

Hagiology

Hagiology is the study of the lives of the saints. We do not do a great deal of hagiology in the Reformed tradition, but it would not surprise us to learn that in the Roman Catholic Church one can engage in in-depth hagiology, a comprehensive study of the lives of the saints. In that tradition, the saints play a key role in every part of life as patron saints are assigned to farmers and fishermen, hospitals and hunters. Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus, for example, is the patron saint of workers, particularly carpenters (understandably), but he is also considered the patron saint of fathers because he was chosen to be the father of Jesus.

While we in the Reformed tradition do not venerate the saints, it is helpful to understand why the practice arose in the Christian church. The reasons were much more social and political than they were biblical.

In times long past, people did not think of themselves as equal with all others. A very pervasive class system had developed in which lower classes of people did not have access to the upper classes. If you belonged to a lower class (e.g. farm labourer), you did not have the right to approach the local civil authority (perhaps the mayor) on your own. No mere labourer would have access to someone of such elevated status. Instead, the farm labourer would go to the farmer (who was also a landowner and of higher status), and he would beseech the farmer to go to the mayor on his behalf. The land-owning farmer served as an intermediary between the labourer and the mayor, bringing the needs of the labourer to the attention of the upper-class mayor. The mayor, likewise, could not approach the king with any requests he might have but, rather, he would seek someone who was more elevated than him, and he would ask that person to bring his request before the king.

The concept of a lower class person needing an intermediary to speak to someone of a much higher class was accepted by all. A world where everyone is equal was unheard of in those days of long ago.

The belief that a lowly person could not communicate directly with an elevated person crept into the church as well. God, of course, is far elevated above us, and it was believed that to approach God in prayer might be a bit too presumptuous. Those with needs had to find a way to communicate with God without offending his majesty, and going directly to Jesus was also out of the question because Jesus is God's eternal Son, of the same majesty as his Father.

An alternative solution developed: why not approach those who are more like us but who we know to have a good standing with God? Take Joseph as an example. True, he was chosen to be Jesus' father, but he was also a carpenter, someone who might make repairs to our house if we lived in his village at that time. He was approachable, but he also had access to God, for, after all, he was Jesus' earthly father. With this logic, people began to "pray" to Joseph (and many others who were like us but had access to God), with the hope that Joseph would pass on their need to God the Father. Joseph became the intermediary, bringing the prayers of the humble human to the majestic God.

In a sense, this need for a intermediary is seen in the Old Testament as well. The people could approach the temple, God's dwelling place, but they could not approach God directly. God was too majestic, too holy, and they were not worthy to enter into his presence. God, in his wisdom, instituted the priesthood where in the priests, human beings but set apart by God, would take the prayers of the people and bring them before God. The priests served as intermediaries between humble and lowly people to a holy and majestic God. Like the priests of the Old Testament, the saints of the era of the church served to stand between us and God.

We should note that in the Roman Catholic tradition, people are not supposed to worship the saints. Some do, but they are misinformed in their theology. Rather, the saints are to be venerated, or, in other words, to be recognized as having special status with God because of their faithfulness and commitment, something that is confirmed in them because God blessed them with the ability to serve him. To venerate a saint is to recognize that he or she, though fully human and like us, has special status with God.

The whole study of the saints (hagiology) is undertaken as a means to help people understand who is best qualified to bring their needs before a majestic and powerful God. We might see how someone who believes that access to God is denied to the humble person might find hagiology to be a comforting and equipping endeavour.

There is something to be learned from this practice of using the saints as an intermediary between God and us and that is this: God is majestic and holy and completely inaccessible to mere human beings who are also sinners. For someone to believe that they have immediate and unrestricted access to God is to ignore the difference between us and God. We are not on the same level as he is, and the ability to come before him is not intrinsically our right or privilege. We need an intermediary.

And that is what we have in Jesus Christ. Jesus serves as our intermediary, but he operates in a completely different way from the saints (or the priests of the Old Testament). The saints are human beings who have been elevated so that they have special status with God. Jesus is God who has humbled himself to become one of us. They travelled in different directions from each other, but the effect is the same.

It is because Jesus came to us, became one of us, and then returned to heaven that he becomes an acceptable intermediary. And he also became our mediator by offering himself as a sacrifice so that our sin would no longer stand between us and God. In other words, while we do not, as a native right, have access to God, we have access to him through Jesus. Therefore, because that access has been given to us, even though we are sinful, lowly human beings, we do not need another intermediary. And, so, while hagiology might be an interesting study of history, and it may even be spiritually rewarding, we do not learn about the saints to discover who might be the best intermediary, for we already have one who is also our mediator. And that is enough.

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