should Christians Be Roman Catholics?

by Rev. Andy Wilson

Over the past few decades, a significant number of Protestants (including evangelical Protestants) have converted to Roman Catholicism. Some of the most prominent examples of this are Thomas Howard (Elizabeth Elliot's brother and a former professor at Gordon College), Peter Kreeft (a former professor at Calvin College), Scott Hahn (a former Presbyterian Church in America minister), and Bryan Cross (a graduate of Covenant Theological Seminary). Such openness to Roman Catholicism among Protestants is a new phenomenon in church history, something that was extremely rare until very recently. There are a variety of reasons why some Protestants are being drawn to Rome these days, including the lack of visible unity in Protestantism, the non-churchly nature of much evangelical piety, and the faddishness and flippancy of much evangelical worship.

That being said, it should be pointed out that there are still far more Roman Catholics converting to Protestant Christianity than there are Protestants converting to Roman Catholicism. A recent Pew Research study has shown that one out of three people who were raised Roman Catholic no longer identify themselves as Roman Catholics and that one out of ten Americans is an ex-Roman Catholic. And among those who leave the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), about half remain unaffiliated and about half become Protestant. (Thomas Reese, "The Hidden Exodus: Catholics Becoming Protestant", *National Catholic Reporter*, <http://ncronline.org/news/hidden-exodus-catholics-becoming-protestants>, posted April 18, 2011)

In this paper, I will set forth some of the most important objections that orthodox, confessional Protestants have raised against the teachings and practices of the RCC. My primary purpose is to show Protestants why they should never consider uniting with the RCC. In addition, I offer this as a resource that Protestants can give to their Roman Catholic family and friends to explain why we still "protest" against the RCC.

### **1. *Sola Scriptura vs. Sola Ecclesia***

One of the reasons given by many evangelicals who convert to Roman Catholicism is that they have come to the conclusion that the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* is untenable. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* says that the Bible is

the only infallible authority for the church's beliefs and practices. It is summed up by the Westminster Confession of Faith as follows:

"The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." (WCF 1.10)

The RCC denies this doctrine, as well as other doctrines that flow from it, including the sufficiency of Scripture and the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture, which are set forth as follows in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." (1.6)

"All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." (1.7)

These doctrines were not created by men. They are taught by the Bible itself. The principle of *sola scriptura* can be seen in the following passages:

"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." (Rev. 22:18-19)

"You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you." (Deut. 4:2)

“Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” (Deut. 12:32)

The parallels between these passages indicate that John is warning his readers against the same error that Moses was warning the Israelites against in Deuteronomy. And what was this error? It was the error that Israel eventually fell into: the error of setting aside the written commandments of God for the sake of the oral traditions of men. Concerning this, F.F. Bruce writes,

“As time went on the claim was made that this oral law, like the written law itself, was received by Moses on Sinai, and it was accorded much the same authority. From Moses, it was further claimed, it was handed down through a succession of tradents, until it was received by the leaders of the Shammite and Hillelite schools.” (cited in Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 173)

In other words, the rabbis claimed that their extra-biblical traditions were handed down to them orally through a line of succession that could be traced back to Moses himself in order to ensure that what he wrote was properly interpreted. This sounds almost identical to the claims of the RCC when it says that its traditions have been orally handed down through a line of succession that can be traced back to the apostles. Yet this is the very thing that John is warning us against in Revelation 22, and it is the very thing that Jesus condemns in Mark 7:8-9, where he says:

“‘You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.’ And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!’”

While the passages cited from Revelation and Deuteronomy are not saying that all tradition is evil, they are issuing a clear warning against setting tradition alongside or above God’s written revelation in Scripture. They tell us that

“The written Word is to be the norm to which nothing may be added and from which nothing may be taken away. Interpretation and application are legitimate, but by their very nature they are not identical to the written norm being interpreted and applied. When they are equated either through negligence or presumption, the warning of Deuteronomy and Revelation has been ignored.” (Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 173-174)

As for the sufficiency of Scripture, Paul says in 2 Timothy 3 that the sacred writings “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ” and that Scripture has been given “that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (vs. 15, 17) The Greek term translated as “competent” in verse 17 means ‘to be fitted for a task.’ Paul is saying that Scripture is given in order that God’s servants may be fully equipped for their ministry. Scripture is sufficient to achieve this purpose.

