

## **Ready Reference: Confession to a Priest**

It is the position of the Roman Catholic religion that God has instituted confession to a priest. It is claimed that sins are forgiven if they are confessed to a priest. If this is true then the entire establishment of the Roman priesthood is validated. But is it true?

Catholic Answers argues that the Old Testament illustrates that God uses priests as an instrumental cause to bring about forgiveness that comes only from God. God is the first cause and the Old Testament priest is the secondary cause. Catholic Answers has determined that Old Testament priests in the nation of Israel were God's instruments of forgiveness. But were they?

One passage appealed to which allegedly teaches a secondary cause and communication of forgiveness by Old Testament priests is Leviticus 19:20-22.

Lev 19:20-22

20 'If a man sleeps with a woman who is a slave girl promised to another man but who has not been ransomed or given her freedom, there must be due punishment. Yet they are not to be put to death, because she had not been freed. 21 The man, however, must bring a ram to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting for a guilt offering to the LORD. 22 With the ram of the guilt offering the priest is to make atonement for him before the LORD for the sin he has committed, and his sin will be forgiven. NIV

What is hoped for is not present in this text. We see clearly that the guilty man is to bring a ram guilt offering to the Lord. The guilt offering is then offered, as atonement, by the Old Testament priest to the Lord. The Old Testament priest is an administrator of the law. The guilty man does not confess his sins to the priest. The priest does not forgive his sins. The priest is responsible to declare that God has chosen this way to forgive such a sin. The priest has no involvement other than to carry out the Word of the Lord. In the same way the Christian gospel is spoken clearly. It is the announcement to the world the way in which God has decided to forgive sins. No sacrifice need be brought to a priest today. The declaration of the gospel is that faith alone in Christ alone brings full and everlasting forgiveness. In this sense every Christian is a priest by virtue of sharing the way in which God forgives sins. This is exactly what Peter tells us.

1 Peter 2:9

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. NIV

Catholic Answers, like so many Catholic apologetic organizations, likes to slip in words to carry their faithful down the road to pure Romanism. In this instance the progression of the role of an Old Testament priest is referred to first as an instrument of God, second as a secondary cause, third as communicator of forgiveness, and finally as a mediator of forgiveness.

Christians do not believe that Old Testament priests mediated forgiveness of sins. The function of an Old Testament priest was to offer gifts and sacrifices according to the law. They were responsible to attend precisely to what the law of God prescribed. The entire Old Testament sacrificial system was designed by God to prefigure the coming of the eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ. On the basis of law the Old Covenant priesthood was established. Attending to the specifics of the law is not mediation. Old Testament priests are never referred to as mediators of forgiveness of sins. Priests are not mediators. They oversee fidelity to the law.<sup>1</sup>

Roman Catholic defenders then ask if God *could have* established a priesthood to mediate forgiveness. We say, “Yes he *could have* but He did not.” Rome says, “Not so fast!”

Rome next tries to prove from the New Testament that God did in fact send an army of priests to mediate His forgiveness. Here is one of their favorite proof texts.

John 20:21-23

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."  
22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. NIV

Roman Catholic defenders take the words of Jesus to His disciples, “As the Father has sent me” to mean “Go and do exactly what I have done.” Since Jesus is the only mediator between God and man then, according to the RC religion, Jesus is now telling His disciples to go and become mediators. But there is more to the claim. Jesus was not only the mediator between God and man but He also infallibly proclaimed the gospel, reigned supreme as King of kings, and redeemed the world through forgiveness of sins. Thus with the simple words, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” Roman Catholic priests are sent to mediate forgiveness of sins, to govern the church, and to sanctify the church through Roman Catholic sacraments.

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<sup>1</sup> **1. According to English dictionary definition the work of a mediator is as follows:** To resolve or settle differences by working with all the conflicting parties to bring about a settlement with two or more disputants in order to bring about an agreement or compromise. Or to simply reconcile differences. R.C. priests do not qualify!

Such quantum leaps of logic defy all imagination. John 20:21 informs us that the Father sent Jesus Christ into the world to finish an appointed task. Likewise, Jesus is sending His disciples into the world to finish an appointed task. They are to preach the gospel, make disciples, and baptize converts in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And this is exactly what they did.

It is in John 20:22, 23 where the Roman Catholic religion finds full justification for their sin forgiving priesthood.

22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

From this statement the Roman religion concludes the disciples of Jesus listened to the sins of people and then decided if they would forgive sins or retain sins.

We are not told that the disciples would have to listen to people's personal sins and then decide to forgive or retain them. We are not told what it means to "retain" the sins of people. We are not told anything about granting of forgiveness based upon performing some kind of penance. There is no indication whatsoever in the New Testament or the Old Testament of individuals going to priests, apostles, disciples or elders/deacons and asking for release from their sins based upon personal penance. There is not a single shred of evidence from the New Testament for the Roman Catholic practice of *auricular* (whisper in the ear) confession to a priest.

