

# Justification

by Jim Seghers

## Introduction

Differences over the understanding of justification were one of the two fundamental theological foundations supporting the Protestant Reformation, the other being *sola scriptura*. The traditional Protestant position is known by the Latin phrase *sola fide*, “by faith alone.” Any meaningful dialogue between Catholics and Protestants, particularly Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants, must include a substantive discussion of justification. This is true for a number of significant reasons.

Catholics need to understand that many Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants have a keen sense that salvation is **by grace, a belief which Catholics share**. Their convictions are frequently reinforced through sermons, publications, crusades, teachings and broadcasts.

However, many Bible-believing Protestants are erroneously convinced that the Catholic Church teaches that salvation is by works, that is, one can “earn” or “merit” salvation on his own. Thus they reason that Catholics are not saved. This conclusion does not come from uncharitableness towards Catholics, but from their genuine and correct conviction that salvation is by grace. What contributes to this misunderstanding is the fact that many Catholics are themselves confused about what the Church teaches.

As a starting point it is helpful to know that both Catholics and Protestants agree that mankind found itself in a state of sin and unrighteousness because of Original Sin. Both agree that mankind needed justification, a restoration that only Jesus Christ could achieve. The issues that divide Catholics and Protestants pertain to how this justification comes about and what are its effects.<sup>1</sup>

## Beliefs We Share in Common

The Catholic Church teaches that “our justification comes **from the grace of God.**”<sup>2</sup> Sacred Scripture supports this instruction.<sup>3</sup> Protestants and Catholics also agree that our justification is **by faith**. This last point needs emphasis as many Protestants are not aware of the clear Catholic teaching.

The following is the teaching of the Council of Trent. “We are therefore said to be justified **by faith**, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God ... We are therefore said to be

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study of justification I highly recommend Robert A. Sungenis’ superb work *Not By Faith Alone: the Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification*. Queenship Publishing Company.

<sup>2</sup> [Catechism of the Catholic Church #1996](#).

<sup>3</sup> See: Eph 2:8; Rom 3:24; Acts 15:11.

justified **gratuitously** [that is, not by works], because **none** of those things that precede justification, **whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification** [emphasis mine].”<sup>4</sup>

Trent’s instruction finds a clear reaffirmation in the [Catechism of the Catholic Church #161](#). “Believing in Jesus Christ and in the One who sent him for our salvation is **necessary** for obtaining that salvation. Since ‘**without faith it is impossible** to please [God]’ and to attain the fellowship of his sons, therefore **without faith no one has ever attained justification** [emphasis mine].”<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Church also teaches that the works of the law or the works of the flesh justifies no one. Protestants agree. Tragically, many Protestants believe the Catholic Church teaches the opposite — a “works doctrine.” The teaching of the Council of Trent, however, is adamant on this point.

“If anyone says that man can be justified before God **by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law**, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.”<sup>6</sup> This decree is consistent with the revealed word of God (Rom 3:20, 27-28; Eph 2:8-9).

On June 16, 1998 the Lutheran World Federation unanimously approved the *Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity approved the same *Declaration* on June 25, 1998. In this statement both churches agreed that salvation is a totally free gift of God and cannot be earned by performing good works, but rather is reflected in good works.

### **Good Works**

The issue of “good works,” however still remains a point of disagreement. The Catholic Church teaches that good works of charity, the obedience of faith, are **necessary for salvation**. These good works are preceded by God’s grace, enlivened by God’s grace and rewarded by God’s grace. In other words, good works are “graced works,” therefore they are themselves the results of grace even though man’s free cooperation is required. A consideration of relevant Scripture passages will prove helpful.

In Ephesians 2:8-9 St. Paul makes the following point. “For by grace you have been saved **through faith**; and this is **not your own doing**, it is the **gift of God — not because of works** [*ergon* in Greek], lest any man should boast.” Unfortunately, many Protestants take this verse out of its context and give it a meaning contrary to what St. Paul intended. They interpret it to mean that St. Paul rejects all works including “good works.” Thus the vital distinction that St. Paul makes between “works of the law” as well as accomplishments based on our natural capabilities and “good works” is ignored.