As for the clarity of Scripture, Psalm 119 says that “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (v. 105) and that it “imparts understanding to the simple.” (v. 130) The message of the Bible is clear enough that it can be a light to our path. And this is true for all who will meditate upon the Word and submit to it, even to the simple.

While the church’s ministry has been given by God to help Christians understand the Bible and to hold them accountable to what it teaches (see Eph. 4:7-16; Heb. 13:17), there is nothing in Scripture that indicates that the church’s official teaching stands as an infallible rule that is above Scripture. On the contrary, the Berean Christians were commended, not condemned, for comparing the apostle Paul’s teachings with God’s written revelation in Scripture. (see Acts 17:11) This tells us that the church’s ministry, while certainly authoritative, is always subject to the Bible.

In denying *sola scriptura*, the RCC contends that we need an infallible church to interpret Scripture for us or else we will be split into countless factions. And Rome points to the seemingly endless Protestant interpretations of the Bible as proof of this. Rome’s solution to this dilemma is to say that only the church can tell you what the Bible truly teaches. As Robert Godfrey points out in his essay “What Do We Mean by *Sola Scriptura*?”, the role that Rome ascribes to itself means that “the only real authority is the church: *sola ecclesia*.” Thus, in contrast to the traditional Protestant position that says that the church’s authority is ministerial and declarative in nature, Rome assigns to itself magisterial and legislative authority.

Rome’s contention that the divisions in Protestantism disprove the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture needs to be carefully considered. First, it should be noted that there is a significant degree of doctrinal agreement among confessional Protestants (that is, Protestants who take *sola scriptura* seriously and who seek to summarize the whole counsel of God in Scripture by producing

confessions of faith). Confessional documents such as the Westminster Standards, the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt), the London Baptist Confession, the Savoy Declaration (Congregational), the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran), and the Thirty-Nine Articles (Anglican) have broad areas of agreement. Furthermore, the major conservative Bible commentaries also demonstrate a significant level of agreement, so much so that readers are often not aware of what denomination a writer belongs to. It is true that there is significant institutional division within Protestantism, but this should not surprise us when we take into account that Protestantism only came into being because the institutional church (the RCC) cast out her reformers. Yet in spite of all of its institutional division, Protestantism often displays a significant degree of unity around the gospel. Surely it is significant that such unity takes place among those Protestants who take *sola scriptura* and its related doctrines seriously.

Second, it should be pointed out that, to be consistent, Rome's contention for the necessity of an infallible interpreter of Scripture should also be applied to its own magisterial tradition. In other words, the charge that *sola scriptura* results in seemingly endless interpretations of the Bible can also be leveled at Rome's doctrine of *sola ecclesia*. There is a significant degree of disagreement within the Roman church over how its magisterial tradition should be interpreted. While Rome asks Protestants, 'Who provides the infallible interpretation of the Bible?', Protestants should ask Rome, 'Who provides the infallible interpretation of RCC tradition?' At the end of the day, the question posed by Roman Catholic historian William Shea remains unanswered for Roman Catholics: "if not the Bible, then what is the *norma Normans non normata* (the measuring measure, itself unmeasured) by which we determine which of the many interpretations of church teaching and Christian life is correct, which is to be believed?" (*The Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in America*, 157)

Lastly, it should be pointed out that Rome's insistence upon the need for an infallible interpretation of the faith is a quest for a degree of certainty that is simply not available to us in this present age. While we can have sufficient knowledge of what the Bible teaches, we cannot have perfect knowledge. Rather, ours is the age in which "we see through a glass, darkly." (1 Cor. 13:12) In the words of Cornelius Van Til, "For Rome everything is already present and directly available under the control and direction of men. Her position is anti-eschatological." (*The New Modernism*, 137)

