

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Justification by Faith: Romanism and Protestantism

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Four hundred years ago the religious world was involved in one of the greatest religious conflicts that this world has ever witnessed. A tremendous number of books have recorded a blow-by-blow account of the epic Romanist-Protestant struggle. Yet, after more than four centuries have gone by, the professed sons of the Reformation generally have very little idea of the real issues of the conflict. If you ask a Protestant what Roman Catholics teach concerning justification, you will most likely be told that Catholics believe that a sinner may be justified by his own works of merit. But listen to what an authoritative Catholic catechism teaches:

Q. What is justification?

A. It is a grace which makes us friends of God.

Q. Can a sinner merit this justifying grace?

A. No, he cannot; because all the good works which the sinner performs whilst he is in a state of mortal sin, are dead works, which have no merit sufficient to justify.

Q. Is it an article of the Catholic faith, that the sinner cannot merit the grace of justification?

A. Yes, it is decreed in the seventh chap. of the sixth sess. of the Council of Trent, that neither faith, nor good works, preceding justification, can merit the grace of justification.

Q. How then is the sinner justified?

A. He is justified gratuitously by the pure mercy of God, not on account of his own or any human merit, but purely through the merits of Jesus Christ; for Jesus Christ is our only mediator of redemption, who alone, by his passion and death, has reconciled us to his Father.

Q. Why then do Protestants charge us with believing, that the sinner can merit the redemption of his sins?

A. Their ignorance of the Catholic doctrine is the cause of this, as well as many other false charges (Rev. Stephen Keenan, *Doctrinal Catechism*, 138, 139).

Many Protestants are awakening to the fact that the Roman Catholic Church does teach a doctrine of justification by faith. With surprise they are saying, "I always thought that Catholics taught that a sinner could be justified by his own works of merit. But they do not teach this. I have been subjected to some uncharitable Protestant propaganda about Catholic doctrine. Why, they believe in the saving grace of God the same as we do!" There is no question but that Catholic doctrine has always taught that a sinner is justified by a grace that comes from God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Then what was the doctrinal bone of contention between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation?

Three Aspects of Redemption

There are three great aspects of salvation:

1. God the Father's choosing *of* his people—election.
2. God the Son's (Jesus Christ) work *for* his people—atonement.
3. God the Holy Spirit's work *in* his people—faith.

The Father's choosing of us. This aspect of redemption occurred before we were born, before we had done any good or evil, even before the creation of the universe. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world.... In love he predestined us" (*Ephesians* 1:3-5).

The Son's work for us. This work of redemption, like election, was done entirely apart from us and without our assistance. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life of obedience for his people. He "died *for* our sins according to the Scriptures" (*1 Corinthians* 15:3). He "was delivered *for* our offences" (*Romans* 4:25). He entered the sanctuary, "having obtained eternal redemption *for* us" (*Hebrews* 9:12). He appears "in the presence of God *for* us" (*Hebrews* 9:24). By his obedience and satisfaction of divine justice, Christ *earned* salvation for his people and gives it to them freely, from beginning to end. "Whom he predestined, these he also called; whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified" (*Romans* 8:30).

The Holy Spirit's work in us. The Holy Spirit gives to the elect the gifts that Christ earned for them. Some of these gifts, but not all, are done in the believer's mind: Faith is the principal work of the Spirit in the believer. But justification is not an internal work: It is an external act. It is a legal act consisting of God's pardoning of sin and his imputing of Christ's righteousness, his good works, to the believer.

The Romanist Concept of Justification

The Roman State-Church does not teach that a sinner can be justified by his own works of merit done before he is regenerated. Briefly, its position on justification is this: Christ's work for us has made the gift of the Holy Spirit available to believers. Men must receive an *infusion* of righteousness by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit must work repentance and charity (love) in the believer. God then pronounces the believer just because of the work that the Holy Spirit has done in him. If the believer continues in his belief and good works, then his justification is increased.

Or to express it another way: The Roman State-Church teaches that a man is justified before God because the Holy Spirit has given that man a just nature. God the Father merely recognizes the work which the Holy Spirit has done in the heart of the believer. Justification means to *make* just or righteous, according to Roman theology.

