

## CONFESSION AND PENANCE

Italicized below are the **Authoritative statements of Roman Catholic Teaching** on confession and penance

### **The Council of Trent**

Session XIV: On the Most Holy Sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction

Chapter VI: On the Ministry of this sacrament, and on Absolution

*But although the absolution of the priest is the dispensation of another's bounty, yet is it not a bare ministry only, whether of announcing the Gospel, or of declaring that sins are forgiven, but is after the manner of a judicial act, whereby sentence is pronounced by the priest as by a judge.*

On the Most Holy Sacrament of Penance

*Canon VI. If any one denieth, wither that sacramental confession was instituted, or is necessary to salvation, of divine right; or saith, that the manner of confessing secretly to a priest alone, which the Church hath ever observed from the beginning, and doth observe, is alien from the institution and command of Christ, and is a human invention: let him be anathema.*

*Canon IX. If any one saith, that the sacramental absolution of the priest is not a judicial act, but a bare ministry of pronouncing and declaring sins to be forgiven to him who confesses; provided only he believe himself to be absolved, or [even though] the priest not in earnest, but in joke; or saith, that the confession of the penitent is not required, in order that the priest may be able to absolve him; let him be anathema.*

Note of definition: *anathema*: a-nath-e-ma n

1) a curse from a religious authority that denounces something or excommunicates somebody; 2. any forceful curse or denunciation.  
Encarta® World English Dictionary

### **The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism**

1320. *Why is the virtue of penance necessary?*

*The virtue of penance is necessary for a sinner to be reconciled with God. If we expect his forgiveness, we must repent. Penance is also necessary because we must expiate and reparation for the punishment which is due for our sins. That is why Christ tells us, 'Unless you repent you will all perish' (Luke 13:5).*

1321. *What is the sacrament of penance?*

*Penance is the sacrament instituted by Christ in which sinners are reconciled with God through the absolution of the priest.*

1326. *What is the matter and form of the sacrament of penance?*

*The form of the sacrament is the words of absolution, which are said orally by an authorized priest. Essential for absolution are the words, 'I absolve you from your sins.' The matter of the sacrament is the required acts of the penitent, namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction.*

1389. *How is satisfaction expiatory?*

*Satisfaction is expiatory by making up for the failure in love of God which is the root cause of sin, by voluntarily suffering to make up for self-indulgence, and by enduring pain in reparation for the harm or disorder caused by the commission of sin.*

1395. *What is extra-sacramental satisfaction?*

*Extra-sacramental satisfaction is every form of expiation offered to God outside the sacrament of penance. Our works of satisfaction are meritorious if they are done while in the state of grace and in a spirit of penance. 1400. How can we make up for sin?*

*We can make up for sin through the sorrows and trials of life, including the pain of death, or through the purifying penalties in the life beyond. Sin can also be expiated through indulgences.*

## **Summary of Roman Catholic Teaching**

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that through the apostles the Lord Jesus Christ established a human priesthood with divine authority to forgive sins and to absolve men from guilt and bring them into a state of forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that this is no mere formality, but that the priest stands in the place of God as judge and performs a judicial act. It further teaches that, apart from confessing sins to an authorized priest and doing the penance required, there can be no forgiveness of sins. Confession and penance are therefore seen as necessary for salvation. The Roman Church further teaches that by good works, prayers, fastings, participation in the sacraments, indulgences, the enduring of suffering and by acts of charity, an individual can atone for his guilt, merit God's grace, and remove the temporal punishment his sin deserves. In other words, an individual can make satisfaction for his own sins through his own works.

The following verses are the major biblical texts which the Roman Catholic Church uses as the basis for its teaching on confession and penance.

Matthew 16:16-19: Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ,' he said 'The Son of the Living God'. Jesus replied... 'you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven' (Jerusalem Bible).

John 20:23: If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.

## **What the Bible teaches**

The questions we must ask are: Do these verses actually teach the Roman Catholic doctrine of confession and penance? Is such an interpretation of these verses consistent with the teaching of the rest of the Bible?

