

Justification by Faith Alone:

Not the Church's Good News

By David Mills

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Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: 2 Samuel 12.7-10, 13;
Galatians 2.16, 19-21;
Luke 7.36-8:3

"If he held a Roman Catholic view on justification, it's very likely he died a lost man in need of Jesus." The subject of the sentence was G. K. Chesterton. The writer was commenting on a Protestant website whose owner had asked readers for their favorite Chesterton quotations. The owner challenged the critic for consigning Chesterton to hell, but only by arguing that he was better than his Church's teaching, and anyway he wrote a lot of really good stuff even if he was a Catholic. The Catholic teaching, the critic and he agreed, *that* was just wrong, wrong, wrong.

Justification is a big subject among our Protestant brethren – those conservative Protestants who on many issues, doctrinal and moral, we would find most sympathetic. Those, to put it concretely, with whom you might find yourself at a pro-life march or find also reading *First Things* or *Touchstone*, or even, and this does happen, evangelizing for natural family planning. Concerning justification there is a countermovement among Protestants, led by major figures like the Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, which depends on new understandings of what the New Testament writers were doing, but their influence hasn't yet spread very far.

Protestant and Catholic Differences

Pastors in churches large and small will preach on the subject, and they will direct some of that preaching against the Catholic Church. As they see it, the Church denies the true Christian doctrine of justification, that we are justified *sola fide*, by faith alone, the doctrine on which, as Martin Luther famously declared, the Church stands or falls.

"Justification" is not a live term in Catholic life, however. Outside the circles of professional theologians and apologetes dedicated to apologetics, Catholics almost never talk about it. Search the web for "theology justification" and you'll find the first dozens of pages dominated by Protestant sites. If you find a Catholic site, the writer will almost always be someone answering the Protestant teaching.

And with the qualification that most Catholics should know more formal theology than we do, that's a good thing. Think of it this way. The Protestant concern directs them (Protestants) to a single moment and a decisive act of God, while Catholics aren't so concerned with a single moment in our past because we're immersed in our ongoing life in Christ in his Church. It's an instructive difference.

I will try to tread delicately here, because the Catholic Church has worked hard for reconciliation with her Protestant brethren and their ecclesial communities. But as one who worked for fifteen years in an Evangelical seminary and has many friends and colleagues in that world, I must say that the disagreements haven't shrunk much. The matter of justification is one place the disagreements become obvious.

What is the difference? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines justification this way, quoting St. Paul's letter to the Romans: "The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ' and through Baptism." Note the words "cleanse" and "communicate."

Compare the Catholic teaching with Martin Luther's: "The doctrine of justification is this, that we are *pronounced* righteous" (emphasis added here and following). And with John Calvin's: It is "the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor *as if we were* righteous." St. Paul, Calvin writes, declares "that man blessed whose sins are covered. . . . [H]e is righteous, *not intrinsically* but by imputation." Many similar statements from their descendants today could easily be found.

The Catholic would argue, as the ex-Calvinist A. David Anders does, that the Protestant doctrine doesn't account for all the biblical evidence. The change God makes in us is the reason he "accepts us as his children (Romans 2:13, Romans 2:25-29, Romans 8:3-4, Romans 8:13). Protestants . . . ignore or minimize all the Scripture that teaches Christians can lose the grace of God through willful disobedience (Romans 8:12-13, Galatians 5:18:21, Hebrews 6:4-6, Matthew 18: 15-20)." Protestants might respond that it does too account for the biblical evidence – but only because they don't realize how much their theology affects their biblical reading, but that's another subject.

Does It Matter?

The difference matters a lot, the Protestant theologians argue. That's the reason, presumably, they bring it up so often. Michael Horton, a leader of conservative Calvinists (and another good guy), has explained it pastorally: "Without the imputation of righteousness the Gospel isn't Good News because we could never know if we are standing before God in a justified, therefore a saved, state. We'll have to wait for some ultimate but by no means guaranteed salvation. The Gospel just isn't Good News if believers are made to face thousands of years in purgatory before they come at last to heaven."

He was responding to the 1998 statement *The Gift of Salvation*, the second statement issued by the gathering of major American Protestant and Catholic thinkers called Evangelicals and Catholics Together. The group, of which I have been a member, agrees on a great deal, but it doesn't even take up this question of what it calls "imputed and [or versus] transformative righteousness." They included the issue among the "necessarily interrelated questions that require further and urgent exploration."

In other words, they punted, and you don't need to know much about the issue to know why. It's the theological equivalent of the argument between the English and the Irish over the status of Northern Ireland. It's safer to celebrate the shared cultural heritage of writers like Wilde, Yeats, and Joyce. But it's still a problem that won't go away.