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<sup>4</sup> Justification, Chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> In the footnote the *Catechism* cites: Mk 16:16; Jn 3:36; 6:40; Rom 3:22, 24; 11:6; Mt 10:22; 24:13; Heb 11:6; and Trent (1547): DS 1532.

<sup>6</sup> Council of Trent, Justification, Canon 1.

However, the same Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to write verses 8 and 9 also inspired verse 10. “For we are **his workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for [the Greek word *gar* introduces a purpose clause: “for the purpose of”] **good works** [*ergon* in Greek], which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

St. Paul makes a like distinction in his letter to Titus. “He saved us, **not because of deeds** [works - *ergon* in the Greek] done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration [Baptism] and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified **by his grace** and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. I desire you to **insist** on these things, so that those who have believed in God may **be careful to apply themselves to good deeds** [*ergon*]; these are **excellent** and **profitable** to men... And let our people learn to **apply themselves to good deeds** [*ergon*], so as to help cases of urgent need, and not to be unfruitful” (Titus 3:5-8, 14).

The language of this passage is quite clear. Paul insists that Christians “be careful to apply themselves to good deeds [works]” because they are meritorious, that is, they are “profitable” so that Christians will not be “unfruitful.” The reverse is implied. Failure to perform “good deeds” could bring about eternal punishment.

St. Peter gives a similar instruction in his first letter (1 Pet 1:1-20). He instructs the Church that Christians have been “sanctified by the Spirit for **obedience**” (v. 2). In preparing the Church to endure persecution (v.6) he teaches that trials are permitted “so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is **tested by fire**” (v.7). If the obedient submission of trials is of no value for our justification, then why is it tested? Peter’s point is very clear. Good deeds are necessary for salvation because God will judge our life based on them. “And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his **deeds** [*ergon*], conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (v. 17).

In his letter to the Philippians Paul makes a similar connection between obedience, which is love in action, and salvation. “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always **obeyed**, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation** with fear and trembling; for God is at **work** in you, both **to will** and **to work** for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

The “fear” to which both St. Peter (1 Pet 1:17) and St. Paul (Phil 2:13) refers does not stem for any lack of confidence in the infinite merits of Jesus Christ. Rather it comes from the knowledge that Christians can fail in their submission to grace. Thus, because of personal sin they are capable of being condemned.

Paul also makes the connection between grace and our required cooperation with grace in his letter to the Corinthians. “But **by the grace of God** I am what I am, and his **grace** toward me was **not in vain**. On the contrary, I **worked harder** than any of them, though it was not I, **but**

**the grace of God which is with me**" (1 Cor 15:10) One can't help noting how the teaching of the Catholic Church captures the meaning of Sacred Scripture.

"For since *Christ Jesus Himself*, as the **head** into the members and the vine into the branches, continually *infuses strength* into *those justified*, which strength always **precedes, accompanies and follows** their **good works**, and without which **they could not in any manner** be pleasing and meritorious before God."<sup>7</sup>

"Indeed we also *work*, but we are **only collaborating with God** who *works*, for his mercy has gone **before us**."<sup>8</sup> From the Catholic perspective **every aspect** of man's cooperation with grace is itself a **gift of God's grace. Without God's grace, nothing man does is ever spiritually effective** because the "good works" that are pleasing to God would be impossible.

This understanding of the clear teaching of the Catholic Church greatly narrows the distance in relationship to the Protestant view. It is not a question of grace or no grace, but an issue of grace and grace. Both Catholics and Protestants stress that **the whole of justification is the work of God's grace**. In both cases **God is doing everything**.

What then is the difference? The Catholic Church teaches that we are not the **passive recipients** of God's grace, but that God's **grace enables us to freely cooperate with his grace**. Both the Catholic and the Lutheran Churches affirm<sup>9</sup> that human beings can refuse God's grace. The Catholic Church declares that with this freedom to refuse, we are given a new capacity of grace to adhere to the divine will, an ability rightly called cooperation. In the traditional Protestant view of grace, man is the passive recipient of grace and even with grace he is not able to do anything which is pleasing to God. In this perspective all works are filthy rags, that is, they are supernaturally useless in the sense that they don't effect anything.