Clearly, the answer to our questions must be negative. These verses do not teach that a priest has the authority to forgive sins. Rome's interpretation of these verses is not consistent with the teaching of the rest of the Bible. Indeed, it causes the Bible to contradict itself. This is true for the following reasons:

We have already seen in our studies on the Mass and the Priesthood that Christ did not institute a special group of men as priests to continue the offering of sacrifices until he returns. On the contrary, all human priesthood has been abolished and replaced by the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Since there is no longer a priesthood, it follows there is no biblical authority for a special group of men who have the power to forgive our sins through confession and absolution and thus reconcile us to God.

To be a priest who absolves a person from the guilt of sin is to be a mediator, one who reconciles two parties together. But, as we have seen, the Bible teaches that there is only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

John Hardon S. J. says, 'Penance is the sacrament instituted by Christ in which sinners are reconciled with God through the absolution of the priest' (The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism, 1321).

For penance and absolution to be a reality there must be a priest. He alone, according to the Roman Catholic Church, has the authority to hear confession and forgive sins. But since the Bible teaches there is no more priesthood, it follows that there is no biblical authority for either confession to a priest or penance.

Since a human priesthood exists no longer, the particular interpretation the Roman Catholic Church gives to Matthew 16:16-19 (and also to John 20:23) is incorrect. Its whole concept of confession and penance is completely contrary to the teaching of the Bible. And this is true not only of the Roman Catholic teaching on human priesthood, but also on the work of Jesus Christ.

To appreciate why this is so we need to understand what the Bible teaches concerning Christ's sacrifice for sin. In the section on the Mass we say that when the Lord Jesus was sacrificed on the cross, he paid the complete penalty for the original sin of Adam. Christ endured the wrath of God against specific sins. He became our substitute: 'He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross' (I Pet. 2:24). 'Sins' means every transgression of the Law of God that we have committed in thought, word, deed, and motive.

In this sense Jesus Christ is 'the propitiation for our sins' and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world' (I Jn. 2:2). Propitiation means the satisfying of wrath. Jesus Christ has borne the wrath and judgment of God for all our sins on the cross. Because he has paid the complete penalty for them, no more sacrifices are necessary. All our transgressions were placed on Christ and their entire penalty was paid by him. This is clearly taught in Colossians 2:13-14: 'And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.'

Paul says 'having forgiven us all our transgressions'. Complete forgiveness of sins is found in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. His blood alone can deal with the guilt of our sins. This is why he alone can be the Savior. There can be no adding of human works or merit to his work. But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that individuals can atone for their own sins in the participation on the sacraments and other forms of human merit. John Hardon S.J. says:

*We make satisfaction for our sins by every good act we perform in the state of grace, especially by prayer, penance, and the practice of charity. While all prayer merits satisfaction for sin, it is most effective when we ask God to have mercy on us, and unite our prayers with voluntary self-denial. Penance for sin is not only bodily, like fast and abstinence, but also spiritual, like restraining curiosity or conversation and avoiding otherwise legitimate recreation. Moreover, the patient acceptance of trials or humiliations sent by God is expiatory. Finally, the practice of charity toward others is a powerful satisfaction for our lack of charity toward God...*

*Sin can also be expiated through indulgences* **(The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism, 1392, 1400).**

But this concept is totally foreign to the Bible.

The Roman Catholic Church also teaches that there is a distinction for the Christian between different kinds of sins, which it terms mortal and venial. Mortal sin is sin worthy of hell, while venial sin is not as serious and will merely relegate a person to a specific time in purgatory. Thus the Roman Church teaches that there are two kinds of punishment due to sin, one eternal and the other temporal. But the terms 'mortal' and 'venial' are never used in Scripture. Neither does the Bible distinguish between eternal punishment and temporal punishment. These are completely arbitrary distinctions by the Roman Catholic Church which have no authority in the Word of God.