## 2. Apostolic Succession and the Papacy

One of the most important Bible passages for Roman Catholicism is Matthew 16:18-19, where Jesus says,

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The RCC contends that these verses mean that Peter would be the first pope (the bishop of Rome), the supreme leader of the Christian church. Furthermore, Rome says that this position of supremacy would be passed down to each bishop who succeeded Peter in that office. This teaching is set forth in the RCC’s *Baltimore Catechism* as follows:

“Christ gave special powers in his Church to St. Peter by making him the head of the Apostles and the chief teacher and ruler of the entire Church. Christ did not intend that the special power of chief teacher and ruler of the entire Church should be exercised by St. Peter alone, but intended that this power should be passed down to his successor, the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, who is Vicar of Christ on earth and the visible head of the Church.” (XX)

It should be obvious that the above statement says a number of things that go well beyond what Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16. Jesus says nothing about an office of bishop. He says nothing about Rome. He says nothing to suggest the idea of apostolic or papal succession. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus says the same thing to all of the apostles in Matthew 18:18 indicates that the things that are said in chapter 16 are not even uniquely true of Peter. On the contrary, Jesus’ words in this passage set forth the same truth that Paul asserts in Ephesians 2:20: the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” In other words, the only version of apostolic succession that is taught in the Bible is the succession of apostolic doctrine, not a succession of apostolic persons and places. Otherwise, how would the apostle Paul be able to say, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8)? Paul’s criterion for discerning apostolicity was not Peter or his supposed successors, but the gospel. And Paul was careful to emphasize that he did not receive the gospel from any man, but “through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” (Gal.

1:12) This is why Paul believed that it was necessary for him to confront Peter when he saw that Peter's conduct in Antioch was "not in step with the truth of the gospel." (Gal. 2:14)

Some RC apologists point to 2 Timothy 2:2 and 4:1-6 and contend that these passages show Paul passing on his apostolic office to Timothy. But there is nothing in these passages to indicate that this is the case. On the contrary, Paul is talking about the transmission of sound doctrine, not the transmission of an office. He says, "what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" and "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...preach the word." Once again, we see that the only kind of apostolic succession that is found in the New Testament is the passing down of apostolic doctrine, not the passing down of the unique authority of the apostolic office. Furthermore, as Herman Bavinck observes,

"believers are nowhere instructed to inquire into the legitimate succession of their ministers, but rather to examine the Scriptures and to remain in the teaching [handed down to them] (Jn. 5:39; Acts 17:11; 1 Tim. 4:13-16; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 3:14-17). Neither does legitimate succession guarantee purity of doctrine (Jn. 8:39; Rom. 2:28; 9:6)." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 361)

While the New Testament certainly demonstrates that the apostles appointed other church officers to serve in the teaching office after they were gone, there is nothing in the New Testament to indicate that the lineal succession of such officers was the factor that determined their apostolicity. On the contrary, the New Testament defines apostolicity by faithfulness to the apostolic teaching.

In light of the fact that the New Testament does not teach apostolic succession, the RCC is forced to look for support for this doctrine in the teachings of the church fathers (important Christian writers of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century through the close of the 8<sup>th</sup> century). Some of the strongest support is found in the writings of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (A.D. 200-258). Faced with the threat of schism, Cyprian taught that the only way to preserve the church's unity was to require members to remain under the authority of the bishops, who he believed stood in the place of the apostles. Cyprian even went so far as to say that it does not matter how correct a man is in his doctrine if he does not remain under the authority of the church's bishops. For Cyprian, then, the person who refuses to remain in subjection to the church's bishops is not a Christian.

