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JUSTIFICATION

In spite of the common core of Augustinian belief in salvation by grace (see chap. 5), Roman Catholics and Protestants have had strong disagreement 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,¹ only Protestants believe in the exclusivity of faith. The heart cry of the Reformation was “justification by faith alone” (*sola fide*).² 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 (see chap. 10).³

1 See Bouyer, *Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, p. 52, where he notes that, for Catholics, faith is necessary for salvation but not totally sufficient; works prompted by grace are also necessary for salvation.

2 Indeed, justification provides the foundation for the Christian life: “Luther’s ETHICS is determined in its entirety, in its starting point and all its main features, by the heart and center of his theology, namely, by the justification of the sinner through the grace that is shown in Jesus Christ and received through faith alone” (Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972], p. 3).

3 Lutheran scholar George Linkbeck may have allowed his ecumenical zeal to obscure his theological judgment when he suggests that, since both Catholics and Protestants accept *sola gratia*, there is no reason they can’t also accept *sola fide*. This might be true were it not for the fact that Catholicism has pronounced infallibly that works are a necessary condition of final salvation. Another Lutheran scholar allows that “There is a sense in which the other two ‘alones’—grace alone and Christ alone— could be accepted by the old scholastics, as Melanchthon acknowledged. The *sola fide*, Melanchthon said, was ‘the chief issue on which we clash with our opponents and which we believe Christians must understand’ ” (Robert W. Bertram; quoted in Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990], pp. 16–17).

The Roman Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent, declaring: “By his good works the justified man really acquires a claim to supernatural reward from God.”⁴ Are we justified by faith alone or are good works a necessary condition for salvation? These questions are at the heart of the differences between Roman Catholics and evangelicals. In order to understand the issue we must first examine what the Reformers taught and how the Council of Trent responded.

ROMAN CATHOLIC TEACHING ON JUSTIFICATION

The Catholic position on justification was made infallible dogma at the Council of Trent in reaction to Martin Luther’s proclamation that the just shall live by faith alone! Needless to say, Luther’s view hit like a lightning bolt in an institution known for its stress on good works as necessary for salvation.⁵ His initial reaction was to the Roman Catholic sale of indulgences. An overzealous salesman named Tetzel is said to have promised the potential purchasers of indulgence, “When in the box the penny rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

LUTHER’S POSITION ON JUSTIFICATION

Before Luther, the standard Augustinian position on justification stressed intrinsic justification (see chap. 5). Intrinsic justification argues that the believer is *made* righteous by God’s grace, as compared to extrinsic justification, by which a sinner is forensically *declared* righteous (at best, a subterranean strain in pre-Reformation Christendom). With Luther the situation changed dramatically, although “Luther does not employ forensic terms to explain this imputation or alien righteousness. This development will come later, from others.”⁶ Melancthon, Luther’s great systematic theologian, did use forensic terms to describe justification. Luther, however, did hold that believers are given the alien righteousness of Christ by which alone they are able to stand before God, and not in their own righteousness. Such an imputed righteousness is extrinsic to the believer.

When Martin Luther was reassigned from Erfurt to Wittenberg he came under the influence of Johann von Staupitz (to whom this volume is dedicated). Staupitz, in addition to being the director of the cloister at Wittenberg, had a mystical bent and was a sympathetic spiritual guide. About Staupitz, Luther said, “If it had not been for Dr.

4 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 264.

5 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.

6 Peter Toon, *Foundations for Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1983), p. 58.

Staupitz . . . I should have sunk in hell.”⁷ During the course of counseling and receiving Luther’s confessions Staupitz recognized his subject’s deep spiritual difficulties and inability to experience God’s forgiveness. To expose Luther to the scriptural antidote for his problems Staupitz assigned Luther to the chair of Bible at the local university—a position that Staupitz himself had once occupied. Luther lectured on Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians from the fall of A.D. 1515 to 1517. The result of his study led Luther to a new view of God: the All Terrible is also the All Merciful.