Some may argue at this point that 1 John 5:16-17, while not using the specific terms 'mortal' and 'venial', certainly seems to use similar concepts. John says:

*If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.*

But do these verses support the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that for the Christian there is the possibility of committing sin which is mortal, that is, which results in the loss of eternal life and results in

eternal death? Not if these verses are properly interpreted within the context of 1 John and the broader context of the rest of Scripture.

With the Epistle, John uses the term ‘brother’ in the broad sense of someone who makes a profession of being a Christian. The presence of true faith is thus assumed, but not guaranteed. For example, in 1 John 2:11 John says that ‘the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness’. He tells us further, ‘Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him’ (1 Jn. 3:15). Even though such an individual claims to be a Christian and a brother, if his life is characterized by hatred, he cannot be a true Christian. He does not have eternal life abiding in him. By contrast, a genuine Christian is one who possesses eternal that can never be lost: ‘My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand’ (Jn. 10:27-29). Those who become Christians can never perish. Eternal life is *eternal*; it is permanent.

In addition to this a true Christian will not practice or live in sin: ‘No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God’ (1 Jn. 3:9). This is not to say that a Christian is perfect and will never sin. What it means is that the bent of a true Christian’s life is not towards sin, but towards holiness. In 1 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 5, Paul underlines that those whose lives are marked by the sins he lists in these chapters will not inherit the kingdom of God. He is not saying that these people were Christians who committed mortal sin and subsequently lost their salvation. Rather they were never Christians to begin with, for they practice sin while ‘no one born of God practices sin’. They have never been born of God, even though they may profess to be Christians.

Thus a Christian cannot commit a sin unto death in the sense of eternal death. In these verses John is talking about those who, though they may have professed Christ, have never genuinely experienced new birth. In fact, one reason for his letter is to warn true believers against those who were deceivers and false teachers. They claimed to be Christians but their lives were inconsistent with their profession. They walked in darkness (1:6); they did not keep the commandments of God (2:3-4); they loved the world (2:15-17); they lived in unrighteousness and sin (3:4-10); they did not love (3:4-19); and they denied basic truths about the person of Jesus Christ (2:22-23; 4:2-3; 5:1). These men knew the truth, but they had either completely rejected it and gone into apostasy or embraced a life-style of open and deliberate sin. It is probably to these that John is referring when he speaks of certain individuals committing ‘sin unto death’. This interpretation is consistent with the teaching of other passages of Scripture. For example, Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26 speak of individuals who, after having come to a knowledge of the truth, have turned away from the faith into total apostasy. It is impossible for them to be renewed again to repentance. All they can look forward to is the future is the judgment of God. Again, Matthew 12:22-32 records an incident when the Pharisees attributed the works of Jesus to the devil. This is a deliberate refusal of truth and an ascribing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. Jesus says they are guilty of an eternal sin, which can never be forgiven, for they have completely hardened their hearts against the witness of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ. They will die in their sins eternally separated from God (Jn. 8:24). They have committed a sin unto death.

When John uses the term ‘sin not unto death’ what he means is that the doom of such people is not sealed. There is still time for them to repent and find forgiveness. When Paul says that certain people whose lives are characterized by sin will not inherit the kingdom of God, he is not saying that such people cannot repent and find forgiveness. What he means is that if they die in that unrepentant state, never having been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, then their doom is sealed when they die. Up to the point of death they have opportunity for repentance. The person, however, who commits a sin unto death has at that point sealed his doom. For that person there is no more opportunity for repentance. This is what happened to a number of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

Thus John is not dealing with genuine Christians in this passage at all, but with those who are counterfeits, or are false teachers. It is impossible for a Christian to commit a mortal sin in the way in which the Roman Catholic Church suggests, for true believers can never lose eternal life, and will not live in sin or apostatise from the faith.

The truth is that, ultimately, there is no distinction such as mortal and venial sin made in the Bible. All sin in God's eyes is mortal and condemns to hell. The consequences in the human realm for certain kinds of sin will differ but the ultimate consequences are the same for all sin—eternal death: 'The wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23); 'The person who sins will die' (Ezek. 18:20).