What are we to say to this? Consider the following observation from a highly regarded Patristics scholar:

“For all his profound sense of the Church as a spiritual entity, [Cyprian’s] approach was practical and even legalistic, owing much to analogies borrowed from Roman law and conditioned by the problems created by the Novatianist schism. This was a rigorist, doctrinally orthodox movement, representing the party which advocated severity towards those who had lapsed in the Decian persecution and now wished to resume Church membership, and so Cyprian was obliged to find some other basis for unity than strict orthodoxy of teaching.” (J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 204)

In other words, Cyprian’s demand for unquestioned loyalty to the bishops emerged as a pragmatic and legalistic solution to a challenge that the church was facing in his day. The same can be said about the other passages in the church fathers that support Rome’s teachings about apostolic succession. The leaders of the early church did not derive the doctrine of apostolic succession from Scripture. Instead, they developed it according to their own wisdom as they scrambled to prevent heresy from dividing the church. The demand for unquestioned loyalty to the church’s bishops was not an apostolic teaching, but a pragmatic attempt to keep the church together.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the hierarchical office of “bishop” only emerged as the early church pragmatically adapted its form of government to imitate the hierarchy of the Roman civil government. In the New Testament, the term “bishop” (or overseer) is used interchangeably with the term “elder” (or presbyter) (see Acts 20:17, 28). The New Testament knows nothing of the office of bishop as Cyprian or the other church fathers conceive it. This is a significant point, because without the office of bishop, the RCC’s doctrine of apostolic succession falls apart.

As for the papacy, a number of the teachings of the church fathers go directly against the notion of papal primacy. For example, even Cyprian declared, “Neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience.” (Seventh Council of Carthage, par. 1) The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) declared that each church center was to be ruled by its own bishop and not by one head over all bishops. (Canon 6) And even Gregory I (A.D. 540-604), himself the bishop of Rome, said “whoever calls himself ‘universal bishop,’ or wishes to be so called, is

in his self-exaltation Antichrist's precursor, for in his swaggering he sets himself before the rest." (Epistle 18) This last quote is especially damaging for the RCC's doctrine of the papacy, as it has a past pope declaring that any pope who declares himself to be the head of the church is a precursor of the Antichrist.

The RCC's claims about the papacy are confronted by a host of historical and biblical problems. First of all, there is a lack of historical evidence that Peter ever even became the first bishop of Rome. In fact, both Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200) and Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 265-339) say that Linus, a man mentioned in 2 Tim. 4:21, was the first bishop of Rome. (see *Against Heresies*, 3.3.3; *Church History*, 3.3) Furthermore, how are we to explain the fact that Paul does not even mention Peter in his letter to the Romans, and that Paul says that Peter was entrusted with missionary efforts to the Jews (see Gal. 2:7-8), if Peter served as the bishop of Rome?

Consider also the many scriptural problems that confront the RCC claim that Peter (and his successors) was the head of the church. The New Testament records more of Peter's errors than those of any of the other apostles. (see Mt. 16:22-23; Mt. 17:4-5; 26:36-45, 51-54; Jn. 13:8-9; 21:21-22; Acts 10:10-16; Gal. 2:11-14) Even after the purported declaration of Peter's primacy in Mt. 16, the disciples argue about which one of them is the greatest. (Mt. 18:1; 20:20-28) The descriptions of Peter's activity in the book of Acts are not what we would expect to see from the one who is the head of the church. (see Acts 8:14; 11:1-18) Peter did not function as the most influential leader at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Paul did not view Peter as one who was invested with supreme authority in the church. (see Gal. 2:6, 11) Peter makes no claim to primacy in his two New Testament letters. (see 1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1)

On a related note, the RCC's claim that the pope's official (*ex cathedra* = "from the chair") pronouncements are infallible is refuted by the many erroneous pronouncements that have been made by numerous popes throughout history. Consider a few examples. During the time of the Arian controversy, Pope Liberius signed an Arian confession of faith and excommunicated Athanasius, who argued for the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ. Eventually, however, the church condemned Arius and vindicated Athanasius. During the time of the Pelagian controversy, Pope Zosimus declared Pelagius to be orthodox and rebuked Augustine for condemning him. Later, however, the Council of Carthage condemned Pelagius and Zosimus changed his views. In the sixth century, Pope Vigilius wrote a treatise that anathematized those who opposed the

writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia. But Vigilius later retracted this treatise publicly and officially.