The Birth of Protestantism

The Reformers abandoned the idea that the Holy Spirit's work *in* them could make them righteous in the sight of God. These men knew what it was to struggle for holiness of heart. Never were there more earnest Roman Catholics than Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Farel, Philipp Melancthon, and William Tyndale. They believed that holiness came only from God, and they tried to apprehend enough holiness in their lives in order that they could be accepted before God. Yet, being honest men, they could never see enough of God's grace in their own experience to give them any confidence toward God. Indeed, as they looked deep within their poor hearts, they saw sin in the form of pride, selfishness, unbelief, unresponsiveness to God's love, and egotism. They despaired of ever being justified by virtue of God's work of grace in them.

Then came their enlightenment in the Biblical faith. They rediscovered Paul's doctrine of justification through belief alone. In the book of *Romans* the apostle sets forth the Gospel truth that the sinner is

not justified by an infused righteousness but by an *imputed* righteousness—meaning a righteousness that is found wholly in Another. A believer is not justified by virtue of what God has done *in* him but by virtue of what Jesus Christ has done *for* him.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time his righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (*Romans* 3:21-28).

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised,

but while uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also (*Romans* 4:4-11).

In these words of the apostle Paul, the Reformers found a certain ground of hope. They saw that men need not look within their own experience to find something that will give them any assurance that they may stand acceptable before God. The Reformers were confronted with the great Gospel truth that Christ has already satisfied the wrath and justice of the Father, that justification—God's declaring them righteous—was evidenced by belief in Christ alone. By faith in God's perfect work, the finished work of Jesus Christ, they could now rejoice that the righteousness of Jesus was freely imputed to them.

Good Works and Justifying Merit

In returning to the Bible, the Protestant Reformers utterly rejected the idea that works wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit in us can obtain the grace of justification. Although the Roman Catholic position on good works and infused grace was clothed with the appearance of sanctity, Luther discerned that it was a diabolical doctrine devised to lead men astray from the objective Gospel. Roman Catholic doctrine teaches men to trust in God's work in them. God's work and their own works become indistinguishable. Roman Catholic theology leads them actually to depend upon their own works. Armed with the great teaching of the sinfulness of man's nature, Luther was able to show that the good works of the best saints are defiled by the sinfulness and imperfection of human nature. "For there is not a just man on Earth who does good and does not sin" (*Ecclesiastes* 7:20). "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (*Isaiah* 64:6). "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (*1 John* 1:8). Good works, declared the Reformers, can only be considered good if the

merits of Jesus are added to them to make up for their deficiency and imperfection.

Wrote Luther, "No one can be certain that he is not continually committing mortal sin, because of the most secret vice of pride." The pope condemned this statement in his bull excommunicating Luther, but the Reformer responded, "Therefore I must retract this article, and I say now that no one should doubt that all our good works are mortal sins, if they are judged according to God's judgment and severity and not accepted as good by grace alone." Again he declared, "Every good work is sin unless it is forgiven by the mercy of God." In *A Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (176, 177), Luther thundered that the merits of all works, "before grace and after," should be thrown down to Hell. Thus did this man of God teach that we can never look within us for any work of justifying merit.

Contrary to Roman Catholicism, the Protestants taught that while sanctifying grace within a believer enables him to do good works, only the merits of Christ can make those good works acceptable to God. Sanctifying grace does not make us the friends of God, they said, but is rather the result of Christ's work done wholly outside of us. The most thorough and Biblical of the Reformed confessions of faith, the *Westminster Confession*, describes justification in these words:

Those whom God effectually calls, he also freely justifies: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

The Gospel

Before his enlightenment, Luther vainly looked within his own heart for enough repentance or conversion to assure him of his acceptance with God.

"How dare I believe in the favor of God, while there is nothing in me like true conversion? I must be changed before He can receive me." Such was the Roman darkness that enveloped his soul. He dreaded those Scriptures which speak of repentance. But after his enlightenment in the Gospel, the passages so much dreaded became his delight—to use his own words, "an agreeable sport, and the most delightful recreation." All the passages of Scripture which frightened him seemed now to rise up from all sides, smiling, and leaping, and sporting with him. (J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, Vol. 1, 130, 131).

Luther contemplated with great joy the words of Paul, "[Christ] loved me, and gave Himself for me" (*Galatians* 2:29). Luther perceived that the Lord of glory had chosen him in Jesus Christ and bestowed upon him all the treasures of eternity. Luther understood that he could receive justification solely by believing in what God had done for sinners, and that this belief itself was a gift of God.