If the penalty for all sin is eternal death, then there is no distinction to be made between eternal and merely temporal punishment due to sin. Consequently there is no such place as purgatory where a person must go after death to suffer temporal punishment for sins. There is no merely temporal punishment due to sin. It is all eternal. Since Christ has paid that penalty in full for his people, to teach that there is a purgatory where they must be punished for venial sin is to deny the sufficiency of the work of Christ and to believe that the individual can and must add his sufferings to the sufferings of Christ in order to be saved.

Scripture nowhere teaches the doctrine of purgatory. That again is an arbitrary teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast, the Bible teaches that when an individual comes to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, he is immediately set free from all judgment, punishment, and condemnation for sin. He is immediately given the gift of eternal life and may have the absolute assurance that he will go to heaven when he dies: 'There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1); 'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, *has eternal life*, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life' (Jn. 5:24). When a person believes in Jesus Christ his sins are completely dealt with and the punishment due for them paid in full.

No priest can absolve us from the guilt of our sins and give us acceptance with God. No amount of good works can atone for the punishment due for our sins. Only the blood of God's Son can adequately atone for our sin. The following Scriptures provide clear proof of this:

Without shedding of *blood* there is no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22).

The *blood* of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn. 1:7).

In Him we have redemption through His *blood*, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (Eph. 1:7).

Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious *blood*, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Much more then, having now been justified by His *blood*, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (Rom. 5:9).

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the *blood* of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, *cleanse* your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb. 9:13-14).

Forgiveness and acceptance with God have absolutely nothing to do with human effort and good works. They are accomplished solely on the basis of Christ's dying on the cross, shedding his blood there, and rising again. Man's responsibility is simply to acknowledge his own bankruptcy and inability to do anything to merit God's favor, and to turn in faith to receive the Lord Jesus as Lord and Savior. This is why the Bible tells us that we are justified by faith and not by the works of the Law. All our efforts to keep the Law end only in condemnation: 'Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:19-20).

The apostle Paul insists that it is 'by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast' (Eph. 2:8). It is by grace that a man is

saved through faith. This completely cancels out all works. For ‘grace’ means the unmerited favor of God. God accepts a man and brings him into his favor through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, and not on the basis of human merit.

Paul carefully demonstrates this in his Letter to the Romans: ‘For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “And Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness’ (Rom. 4:2, 3, 5); ‘For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law’ (Rom. 3:28); ‘Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 5:1). The Word of God teaches that salvation comes to a person totally apart from the works of any kind. An individual is justified by faith.

At this point an objection might be raised. Doesn’t James chapter 2 say that an individual is justified by works not by faith alone? This apparent contradiction is resolved when we recognize that James and Paul are speaking about salvation from two different perspectives. Yet both are able to appeal to the same Old Testament text (Jas. 2:23; Rom. 4:3). James is dealing with the kind of faith necessary for salvation (i.e. living faith versus dead faith). Paul, on the other hand, is dealing with how a man receives justification (i.e. how a man is made right with God).

Paul is saying that a person is saved by grace through faith completely apart from the works of the Law. James is saying that true saving faith will always result in a holy life. Once a man has been justified his life will radically change. James is warning his readers against the danger of a so-called faith that is empty and dead, which does not result in a changed life. He says in effect that if a man says he has faith but has no works, that kind of ‘faith’ will never save him. No man can be saved and continue living in sin. True saving faith will always result in a changed life—a life of good works. But those good works are not the basis upon which a man or woman merits salvation. They are not the cause, *but the result* of being saved.

It is also important to make a distinction between acceptance with God and fellowship with God. A Christian’s acceptance with God is something which is eternally secured in Jesus Christ. A person can never lose this salvation because it is based upon Christ’s work. He has paid the entire penalty for all sin.