The RCC attempts to explain the abundant historical evidence against papal infallibility by appealing to the notion that the pope is only infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*, something which can only be determined by the pope himself. This appeal, however, simply begs the question. Consider the following observations from Herman Bavinck:

“For the system requires that no one can tell whether the pope has spoken *ex cathedra* except the pope himself. And so a pope is always free to reject his own pronouncements or those of other popes by saying that they were not spoken *ex cathedra*, or to declare them binding by saying that they were. And later he can even say that he or one of his predecessors, thinking that he spoke *ex cathedra*, actually did not do so.” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 401-2)

In other words, whenever it becomes evident that a pope has erred in one of his official statements, Rome claims that he and his successors have the authority to declare that the error was not official and, hence, does not disprove the doctrine of papal infallibility.

The RCC argues that apostolic succession and the papacy are necessary in order to preserve the church’s unity. This is highly ironic, because in reality these doctrines are among the key factors that keep the Eastern and Protestant churches separate from Rome. Furthermore, these doctrines allow the RCC to be a law unto itself, removing it from the possibility of being corrected when it falls into error. Keith Mathison sums this up well when he writes:

“Not only is the doctrine of [papal] infallibility in direct contradiction with the express teaching of Scripture, it is disproven by history. We know that the Church and the popes can err because the Church and the popes have erred often. The Roman church and her popes have taught heresy at times, and she has contradicted her own earlier dogmatic teachings at other times... [Papal] infallibility is an unscriptural, ahistorical doctrine that always results in the practical autonomy of the one claiming it for himself.” (*The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 225)

### 3. Justification

Many of the official teachings of the RCC are in conflict with the clear teaching of the Bible. I have already discussed the papacy, and a number of other things could be mentioned as well (e.g. the teaching about Mary; purgatory; the treasury of merit; penance; the sacrifice of the Mass; etc.). In this section, I want to focus upon the conflict between the RCC and the Bible on the matter of justification, a doctrine that is at the very heart of the gospel.

At the Council of Trent, the RCC made the following declarations about justification (Note: the term “anathema” refers to being cut off from Christ and his church):

Canon 9. “If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification...let him be anathema.”

Canon 24. “If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of the increase, let him be anathema.”

Canon 30. “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.”

Canon 32. “If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and in case he dies in grace the attainment of eternal life itself and also an increase of glory, let him be anathema.”

In responding to the RCC’s teaching on this, it should be pointed out that confessional Protestants agree that the Bible teaches the following: (1) Christians are called to live holy lives; (2) genuine saving faith produces the fruit of good works and obedience; and (3) at the final judgment, Christians will give an

account of the deeds we have done in this life. However, the Scriptures make it clear that justification cannot be based upon anything that we do. Paul writes,

“Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:2-3)

“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”” (Gal. 3:10)

“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” (Gal. 5:4)

Paul makes his point very clear. Human achievement cannot in any sense contribute to our acceptance by God. Not even the righteousness that we exhibit as a result of God’s gracious work in our lives can contribute to our justification.

When James writes about the connection between justification and good works (see Jas. 2:24), he is not contradicting Paul’s clear teaching that faith alone is the ground of justification. Rather, he is talking about the nature of justifying faith, not its ground. Those who try to make him say otherwise make him contradict Paul.

Another problem with the RCC teaching on justification is that it does not raise the same objection that is raised by the biblical doctrine of justification. Consider Paul’s words in Romans:

“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Rom. 5:18-6:1)

Paul realized that his teaching that a person is justified apart from his works might lead some to accuse him of leaving Christians with no motivation for

living a holy life. He responded to this objection by showing that justification necessitates sanctification. Though the two are distinct aspects of salvation, a person cannot have one without having the other.