### **Good Works and Merit**

The Catholic Church teaches that we will be either rewarded or punished according to our good works. This connection between good works and reward is called merit. The merit resulting from good works is in reality a reward of God's grace. Protestants generally reject the idea of merit as a result of good works. Let's begin by citing official Catholic teaching.

"The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that **God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace**. The **fatherly** action of God is **first on his own initiative**, and then follows man's free acting through his **collaboration**, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. **Man's merit**, moreover, itself is **due to God**, for his good actions precede in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Council of Trent, Justification, Chapter 16.

<sup>8</sup> [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2001](#), citing St. Augustine, the doctor of grace.

<sup>9</sup> *Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

<sup>10</sup> [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2008](#).

“**Filial adoption**, in making us partakers **by grace** in the **divine nature**, can bestow true **merit** on us as a result of God’s **gratuitous [not earned] justice**. This is our right **by grace** [God’s gift], the full right of love, making us “co-heirs” with Christ and worthy of obtaining “the promised inheritance [to family members] of eternal life [the reward to family members].” The merits of our good works are **gifts** of the **divine goodness**.<sup>11</sup>

“In crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts”<sup>12</sup> The Catholic Church teaches that God has freely chosen, without any merit on our part, to make us **his real children**. Thus the Heavenly Father chooses to **work through us** by uniting us to the body of his Son infused by the Holy Spirit. Through this Spirit we are formed into Christ to produce “**good works**” for which the Father rewards us. In so doing **it is his work through the Holy Spirit in the Son from beginning to end!**

The biblical connection between good works and our salvation is clearly affirmed in Sacred Scripture.

2 Corinthians 5:10 - “For we must **all** appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each **one may** receive good or evil, according to what he has **done** in the body.”

Romans 2:6 - “For he will render to **every man** according to his **works**” [good or bad - the Greek *ergon* is used].

Revelation 22:12 - “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay **every one** for what he has **done**.”

Matthew 7:21 - “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who **does** the will of my Father who is in heaven.” This passage is particularly powerful because it is clear that Jesus is referring to Christians. Only believers ever refer to Jesus as “Lord” in Matthew’s gospel. Furthermore, only believers “prophesy,” “cast out demons,” and “do many mighty works” in Christ’s name (Mt 7:22).

Matthew 10:42 - “And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his **reward** [merit].”

Matthew 16:27 - “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay **every man** for what he has **done**.”

Matthew 25:31-46 - The parable of the sheep and the goats.

1 Corinthians 3:8 - “He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his **wages** [merit] according to his **labor** [works].”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., [#2009](#).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., [#2006](#) quoting St. Augustine, the doctor of grace.

### **Faith Without Obedient Love is Dead Faith — valueless**

The connection between love and obedience is inseparable in the Bible. Sacred Scripture does not speak of love in terms of the shallow emotional sentimentality that is so common today. Rather love is the surrender of one's mind and will to God. This submission is reflected in obedience, which is love in action. Sacred Scripture teaches that without the "obedience of faith" our faith has no value.

Galatians 5:6 - "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, **but faith working through love.**"

Romans 1:5 - "through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the **obedience of faith** for the sake of his name among all the nations."

Romans 16:26 - "but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the **obedience of faith**"

James 2:17-22 - "So **faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.** But some one will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder. Do you want to be shown, *you shallow man*, that **faith apart from works is barren?** Was not Abraham our father justified **by [good] works**, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was **active** along with his **works**, and **faith was completed by works.**"

James 2:24-26 - "You see that a man is justified **by works** and **not by faith alone.** And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified **by works** when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so **faith apart from works is dead.**"

The Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, *sola fide*, is not biblical! There is only one verse in the entire Bible that speaks about "faith alone" in the context of justification. In that one verse (Jas 2:24), justification by faith alone is explicitly rejected.

