

Douglas E. Woolley
Reverend Scott Jensen
THEO 337 Soteriology
25 May 1998

Salvation: The Roman Catholic View and the Orthodox Protestant View

Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the single most important event in the history of mankind. Coupled with His resurrection, the Almighty God of the universe brought salvation to the whole world. Differing views on how to appropriate this salvation have been a grounds of division for Roman Catholics and Orthodox Protestants, a subgroup of which is often referred to as Evangelicals. Much of the division is often caused by misunderstandings and caricatures of the other's view, "but by no means are all the differences that divide based on misunderstandings. There are some real and fundamental-sounding differences in interpretation and application . . ." (Brown 12). While both groups share a collective nucleus of beliefs about salvation, there are crucial differences in their views of justification and its relationship to works, sanctification, baptismal regeneration, and the assurance of one's salvation.

Protestant scholars Geisler and MacKenzie attest that "Catholics and evangelicals hold much more in common than is often recognized" (19). Some of these shared fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith include: "a belief in the Trinity, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the creation and subsequent fall of humanity, Christ's unique atonement for our sins, the physical resurrection of Christ, the necessity of God's grace for salvation, the existence of heaven and hell, the second coming of Christ, and the verbal inspiration and infallibility of Scripture" (155). Furthermore, "Both Catholics and orthodox Protestants have a common credal and Augustinian doctrinal background. Both groups accept the creeds and confessions and councils of the Christian church of the first five centuries" (17). According to Geisler and MacKenzie, "All cults [e.g. Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, etc.] and heresies depart theologically from doctrine which developed in this time period" (20). In spite of the many similarities between Catholics and orthodox Protestants, "Catholics affirm and evangelicals reject the immaculate conception of Mary, her bodily assumption, her role as corredemptrix, the veneration of Mary and other saints, prayers to Mary and the saints, the infallibility of the pope, the existence of purgatory, the inspiration and canonicity of the Apocrypha, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the worship of the transformed Host, the special sacerdotal powers of the Roman Catholic priesthood, and the necessity of works to obtain eternal life" (155). The doctrine of salvation is a crucial topic for comparison between Catholics and Protestants.

Geisler and MacKenzie summarize four aspects of salvation that are held by both Catholics and evangelicals: salvation is based on God acting in history through Jesus Christ; salvation is "moral and spiritual" in that it delivers a believer from sin and its consequences; salvation is eschatological and will culminate at the return of Jesus; "initial justification is unmerited" and "salvation is by grace and is not prompted by human works" (103). After years of dialogue, Catholics and Lutheran scholars agreed that "our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ" (Anderson, 16). The Scriptures authoritatively state in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For 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" (NASB). Catholic and evangelical leaders have affirmed common

"undisputed biblical truth" in the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* by stating "we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ" (Neuhaus 200).

Justification is an act of God whereby He places a person in a right relationship with Himself. Geisler and MacKenzie aptly summarize some of the strong disagreements that Catholics and Protestants have over the doctrine of justification:

For one thing, while Catholics believe in the primacy and necessity of grace, Protestants believe in the exclusivity of grace; that is only Protestants believe salvation is by grace alone (*sola gratia*) apart from any good works. Likewise, while Catholics believe in the necessity of faith (at least for adults) for justification, only Protestants believe in the exclusivity of faith. The heart cry of the Reformation was "justification by faith alone" (*sola fide*). The distinguishing salvation doctrines of the Reformation, then, are grace alone and faith alone (*sola gratia* and *sola fide*) through Christ alone and based on the Bible alone. (221)

To clarify the different views on justification, several questions should be addressed.

Is salvation obtained by faith alone or by faith and works? "The Catholic position on justification was made infallible dogma at the Council of Trent [1545-64] in reaction to Martin Luther's proclamation that the just shall live by faith alone!" (Geisler and MacKenzie 222). Canon 24 from Trent says, "If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema" (*Canons* 45). Roman Catholicism stresses the necessity of good works for salvation in addition to faith. "Roman Catholics are quick to point out that the works necessary for salvation are prompted by God's grace. Nevertheless, they are meritorious works that are a necessary condition of salvation, which is precisely what the Protestant objection is" (Geisler and MacKenzie 222). "The Reformers insisted that true faith necessarily, inevitably, and immediately yields the fruit of works. They argued that though justification is by faith alone, it is not by a faith that is alone" (Sproul 26). Moreover, "works are the results that show that a man has a true and genuine faith" (Ankerberg and Weldon 34). For Catholics, works are a "necessary precondition *for* justification," while Protestants view works as "a necessary fruit of justification" (Sproul 156).