God justifies the ungodly through faith, without works. "By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (*Galatians* 2:16). To the Reformers who had struggled for years to find favor with God through the work of the Holy Spirit in them, justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ was a message of unspeakable joy. God in eternity chose those whom he would save; Christ actually saved them; and no man can pluck them out of God's hand. The Holy Spirit applied the salvation that Christ earned for his people to those whom the Father had chosen. All three persons of the Godhead work together in saving God's people. Those who believe are justified, declared righteous, because of what *Christ did* at Calvary 2,000 years

ago, not because of what the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives today. Believers are justified *through* faith (and faith itself is a gift of God earned by Christ for his people), but not *because of* faith or any other work that the Holy Spirit does in them.

Christ came to save sinners, and he actually saved them. There is no better news under Heaven than that. The message of the Gospel is that God loves his people so much that he sent his Son to die on the Cross for their sins so that whoever believes that Jesus is God and rose from the dead will be saved. In the Gospel of the imputed righteousness of Christ, Christians can see the smiling face of the heavenly Father. The Gospel is the good news of what God has already done to save sinners.

The Reformers did not deny the necessity of God's work in the hearts of men by the power of the Holy Spirit; in fact, they insisted upon the absolute necessity of belief in the truth of the Gospel, a belief that can only be caused by God. Nor did they make light of good works. One need only compare the lives of the Puritans with the lives of the Jesuits. What they did was to get their theology straight. They understood that Christ's work for his people earned the benefits of the Holy Spirit's work in us, and other benefits besides, including the forgiveness of sins and our justification before God. The result is the Biblical answer to the question, What must one do to be saved? "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved"(Romans 10:9).

The rediscovery of this truth during the Reformations took Europe to its foundations and changed the course of world history. Through the preaching of justification by faith alone, the Roman State-Church received a deadly wound. If we again believe and teach that one can be justified only through faith in the righteousness of Christ, and that God will grant the gift of faith and forgiveness to all who ask for it, the course of world history will be changed again.

Are You Romanist or Protestant?

The meaning of justification by faith alone has been largely forgotten in the professing Christian Church. The meaning of *justification* has been forgotten, and so has the meaning of *faith*. But mere forgetting is not the whole issue. In addition to our sinful tendency to forget God's truth (a tendency that the writers of the New Testament were well aware of, for they repeatedly said that they were writing to *remind* believers), false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing, have worked diligently to twist the Scriptural doctrine of justification. The teaching of the Roman State-Church is a prime example of this. The following ten questions are designed to test your knowledge of justification by faith. After you have taken the quiz, perhaps you could ask a teacher in your church to take it as well. You might be surprised to find that many more than you expected are confused on this cardinal doctrine of Christianity. In each of the following 10 choices, mark either (a) or (b), whichever is correct.

1. (a) God gives a sinner right standing with himself by mercifully accounting him innocent or virtuous.
- (b) God gives a sinner right standing with himself by actually making him into an innocent and virtuous person.
2. (a) God gives a sinner right standing with himself by placing Christ's goodness and virtue to his credit.
- (b) God gives a sinner right standing with himself by putting Christ's goodness and virtue into his heart.
3. (a) God accepts the believer because of the righteousness found in Jesus Christ.
- (b) God makes the believer acceptable by infusing Christ's righteousness into his life.
4. (a) If a person is "born again" (regenerate), he will receive right standing with God on the basis of his new birth.
- (b) If a person is "born again" he receives right standing with God on the basis of Christ's work alone.

5. (a) We receive right standing with God by faith alone.

(b) We receive right standing with God by faith which has become active by love.

6. (a) We achieve right standing with God by having Christ live out his life of obedience in us.

(b) We receive right standing with God by accepting the fact that Christ obeyed the law perfectly for us.

7. (a) We achieve right standing with God by following Christ's example by the help of his enabling grace.

(b) We follow Christ's example because his death has given us right standing with God.

8. (a) In justification, God pronounces that we are good in his sight.

(b) In justification, God sends his Spirit to make us good.

9. (a) Christ's intercession at God's right hand gives us favor in the sight of God.

(b) It is the indwelling Christ that gives us favor in God's sight.

10. (a) Only by faith in the doing and dying of Christ can we satisfy the claims of the Ten commandments.

(b) By the power of the Holy Spirit living in us, we can satisfy the claims of the Ten Commandments.

Answers: 1a; 2a; 3a; 4b; 5a; 6b; 7b; 8a; 9a; 10a.

Revised and adapted from a pamphlet published in 1972 by the Australian Forum, an apparently defunct organization.