It is perfectly in accord with the mission of the church to understand that exposure to the gospel involves full pardon of sins "if" Christ is received by faith alone. And also full retention of sins comes "if" Christ is rejected. In this sense binding and loosening is inherent to the message itself. The Father sent the Son to tell the truth about sin and how it must be brought to the cross of Christ for full redemption. The Son now sends His disciples to speak the same truth. The general call of the gospel contains binding and loosening as the outcome of acceptance or rejection of the gospel. Initially binding and loosening is concerned with entering the kingdom of God or in essence becoming a Christian. For a template on dealing with sin in the Body of Christ we would appeal to Matthew 18. There we find the same binding and loosening language concerning discipline in the church.<sup>2</sup>

Let us compare the commission of Matthew and Luke with the commission of John.

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<sup>2</sup> We would point out that there is room for the disciplining of heresy in the local church. Hence to bind and loose can extend to pointing out error so severe that continuance betrays a non-Christian heart. This is difficult. But we need to see that all binding and loosening is rooted in the faithful proclamation of the gospel and its acceptance or rejection even among those who profess faith but are found to be in grave error!

Matt 28:18-20 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." NIV

John 20:21-23 21 Again Jesus said, Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. NIV

Luke 24:45-49 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. NIV

From these passages we can see that the Roman Catholic religion is gravely mistaken when they affirm that the Lord has granted power to His disciples to actually forgive the sins themselves. Clearly the task appointed was to be faithful messengers and bring into the sheep fold of God all those who received their message of forgiveness. The rejecters were to be warned that their sins yet remained with them. Matthew 28:19 records Jesus as commanding His disciples to "make disciples." The disciples were not being commanded to manufacture disciples (as though they had that kind of power). They were commanded to be faithful teachers. Likewise the disciples were not commanded to forgive sins through auricular confession (as though they had that kind of power). They were commanded to preach the Word in season and out of season for the forgiveness and retention of sins.

#### The Roman Catholic Use of 2 Corinthians 2:10

To further bolster their case for Roman Catholic auricular confession to a priest some Roman Catholic apologists cite Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. Here is the text.

2 Cor 2:10-11

10 If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven-if there was anything to forgive-I have forgiven in the sight (*proposon*) of Christ for your sake, 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. NIV

It is argued by Rome that the Greek word *proposon* should be translated with the English *person* thus making Paul say that he has forgiven “in the *person* of Christ” rather than “in the *face* or *presence* of Christ.” The idea is that somehow Paul acts “in the person” ‘of’ or substitute for Christ in his act of forgiveness. However, while the King James translation has this Greek word as *person* along with the Catholic Douay-Rheims virtually all of the more modern translations translate *proposon* as in the *presence* or in the *face* of Christ. This is the way that Paul uses this word throughout his writings.<sup>3</sup>

To further stretch the point the Roman Catholic apologist would ask us to believe that because Paul was forgiving the sin of someone who had not directly sinned against him he was setting precedent for what Roman Catholic priests would eventually do. Yet in context the apostle is simply reaffirming his stance that he would absolutely forgive what the Corinthians had already forgiven so as not to give Satan any ground for his schemes. We can be assured that Roman Catholic priests are not in the business of merely upholding forgiveness already bestowed by common ordinary Christians. No, we are told that Roman Catholic priests are the only ones who can truly forgive sins on earth. This is the opposite of what the New Testament teaches!

#### The Roman Catholic Use of 2 Corinthians 5:18

Rome now argues that 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19 is illustrative of Roman Catholic confession.

2 Cor 5:17-19

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. NIV

Rome argues that the “ministry of reconciliation” is different than the “message of reconciliation.” By this Rome means that Paul was given the “ministry” of actually forgiving sins (just like Jesus) and not merely announcing the “message” of reconciliation. If Rome is right then the “message of reconciliation” becomes, “Go quickly to a Roman Catholic priest, confess your sins in the confession, receive your penance, and perform your penance for forgiveness of sins.” However the word for “ministry” used here by Paul is the Greek word *diakonian* which is the common word for servant. Paul was the servant of God’s reconciliation. Paul was not the effectual agent of it. In the next verse Paul speaks for all Christians in that the word of reconciliation is “placed in us.” The word of reconciliation is that God was in Christ

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<sup>3</sup> Please review Paul’s use of this term in 1 Corinthians 13:12; Galatians 2:6; 2 Corinthians 8:24; Galatians 2:11

reconciling the world to Himself and not counting their sins against them. To twist this to say that Paul's ministry of reconciliation was to bring about reconciliation through his own personal power to forgive sins is simply not true. Such a distortion destroys Paul's divine appointment to serve the already accomplished reconciliation.