But sin can and does affect the Christian’s enjoyment of fellowship with God. How then is sin to be dealt with and how is fellowship with God to be restored? By confession of that sin directly to God through Jesus Christ, since he is our priest and the only mediator between ourselves and God. We do not go through human mediators. We go through Jesus alone because the human priesthood has been abolished. And where there is confession of sin and true repentance, the Christian experiences immediate forgiveness and restoration to fellowship with God, his Father: ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins to cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 Jn. 1:9).

Forgiveness and cleansing are secured exclusively on the basis of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. God will never forgive us and restore us to fellowship with himself because of good works or penance. God can never accept our good works as a payment for sin. To do so would be to dishonor the perfect work of his Son. God’s way is for an individual to confess his sin directly to him, repent of it, and then receive by faith the cleansing of the blood of Jesus Christ. Penance can never be a payment for sin.

But according to the Roman Catholic Church the Bible commands that we do penance. The Bible translation used by the Council of Trent, the Latin Vulgate, expresses this teaching:

Ezekiel 18:30: Be converted and *do penance* for all your iniquities, and iniquity shall not be your ruin.

Luke 13:15: Except you *do penance* you shall all likewise perish.

Acts 2:38: *Do penance* and be baptized every one of you.

An examination of the original Hebrew and Greek text of the Old and New Testaments makes it apparent that the Latin Vulgate rendering is an improper translation of these verses. In each case the word translated ‘do penance’ means repent. In Ezekiel 18:30, it is the Hebrew word *shub* which means to turn, to return, or to repent. It is the same word used in Isaiah 45:22: ‘*Turn to Me*, and be saved, all the ends of the earth.’

In Luke 13:5 and Acts 2:38 the Greek word the Roman Catholic Church translates as ‘do penance’ is *metanoeo*, literally meaning ‘To change one’s mind, i.e. to repent...to change one’s mind for the better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one’s past sins’ (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament). Repentance means recognizing sin as an offense to God and resolutely determining in the heart to forsake sin completely and to live in holiness before God. But that is a completely different concept from trying to expiate the guilt and punishment for sin through penance and good works. God wants repentance, not penance. To try to do penance to appease God, is to attempt to replace the work of Christ with your own works. It is also to say that his work is insufficient.

To be fair in accurately presenting what the Roman Catholic Church teaches, it is important to point out the more modern translations of the Scriptures by the Roman Catholic Church accurately use the word ‘repentance’. But such is the influence of the Church’s tradition that the meaning communicated by that word carries the same idea as the word ‘penance’. The two are synonymous terms in Roman Catholic theology. This is very clearly demonstrated by the statements made by John Hardon S.J. in his Question and Answer Catholic Catechism: ‘Penance means repentance or satisfaction for sin...The virtue of penance is necessary for a sinner to be reconciled with God. If we expect his forgiveness, we must repent. Penance is also necessary because we must expiate and make reparation for the punishment which is due for our sins. That is why Christ tells us, “Unless you repent you will all perish” (Luke 13:5)’ (1318, 1320).

Even though the incorrect translation used by the Council of Trent may have been abandoned, the concept of penance is still retained. It is not enough to use biblical words, but the meaning that we give to those words must be in accordance with the meaning the Bible gives them. The Roman Catholic Church uses the word ‘repentance’ to mean something quite different from the biblical meaning, and in so doing it leads men and women to trust in their own works rather than in the finished work of Christ. The word of God has been replaced by the word of man, because the work of God has been displaced by the work of man.

#### THE TRUE MEANING OF MATTHEW 16:18-19

If, in Matthew 16:18-19 and John 20:23, the Lord Jesus Christ was not giving Peter and the other disciples authority to forgive sins through confession and penance, what exactly was he authorizing them to do? What does he mean when he uses the terms ‘keys of the kingdom’ and ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’?

In Matthew 23:2, 3:13 we read Jesus’ words about the scribes and Pharisees:

The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them...But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

Lorraine Boettner’s comments on these verses are very helpful at this point.