Is the nature of justification only judicial (forensic and extrinsic) or is it also sanctifying (intrinsic)? "The reformers viewed justification as being forensic [legal], resting on God's judicial declaration that the sinner is counted as just or righteous by virtue of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ" (Sproul 44). Catholicism rejects this view and sees justification "as a true eradication of sin and a true sanctification and renewal. The soul becomes objectively pleasing to God and so merits heaven" (Keating 168). For Protestants, God "declares" a sinner righteous, but for Catholics, God "makes" a sinner righteous. Horton comments:

The difference between "to declare righteous" and "to make righteous" is the difference between a definitive, once-and-for-all verdict and a gradual progression. If we are justified by a declaration, through faith alone, then the very moment we believe that Christ is our salvation we are declared righteous in Christ. If we are justified by a process of sanctification, which is never complete in this life, there is not a sufficient basis for God to ever accept us. (255)

"Protestant theology clearly distinguishes between forensic justification (by which alone one is promised a place in heaven) and sanctification (which determines how high a place one will have in heaven). . . . Sanctification is the actual process by which one is *made* righteous after being

declared righteous (by justification)" (Geisler and MacKenzie 240). Catholics "see justification and sanctification as one long process of individual growth in personal righteousness" (Ankerberg and Weldon 59), and they "must live a life of sanctification as a condition for [their] ultimate justification (i.e., to get to heaven)" (Geisler and Mackenzie 240).

Are the sacraments necessary for justification? The Catholic church would say, "yes." In addition to the necessity of grace, faith, and works, baptism is needed for initial justification (McCarthy 37-39, 57). Keating expresses the Catholic view saying, "Baptism was given to take away the sin inherited from Adam (original sin) and any sins (called actual sins, because they come from our own acts) committed before baptism. For sins committed after baptism, a different sacrament is needed", namely penance or confession (182). The Eucharist helps to "provide the grace needed to avoid sin and to do good." All seven sacraments are said to "contain" grace and automatically confer grace upon the recipient and "increase" justification (McCarthy 57). Protestants regard only baptism and the Eucharist as valid sacraments, and most Protestants regard them only in a symbolic way and not being necessary for salvation. Protestants emphasize justification by faith alone.

Can believers be assured of their salvation? Most Protestants say, "yes," for the Scriptures state, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (NASB 1 John 5:13). "For Catholics, salvation depends on the state of the soul at death" (Keating 166). Like some Protestants, Catholics believe that a person can lose their salvation. Therefore, Catholicism teaches that "no one can know with absolute certainty in this life whether he or she will be [finally] saved . . . any of us, at any point in life, can turn away from God and lose the hope of heaven . . . we should not presume to know ahead of time that we will persevere in faith until the end" (Schreck 33). Catholics have some relative assurance that they are presently saved, but they can only have a "firm hope and confidence" of final salvation (32). Many Protestants believe that once a person is genuinely saved by faith alone then they will always be saved, and they can have this assurance. Other Protestants who believe that it is possible to lose salvation teach that "salvation is received and kept by faith." "As the believer's salvation is received, not by an act of righteousness but by an act of faith, so the believer's salvation is maintained, not by acts of righteousness but by a life of faith! . . . His security is never in doubt as long as his faith in Christ is steadfast, for he is kept by faith" (*Where We Stand* 109-10).

How essential to personal salvation is it to know the intricate details about justification? While Horton believes that "in order to be saved, I must have not only faith but also a correct doctrine (some recognition) of justification by faith," Reardon contrarily believes "that a man is justified by faith, not by entertaining a correct view on justification" (qtd. in Geisler and MacKenzie 499). Sproul validly asserts, "To be saved we may not require an exhaustive or comprehensive knowledge of God, for none of us possesses such comprehensive knowledge, but we must have some knowledge and we must have some *right* knowledge about God" (77). McGrath asks and answers a pertinent question, "How important, for example is the distinction between an alien [extrinsic] and an intrinsic justifying righteousness? In recent years, there appears to be increasing sympathy for the view that these differences, although of importance in the Reformation period, no longer possess the significance they once had" (71). While firmly asserting the essential Protestant truth of gospel that salvation is "by grace alone through faith alone based on Christ alone", Geisler and MacKenzie assert that people can be saved without believing that this is an essential part of the gospel; otherwise, if belief in the Protestant view of imputed righteousness or the "forensic" aspect of justification is necessary for salvation then "few people were saved between the time of the apostle Paul and the Reformation, since scarcely anyone taught imputed

righteousness (or forensic justification) during that period!" (501-02). This writer concurs with J. I. Packer when he says, "What brings salvation, after all is not any theory about faith in Christ, justification, and the church, but faith itself in Christ himself" (37).

Works Cited

- Anderson, H. George, ed. *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*. Vol. 7. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985.
- Ankerberg, John, and John Weldon. *Protestants & Catholics: Do They Now Agree?*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995.
- Brown, Harold O. J. Foreword. *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*. By Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995. 12.
- Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent: Original Text with English Translation*. Trans. H. J. Schroeder. London: Herder, 1941.
- Geisler, Norman L., and Ralph E. MacKenzie. *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995.
- Horton, Michael S. "What Still Keeps Us Apart?" *Roman Catholicism: Evangelic Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*. Gen. Ed. Armstrong, John. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.
- Keating, Karl. *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on "Romanism" by "Bible Christians"*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.
- McCarthy, James G. *The Gospel According to Rome*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Justification by Faith: What It Means for Us Today*. London: Marshall Pickering; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. "The Catholic Difference." *Evangelicals & Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*. Eds. Colson, Charles and Richard John Neuhaus. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995.
- New American Standard Bible. La Habra, Ca: The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.
- Packer, J. I. "Why I Signed It." *Christianity Today* 12 Dec. 1994: 36-37.
- Schreck, Alan. *Catholic and Christian: An Explanation of Commonly Misunderstood Catholic Beliefs*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1984.
- Sproul, R. C. *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995.
- Where We Stand*. Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1994.