The problem with the RCC's doctrine of justification is that it does not lead to the objection that Paul foresaw in Romans 6:1. Because Rome teaches that a person's justification is in fact dependent upon his good works, its gospel is not subject to the accusation that it undermines the motivation for living a holy life. This shows that the RC doctrine of justification is a different doctrine of justification than that which taught in the Bible. And this is very serious, because those who deny that justification is by faith alone are denying the gospel:

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." (Gal. 1:6-9)

#### **4. Rome's Antiquity**

Rome claims that it is the true church because it is the oldest section of the church (a claim, by the way, with which the Eastern Orthodox Church would contend). This is not a very impressive claim when we consider it in light of God's dealings with his people throughout the history of redemption. Throughout the Bible, we see that the central tradition of the covenant community is often corrupt and spiritually dead. In the wilderness, many Israelites doubted and disbelieved. In the judges period, Israel continually succumbed to pagan influences. During Solomon's reign, Israel began to slide into idolatry. Most of Israel's kings led the nation further into idolatry. Israel's spiritual leadership is frequently characterized as corrupt. The prophets that God sent to Israel were usually rejected. Israel's unfaithfulness eventually resulted in exile. The majority of the nation rejected Jesus and called for his death.

Throughout the Bible, we find many instances where those claiming antiquity and tradition are deemed unfaithful. For example:

“Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’” (Jer. 7:4)

“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.” (Mt. 3:9)

“They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did,” (Jn. 8:39)

Also, throughout the Bible, the true people of God are only a remnant of those who claim to be God’s people. For example:

“Save, O LORD, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man.” (Ps. 12:1)

“And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,’” (Rom. 9:27)

God’s presence left the temple due to Israel’s unfaithfulness:

“Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim.” (Ezek. 10:18)

Consider Calvin’s comments on the above passage:

“So, although the glory of God sat between the cherubim in the sanctuary [Ezek. 10:4], and he promised his people that this would be his abiding seat; when the priests corrupt his worship with wicked superstitions, he moves elsewhere and strips the place of holiness. If that Temple, which seemed consecrated as God’s everlasting abode, could be abandoned by God and become profane, there is no reason why these men should pretend to us that God is so bound to persons and places, and attached to external observances, that he has to remain among those who have only the title and appearance of the church [Rom. 9:6].” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.2.3)

Jesus said that the Jewish leaders had abandoned the true faith by overlaying it with manmade traditions (see Matthew 23:25-39). These were devout men who thought they were the true church. Like the RCC, they claimed to be the guardians of an ancient tradition.

Like Israel throughout much of its history, the RCC has overlaid the gospel with manmade traditions and has consistently rejected those who have called for biblical reformation. It is not true that historic Protestantism is schismatic. The Reformers did not set off to form a new branch of the Christian church. They were cast out of the RCC. The RCC's response to the points of debate that were raised by Luther sounds strikingly similar to Ahab's response to Elijah: "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" For this reason, the response of confessional Protestants to Rome should be the same as Elijah's response to Ahab: "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals." (1 Kgs. 18:17)

## 5. Changes in Official RCC Teaching

Roman Catholic theologians explain the changes that have taken place in official RCC teaching over the centuries as doctrinal "developments," pointing to the early church's development of the doctrine of the Trinity as a prime example. The RCC is forced to say this in order to uphold its doctrine of papal infallibility, which says that the Pope's official pronouncements are "irreformable" (Vatican I, decree # 9). It is true that it took time for the church to respond to the various Trinitarian heresies that emerged in its first few centuries and to clearly state what the Scriptures teach about God's nature as a Trinity. That being said, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is in an entirely different category than the many innovations and changes that have taken place in the RCC's official teaching through its history. When we look at specific examples of these changes, it is hard to see how the "development" explanation can be logically sustained. For example, the Papal Bull *Unum Sanctum* says:

"Further, we declare, say, define, and pronounce it to be altogether necessary for salvation for every human creature that he be subject to the Roman pontiff."