The scribes and Pharisees were in possession of the law. In that sense they sat on Moses’ seat. As the law was faithfully given to the people, or withheld from them, the way to heaven was opened before them, or closed to them. In the failure of the scribes and Pharisees to give the law to the people they were shutting the kingdom of heaven against men, not literally, but figuratively.

‘The keys of the kingdom’ was a symbolic expression for the Old Testament Scriptures which set forth the way of salvation. The Old Testament, of course, was the only Scripture they had at that time. It was the responsibility of the scribes and Pharisees, who were the custodians of the Scriptures to acquaint the people with that knowledge by making the Scripture truth available to them. Instead, they not only neglected that duty but actually veiled the Scriptures and perverted their meaning so that the people who wanted that knowledge were deprived of it. Similarly, in the Christian dispensation, the apostles were given the ‘keys of the kingdom,’ (clearly not a set of metallic keys), not that they could by a mere word admit certain individuals

into the kingdom while excluding others, but that, in the words of Paul, they were ‘entrusted with the Gospel’ (1 Thess. 2:4), and so opened or closed the kingdom as they proclaimed the Word of Life or withhold it. In that sense every minister today, and indeed every Christian, who teaches the Word also possesses the ‘keys’ and admits to, or excludes from, the kingdom. The key to the kingdom is *the Gospel of Christ*. Peter was given that key, and he used it to unlock the kingdom to those to whom he preached. We have the same key, and we must use it in the same way, by making known the message of salvation and so opening up to others the way into the kingdom of heaven.

The powers of binding or loosing, and of forgiving or retaining sins, were given to the apostles as proclaimers of the Word of God, not as priests. As we have shown elsewhere, there is no select class of Christian ‘priests’ in the New Testament dispensation. The apostles never claimed to power of forgiving sins by absolution as the Roman priests to. Rather they preached the Gospel of salvation through Christ—which was a declarative power, by which the announced the gracious terms on which salvation was granted to sinful men (*Roman Catholicism*, pp. 208-9).

In Matthew 16:18-19 the authority given to Peter, and later to the disciples in general, has to do with the gates of hell not prevailing against the ongoing of the kingdom of God. This is the context in which the words of Jesus were spoken. Jesus said, ‘I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it’ (Matt. 16:18).

The building of the church and the furthering of the kingdom has to do specifically with men and women coming into the kingdom of God. How do men and women enter into the kingdom of God? When men hear the message of the gospel and respond by turning to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, then they are immediately brought into the kingdom of God. They receive eternal life and the complete forgiveness of sins. Matthew 16:18-19 has absolutely nothing to do with confession and penance but with the authority to declare the gospel of Christ to sinners and to offer them the free forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can see that this is precisely how the apostles understood the commission of Jesus by noting what Jesus told them to do, and what the apostles actually did in the light of their commission by the Lord Jesus.

Jesus authorized the disciples to preach repentance for the remission of sins in his name to all the nations: ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem’ (Lk. 24:46-47).

We are told that the purpose for which the Lord Jesus came into the world was ‘to seek and to save that which was lost’ (Lk. 19:10) and ‘to call sinners to repentance’ (Lk. 5:32). This was his commission from his Father. When he in turn commissioned his disciples, he told them, ‘As the Father has sent Me, I also send you’ (Jn. 20:21). In John 17:18 the Lord Jesus says, ‘As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.’ Thus, the disciples were commissioned to go forth, even as Christ himself went forth to seek and save the lost by proclaiming the gospel to men and calling them to repentance and faith.

We are told in Mark 1:14-15 that ‘Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel”.’ The gospel is an authoritative message that is to be preached to men. It is the proclamation of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the call to men to repent and believe with respect to his person and work on their behalf.

This is what the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned his disciplines to do. And as we look closely at the recorded history of the activity of the apostles in the Book of Acts this is precisely what we find. We find them proclaiming the gospel and calling men to repentance and faith; not hearing confession and commanding men to do penance. Nowhere in the Bible is it ever recorded that the apostles forgave sins by means of such auricular confession.