### **Origin of *sola fide***

Where, then, did Martin Luther find in the Bible the support for his doctrine of faith alone? He didn't! Martin Luther invented his theory, then he added the word "alone" to his German translation of Romans 3:28. "For we hold that a man is justified by faith **ALONE** [Luther's addition] apart from works of law."

One can readily see that this addition gives an entirely different meaning to Romans 3:28 than the one written by St. Paul. Paul used the word "faith" and its cognates over 200 times in the New Testament, but never with the qualifiers "alone" or "only." It is also striking that Paul used the word alone more frequently than did any other New Testament writer. Are we to believe that St. Paul taught as the central part of the doctrine on justification that one is justified by

faith alone, but never used the one modifier that would have made that meaning explicitly clear?

Would the Holy Spirit inspire this kind of ambiguity on such an important issue? Are we to believe that the Holy Spirit made a mistake and so needs the aid of a translator? What kind of respect is this for the divinely inspired scriptures? In case someone would think that the above statements are Catholic propaganda, the following citation from Luther's own writing in 1530 clarifies the point.

"If your Papist makes much unnecessary fuss about the word (*Sola*, alone), say straight out to him, Doctor Martinus Luther will have it so, and says, Papists and donkeys are one and the same thing... thus I will have it, thus I order it, **my will is reason enough** [emphasis mine]. For we will not be the scholars and or the disciples of the Papists, but their masters and judges. We must once in a way act a little haughtily and noisily with these jack-asses.

This is my answer to your first question; and as to their unnecessary noise about the word *Sola*, I beg of you not to give these donkeys any other or future answer, but simply this much: **D. Luther will have it so** [emphasis mine], and says he is a Doctor above all Doctors in the whole of Popery.

But as to you and our friends, I will give you my reason for using the word (*Sola*) ... **I knew very well that here, Rom. III., the word (*Sola*) is not in the Latin and Greek text**, and it was not necessary for the Papists to teach me that. It is **true, these four letters, S O L A, are not in it**, which letter the jack-asses look at as a cow looks at a new gate; but they do not see that, nevertheless, it expresses the meaning of the text; and if our German translation is to be clear and powerful, **it ought to be put in**" [emphasis mine]...<sup>13</sup>

There are many passages in the Gospels that cite Jesus affirming the importance of faith. However, Jesus never taught *sola fide*. Consider the passage of the rich young man who came to Jesus. "What **good deed** must I **do**, to have eternal life" (Mt 19:16)?<sup>14</sup> Jesus didn't correct him by saying: "Do! Good deeds! You don't do anything. Good deeds aren't necessary for salvation. The one thing required is to accept me as your Lord and Savior." Jesus' actual reply was: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:17).

### **Justification: Real or a Legal Fiction**

In Protestant theology justification is often described as a mere legal or forensic act. It consists merely in the Father's judicial declaration that we are righteous because of the atoning death of his Divine Son. Justification does not work an internal change in those justified. Sin, therefore, remains in the justified believer, but it is covered by the righteousness of Jesus' infinite merits.

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<sup>13</sup> *Luther's Own Statements Concerning His Teaching and its Results. Taken Exclusively From the Earliest and Best Editions of Luther's German and Latin Works*, By Henry O'Connor, pp. 23-26.

<sup>14</sup> The parallel passages are Mk 10:17-22 and Lk 18:18-23.

To explain this idea Luther used an apt metaphor of snow covering a pile of manure. The pile of dung represented the state of man's soul before and after justification. The snow represented Jesus' merits which covers the filth, but the underlying reality remains unchanged. Thus the Father merely declares us justified as a legal act, but we remain interiorly corrupt.

Catholic theology is quite different on this point. The Catholic Church teaches that justification effects an **internal change** in the soul of the justified. By justification one is declared righteous because one is made righteous. This marvelous transformation effects a new reality as we share in God's own divine nature as his adopted children. We become son and daughters of the Father and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. In summary, the Catholic Church teaches that justification denotes a transformation in the soul by which a person is transformed from the state of original sin to that of grace and divine sonship.