But the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this:

“Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.” (CCC 847)

This is not a development. It is a change. When something that is said later (people can be saved outside the church) is the opposite of what was said earlier (people cannot be saved outside the church), a change has been made. Both statements cannot be true. In one or the other (or both), Rome erred. This demonstrates that the official teaching of the RCC is not infallible.

## 6. The RCC and Modernism

One last point should be briefly mentioned. While various factors (esp. the changes made at Vatican II and the pro-life movement) have caused many evangelicals to take a friendlier view of Rome, it should be pointed out that the changes made at Vatican II actually moved the RCC further away from historic Protestantism. As Orthodox Presbyterian minister Danny Olinger writes, “Whereas previously there were significant historic theological affirmations upon which orthodox Protestants and Catholics agreed, now with Rome’s modernist turn ‘every doctrine of our historic Christian faith has been challenged.’” (forthcoming book, citing Robert Strimple, “Roman Catholic Theology Today”) It is true that the Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen once wrote, “The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.” (*Christianity and Liberalism*, 52) However, Machen wrote those words decades before Vatican II. In light of his assessment of liberal Protestantism, it seems highly unlikely that he would have made such a statement about Rome after Vatican II.

Many of the recent evangelical converts to the RCC have cited the RCC’s visible unity as one of the most important influences in making their decision. However, in light of the modernist turn in the RCC after Vatican II, as well as the fact that Rome often tolerates superstitions that run contrary to its official teaching and tends not to do anything when its members ignore its “infallible” teachings (e.g. the prohibition of artificial means of contraception), it is hard to see how Rome’s visible unity can be seen as a unity in the truth. On the contrary, when we look beneath the surface, the RCC does not look very different than the

mainline Protestant denominations do, with their conservative, moderate, and progressive factions.

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In one sense, it is understandable that some Protestant Christians might be attracted to certain aspects of Roman Catholicism. For one thing, Rome's commitment to tradition and church authority, while obviously taken to unbiblical extremes, might seem refreshing when compared to the ahistorical, trendy, and individualistic expressions of Christian faith that are so typical in evangelical Protestantism. Also, the sense of reverence and historical continuity in Roman Catholic worship makes some Protestant worship services look vacuous and banal. And Rome's contention that the church needs to display visible unity has a definite allure, especially in light of the fractured state of Protestantism. There is no denying that there are serious problems in Protestant Christianity, even in the evangelical version of it. There are a host of ways in which some Protestant churches and "ministries" distort the gospel of our Lord. Reformation is definitely needed.

Nevertheless, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, it is a grievous mistake for an evangelical Christian to join the RCC. It is neither a Christ-honoring decision nor a decision that will draw a person closer to Christ. On the contrary, it is a decision that places a person in a position of spiritual danger. I say this because the RCC teaches that its members need to believe everything that it officially teaches or else they will be in a state of "mortal sin" (by which the RCC means that they will go to hell, not purgatory, when they die). This is made clear in the ninth decree of Vatican I, which anathematizes anyone who denies the doctrine of papal infallibility. What makes this so tragic is that the person whose faith in Christ is truly conformed to all that the RCC teaches about how we are made right with God is someone who is seeking to be justified by grace plus merit, by faith plus works, by Christ's righteousness plus our righteousness.

It may be that some Roman Catholics really do trust in Christ alone, as he is offered in the gospel, for their salvation. However, they can only do so by not being derailed by the many distortions of the gospel that are set forth in their church's official teachings and practices. In the end, the Bible's evaluation of those whose faith is shaped by what the RCC teaches about the way of salvation is quite sobering: "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace." (Gal. 5:4)

**For further reading:**

- Robert Rayburn's sermon series on Roman Catholicism  
(<http://sermons.faithtacoma.org/Romancath/roman.html>)
- W. Robert Godfrey's essay, "What Do We Mean by Sola Scriptura?"  
([http://www.the-highway.com/Sola\\_Scriptura\\_Godfrey.html](http://www.the-highway.com/Sola_Scriptura_Godfrey.html))