#### James 5:14-17

##### James 5:13-16

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. NIV

The Roman Catholic apologist claims that this passage teaches us when it comes to sickness and personal sins we must go to the elders. To be specific, Rome teaches that the context of this passage points to the elder as the one to whom confession of sins is made. The elder, in the world of the Roman Catholic religion, is one and the same as their priest. But the passage does not come close to yielding such an interpretation. James gives Christians good advice. If in trouble then pray! If happy then rejoice in songs of praise! If sick then call for the elders (plural) of the church to pray and anoint with oil in the name of the Lord! There are two schools of thought among Christians as to the circumstance mentioned here by James. Some think that rubbing with oil is for spiritual healing and that the entire healing is a spiritual healing. Others think the language is too direct and that physical healing is the circumstance. What is clear is that the elders are involved through oil and prayer in faith to petition the Lord for restoration. James then adds the clause, "If he has sinned he will be forgiven." This may refer to the close connection between sinning and physical illness found in the New Testament. Or it may refer to a spiritually deflated and depressed Christian who has fallen into sin. Either way James wants to add that if there is sin attached to the malady in any way it too will be forgiven by the Lord. James adds that Christians are to confess their sins to one another (not to the elders/priests) and pray for each other to be healed if spiritual depletion or sin may have caused physical maladies. There is no Roman Catholic auricular confession to a priest in view here. There is no remitting sin on the basis of priestly administered penance. The Roman Catholic twisting of this passage of the Bible will not with stand even a cursory examination let alone an in depth analysis.

Are all Christians Mediators?

The seemingly endless non sequitur use of Scripture continues in speculative form as we run out of passages that can possibly be used by Roman Catholic defenders to preserve their priestly class and auricular confessions. Rome boldly proclaims Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and men but all Christians are mediators as well. According to Rome Jesus is the unique mediator. But Christians mediate as well. How so? According to Rome when we pray for someone we are mediators. When we share the gospel we are mediators. But this is a non sequitur. As we have noticed the word mediator is one who mediates between two parties to remove a disagreement and reach a common goal. To pray is not to mediate. To announce the gospel is not to mediate. To suggest that the mediation of Christ can be duplicated or imitated is a disgrace. The word mediator is only used six times in the New Testament. Four of those times refer to Jesus Christ as God's one and only mediator of the New Covenant. The other two occasions are in Galatians where the apostle Paul contrasts the promise of God with the inferior mediation of the law given to men by angels and Moses. Christians are never referred to as mediators between God and man. So why does Rome push this point? It is obvious that Rome needs many mediators with Christ being the special mediator. This sets the stage for Rome's claim that Christians are many priests but Christ is a special priest. This then sets the stage that Christ has selected a special priesthood out of many Christian priests. These special priests are Roman Catholics priests. Rome does not prove from the Bible that Jesus willed to call out a special priesthood. Rome simply says that He did. Rome relies totally upon the analogy of Israel referred to as a kingdom of priests in the Old Testament and yet having a priestly class as proof positive that God has done the same thing in the New Testament. But God has not. There is not a scrap of evidence for a New Covenant priesthood in the New Testament. New Testament church leaders are well defined and their roles are clearly stated. There is nothing of the Roman Catholic priesthood mentioned in all of Scripture!

We must close with the classic proof text of the Roman Catholic religion on this matter of priestly authority. Eventually the Roman Catholic will find his way to Matthew 16:19.

Matt 16:18-19

18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. NIV

From this verse it is said that Jesus communicated authority not only to pronounce doctrinal judgments but also the authority to absolve sins.<sup>4</sup> There are some things to consider here. How and on what basis this binding and loosening action is to take place is not given to us here. Christians have argued that binding and loosening can only make sense in the context of preaching the gospel. If someone hears the gospel and rejects it he/she is yet bound in sin. If the gospel is accepted he/she is loosed from the penalty of sin. The power is in the message not the messenger. This is born out throughout the New Testament where the gospel is preached. There are no confessional boxes with priests hearing confessions. There is no penance stipulation for the remission of sins. There is no priestly class binding and loosening based upon auricular confession. Also this same binding and loosening is given to the Body of Christ in disciplinary cases.

Matt 18:15-18

15 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. NIV

Clearly the mandate to bind and loose falls to the leadership of the church to make difficult decisions. It does not fall on one person or on a priestly class.

In direct contrast to Roman Catholic teachings on binding and loosening is the way in which the gospel is presented in the New Testament. The elders, teachers, Pharisees, and lawyers of Israel had taken away the key of knowledge and hindered entrance to the kingdom of God (see Luke 11:53). Now the key to heaven has been given to Peter (as primary not pope), the disciples (John 20), and the church to proclaim the gospel. To proclaim the gospel is to bind and loose dependent upon one's response to the gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> The "power of the keys" designates authority to govern the house of God, which is the Church. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, confirmed this mandate after his Resurrection: "Feed my sheep." The power to "bind and loose" connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments, and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church. Jesus entrusted this authority to the Church through the ministry of the apostles and in particular through the ministry of Peter, the only one to whom he specifically entrusted the keys of the kingdom. New Catholic Catechism Paragraph 553.