The following are samples from the Book of Acts of what the disciples preached. They show clearly what they understood the commission of Jesus to be:

‘Therefore let all of the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.’ Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins’ (2:36-38).

But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (3:14, 15, 19).

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved (4:12).

And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins (10:42-43).

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses (13:38-39).

They...fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel (14:6-7).

Therefore having overlooked the times ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (17:30-31).

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (20:20-21).

From these Scriptures it is clear that the apostles understood the commission from Jesus to mean the authority to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to sinners by the heralding of the gospel message. It had nothing to do with the authority of priests to hear confession and through absolution to forgive sins and assign penances.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches the need for priests, confession, and penance as a result of misinterpreting the Word of God. It teaches that Christ established the apostles as priests with authority to sacrifice and forgive sins, while the Word of God teaches that all such priesthood has been abolished along with the sacrifices since the sacrifice of Christ is a once-for-all sacrifice dealing completely with the penalty for sin. But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is not an adequate sacrifice in that it has not completely remitted all the punishment due to sin.

Consequently Roman Catholic teaching requires faith plus works for justification. It teaches that the merits won for us on the cross by Christ must be channeled and applied to us through the sacraments which priests alone can administer. Then, in addition, they must be merited by ourselves through our own works, moral life, prayers, fastings, sufferings, and penances. All of this replaces the work Jesus Christ by the work of man. The net result is that men and women put their faith in a church and their own moral and religious works rather than in the person of Jesus Christ himself. This is why the Church calls itself the ‘Universal Sacrament of Salvation’. But its teaching on the priesthood, sin, confession, penance, indulgences, purgatory, and forgiveness is a direct contradiction of the teaching of the Bible. Rome teaches faith in Jesus Christ *plus* faith in a church and human

merit or works if we are to receive forgiveness and acceptance with God. By contrast the Bible teaches faith in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ *alone*.

Clearly the Roman Catholic Church has fallen into the same error as that of the scribes and Pharisees during the days of Jesus. It has become guilty of teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (Mk. 7:7). Jesus told certain people in his day that they were guilty of ‘invalidating the word of God by...tradition’ (Mk. 7:13). Since these teachings on the Mass, the Priesthood, Confession, and Penance are contradictory to the Word of God, they cannot be biblical doctrines but are the teachings and traditions which men have devised. They have been elevated to a position of authority equal to the Word of God itself. But the actual effect of these teachings is to invalidate what the Word of God teaches about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, about the priesthood, about forgiveness of sins and the way of salvation.

Men do not need the sacrifice of a Mass. Jesus is the complete sacrifice. They do not need the mediation of a priest; Jesus is their priest, the only mediator between man and God. They do not need penance to receive cleansing and forgiveness for sins; Jesus’ blood alone can wash them and make them clean.

What, then, do I need to do, if penance will not help me? Turn from your sins in repentance and trust in Christ as your only sacrifice and priest. Receive him into your life as your Savior and submit to him as your Lord. Jesus said: ‘Come to *Me*, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls’ (Matt. 11:28-29).

This chapter gratefully presented here by Think Inc. with permission from the author and publisher. We highly recommend you obtain a copy of the book in order to grow in your understanding and practice of Biblical Truth.

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*The author expressed his thanks to the following publishers for permission to quote from their material (the documents below carry the official authorization of the Vatican):*

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**III. The Code of the Canon Law**, Prepared by the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Association with The Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand and the Canadian Canon Law Society, William Collins and William B. Eedmans Publishing Company, 1983. John Paul II makes the following comments concerning The Code of The Canon Law: “It is hoped that this English Version of the Code will be a fitting resource for an attentive and fruitful study for the law of the Church...” “We order that henceforth it is to have the force of law for the whole latin Church, and we commit its observance to the care and vigilance of all who are responsible.”

**IV. The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism**, John A. Hardon S.J., Image Books, Doubleday and Company, 1981