The Mechanism of Mercy

The difference matters a lot to our Protestant friends and comrades, but why should it matter to Catholics? As I say, we hardly ever talk about it. It matters because, if taken seriously, *sola fide* destroys the entire elaborate mechanism of mercy the Church offers. At most it leaves us with a few tools, the way you might find a working toaster or dryer in a home flattened by a tornado. But it knocks down our home.

Chesterton wrote at the beginning of his classic book *Orthodoxy*, "The ancient masters of religion . . . began with the fact of sin – a fact as practical as potatoes." (By the way, this passage includes his famous remark that original sin "is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.") He continued:

Whether or no man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing. . . . The strongest saints and the strongest sceptics alike took positive evil as the starting-point of their argument. If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can only draw one of two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do.

Man wants washing, both in the sense of *needs* and in the sense of *desires*. He doesn't want, in either sense, washing imputed to him. He wants to be truly clean. Benedict XVI spoke about this in a recent interview. He first noted the peculiar modern attitude:

For the man of today, compared to those of the time of Luther and to those holding the classical perspective of the Christian faith, things are in a certain sense inverted, or rather, it is no longer man who believes he needs justification before God, but rather he is of the opinion that God is obliged to justify himself because of all the horrible things in the world and in the face of the misery of being human, all of which ultimately depend on Him.

Yet, Benedict continues, that is not the last word. Man doesn't just stand before God demanding an explanation. He stands there feeling dirty. He wants washing. "It is mercy that moves us toward God, while justice frightens us before Him," Benedict says. "In my view, this makes clear that, under a veneer of self-assuredness and self-righteousness, the man of today hides a deep knowledge of his wounds and his unworthiness before God. He is waiting for mercy."

However one might settle the theological difference between the Protestant and the Catholic understandings of justification, the latter drops us, indeed throws us, into that extraordinary mechanism of mercy we call the Catholic life. That by itself is an answer to the Protestant charge.

I don't know if many Catholics feel the lack of assurance to be the very great problem Horton believes it be. I suspect not many. In any case, suppose he is right, and anxious Catholics worry that they must "wait for some ultimate but by no means guaranteed salvation." What would be the effect upon most, but to make them look harder at the grace upon grace upon grace they've been given as ways to find that ultimate but not means guaranteed salvation?

Catholics have the Mass and confession and all the other sacraments; we have Jesus waiting for us in the Tabernacle when we want to talk; we have the friendship of the Mother of God herself; we have her rosary; we have the company and care of the saints; we have a whole long history of heroes and examples to encourage us; we have spiritual writers and guides for every personality and situation; we have a thick and comprehensive *Catechism* and millions of pages of serious, thoughtful teaching, much of it actually understandably written; we have all the sacramentals, like holy cards and miraculous medals; we have methods of prayer like the novena and thousands of prayers to pray; we have the statues and the icons; we have other Catholics; we have hundreds of apostolates to fund and join; we have a calendar to live by and ways to order our lives. And we have, as a gift and not the punishment Horton thinks it is, purgatory.

The Protestant, I think, sees the poor Catholic with his open-ended doctrine of justification as a man told he must climb a high, steep, ice-covered mountain or die in the valley, even if he might easily die trying to climb the mountain. In fact, the Catholic is the man who says, "But I could just take the stairs over there and ride the gondola and then walk a bit."

Or, to go back to Chesterton, the Protestant offers the filthy, stinking man a long, white bathrobe, the Catholic offers him a hot shower.

About the Author

David Mills is editorial director of Ethika Politika and a senior editor of The Stream. He has been the editor of Touchstone and executive editor of First Things. His latest book is [Discovering Mary](#).

FOR FURTHER READING

James Akin, "Justification in Catholic Teaching," available at: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/JUSTIF.HTM>

A. David Anders, "Protestants Becoming Catholic: Justification by Faith Alone," available at: <http://calvin2catholic.com/?p=362>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1987-2029, available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm

"Full Text of Benedict XVI's Recent, Rare, and Lengthy Interview," Catholic News Agency (March 17, 2016), available at: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/>

"The Gift of Salvation," First Things (January 1998), available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1998/01/001-the-gift-of-salvation>

Peter Kreeft, "Justification by Faith," available at: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy>

IN SHORT . . .

- *In the Protestant view, the Church denies the true Christian doctrine of justification, that we are justified sola fide, by faith alone.*
- *The Protestant concern emphasizes a single moment and a decisive act of God, while Catholics are immersed in our ongoing life in Christ in his Church.*
- *Quoting the Catechism: "The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ' and through Baptism."*
- *The doctrine of justification sola fide destroys the entire elaborate mechanism of mercy the Church offers.*
- *"Under a veneer of self-assuredness and self-righteousness, the man of today hides a deep knowledge of his wounds and his unworthiness before God." (Benedict XVI)*
- *"It is mercy that moves us toward God, while justice frightens us before Him." (Benedict XVI).*