The Catechism expresses the official position of the Catholic Church. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the **interior man**"<sup>15</sup> "It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us **inwardly just** by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life."<sup>16</sup> "It introduces us into the **intimacy of Trinitarian life**... As an "**adopted son**" he can henceforth call God "**Father**" in **union** with the only Son."<sup>17</sup>

Sacred Scripture also supports the Catholic understanding. There are, for example, many passages in the Bible that use language that indicates an interior transformation by the removal of sin, for example: "blot out" and "wash me thoroughly" (Ps 51:1-2), "remove our transgressions" (Ps 103:2), "blot out" (Is 43:25), and "take away" (Jn 1:29). Both Paul and John speak about a regeneration into supernatural life (Jn 3:5; Titus 3:5). Paul also speaks about our being "washed" and "sanctified" (1 Cor 6:11) and interior renewal (Eph 4:23). In addition, the following passages clearly support the Catholic position that justification causes an internal transformation in man's soul.

2 Corinthians 5:17 - "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a **new creation**; the old has passed away, behold, the **new** has come."

2 Pet 1: 3-5 - "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and **become partakers of the divine nature.**'

1 John 3:1 - "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called **children of God**; and **so we are.**"

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<sup>15</sup> [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1989](#) - referencing to the Council of Trent, DS 1528.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., [#1992](#).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., [#1997](#).

1 John 3:2 - “Beloved, we are **God’s children now. . .**”

Romans 8:15 - “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of **sonship**. When we cry, “**Abba! Father!**”

Galatians 4:5-7 - “... that we might receive **adoption as sons**. And because you are **sons**, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “**Abba! Father!**” So through God you are no longer a slave but a **son**, and if a **son** then an **heir**.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 - In this passage which was cited earlier Paul speaks about a “new creation”

### **Conclusion**

Thankfully, there has been a narrowing of the difference between Catholics and Protestants regarding the subject of justification. Eliminating the remaining differences will hinge on arriving at a common understanding in three important areas. First, the idea of a forensic or merely legal declaration justification must be abandoned. It negates numerous biblical passages that speak of eternal life<sup>18</sup> the opposite of which is eternal death.<sup>19</sup> How can one remain dead in sin and be alive in Jesus Christ through justification?

Additionally, this idea creates a significant theological difficulty. From this viewpoint the wreckage of Adam’s sin is so grave that even the infinite merits of the God-man, Jesus Christ, is incapable of restoring man intrinsic justification. How does that make sense? It also implies that in a sense our souls remain eternally wounded and under Satan’s influence!

The second area of disagreement will not require abandoning a position so much as it will require rediscovering it. The objection below the apparent objection regarding the necessity of good works is the fear that good works, that is, deeds done in righteousness, will be understood as the result of our own effort, as if we did them by ourselves. The rediscovery is that they are completely the result of grace, just as the act of faith itself. Indeed, it can be rightly said that the act of faith is the first good work.

Lastly, in conjunction with a clearer understanding of the relationship of grace to good works, a more profound grasping of the biblical notion of the covenant will also resolve many difficulties. Thus the Catholic Church views justification as the **interior** transformation which creates a dynamic personal relationship between the Heavenly Father and his children by uniting us to His Only Begotten Son through the Holy Spirit. In this view men and women are called to active participation in the Father’s business, the salvation of souls. Justification is viewed as **God’s family plan!**

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<sup>18</sup> Consider, for example, the following passages that are drawn from the Gospels: Mt 7:14; 19:16-17, 29; 25:46; Mk 10:17, 30; Lk 10:25; 18:30; Jn 1:4; 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:21-26; 5:39-40; 6:27, 33, 40, 47, 53-54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2-3; 20:31.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Jn 4:16-17

Ignoring the profound impact of the covenant leads to the Protestant view of justification as a mere legal process in a courtroom, in which the Heavenly Judge ignores the interior sinfulness of the defendants because they are covered by the merits of the defense attorney, Jesus Christ. In this view mankind is passive. Justification is viewed as the **divine welfare plan!**

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