Luther discovered that in the Greek used by the apostle Paul, the word “justice” has a double meaning: the first is a strict enforcement of the law; the second is “a process of the sort which sometimes takes place if the judge suspends the sentence . . . and thereby instills such resolve that the man is reclaimed.”⁸ This latter meaning of justice is necessary because “The sinner cannot ever attain any righteousness of his own: he merits or deserves only condemnation.” But God has “freely opted to receive us to Himself . . . to a fellowship that we from our side had broken and could never mend.”⁹

When studying the meaning of Romans 1:16–17 Luther came to a revolutionary discovery.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in great love. This passage became to me the gate to heaven.¹⁰

Amid the Protestant stress on Luther’s discovery it is sometimes forgotten that Luther also believed in a progressive sense of the word “justification.” For example, he said: “For we understand that a man who is justified is not already righteous but moving toward righteousness (WA 391, 83; LW 34, 152).” Further, “Our justification is not yet complete. . . . It is still under construction. It shall, however, be completed in the resurrection of the dead (WA 391, 252).”¹¹ This sense of progressive justification is what many Protestants call “sanctification,” the process by which we are *made* righteous, not an act by which one is *declared* righteous. Toon adds, “Justification by faith is both an event and a process. What later Protestants were to divide, Luther kept together. He is quite clear that there is a moment when a sinner is actually justified by faith. He then has the righteousness of another, the alien righteousness of Christ, imputed to him.”

7 Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 40. This is a valuable short work on the life and ministry of Martin Luther.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

9 James Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 133.

10 Cited by Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 65.

11 Cited by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 237 n. 63.

However, “this is the beginning of a journey toward a time (following the resurrection of the dead in the age to come) when he will in fact possess a perfect righteousness created in him by the Spirit of God.”¹²

Luther also suggested that the believer is righteous in the eyes of God and yet sinful at the same time. “For Luther, faith is the right (or righteous) relationship to God. Sin and righteousness thus coexist; we remain sinners inwardly, but we are righteous extrinsically in the sight of God.”¹³ However, “Luther is not necessarily implying that this co-existence of sin and righteousness is a permanent condition.” Instead, for Luther, “the existence of sin does not negate our status as Christians.”¹⁴

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S RESPONSE TO LUTHER

The Council of Trent was the Catholic response to Lutheranism. No proper understanding of the Catholic view of justification is possible apart from an understanding of the decrees of the Council of Trent. The council considered six questions concerning justification. (1) Is justification only judicial in nature (extrinsic) or is there also an intrinsic (sanctifying) work involved? (2) What is the relationship between faith and good works? (3) Does the will have an active role in justification? (4) How are justification and sacraments such as the Eucharist, baptism, and penance related? (5) Can believers know with certainty they are justified? (6) Can people incline themselves toward justification, and if so, is this inclination to be understood as meritorious?¹⁵

Study on these questions began in June 1546. In January 1547 the council participants agreed on a final formula for justification. The process had been long and arduous and all of the theological schools weighed in with opinions on a great variety of complicated scholastic theological distinctions. We will examine the conclusions to the six questions mentioned above.

First, although several council members recognized an extrinsic element in justification (thereby approaching the Reformers on this point),¹⁶ the consensus view was that “the opinion that a sinner may be justified *solely* as a matter of reputation or

12 Toon, *Foundations for Faith*, pp. 58–59.

13 Joanna McGrath and Alister McGrath, *The Dilemma of Self-Esteem: The Cross and Christian Confidence* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), p. 98.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 99. This is a helpful volume dealing with the tensions between the gospel and modern psychological theories of self-esteem.

15 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:69.

16 See Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York: Nelson, 1964), p. 218. It would be proper to say that Trent allows for but does not teach forensic justification as one element in the overall process of justification.

imputation . . . is rejected.”¹⁷ Therefore, “Justification is thus defined in terms of a man becoming, and not *merely* being reputed as, righteous.”¹⁸

Second, in that Trent understands justification in two senses (the second corresponding to the Reformed doctrine of sanctification), this second justification requires good works as a condition for ultimate justification. “It is thus both possible and necessary to keep the law of God.”¹⁹

Third, taking into account original sin, Trent states that sin has affected the human race. Therefore, “man is incapable of redeeming himself. Free will is not destroyed, but is weakened and debilitated by the Fall,”²⁰ something which Luther rejected in his *Bondage of the Will*. According to Trent, “If anyone shall say that man’s free will moved and aroused by God does not cooperate by assenting to God who looses and calls . . . let him be anathema.”²¹ (It is important to note that “anathema” is a decree of excommunication, not automatic damnation.) So as one Catholic author puts it, “the sinner indeed cooperates with this grace, at least in the sense of not sinfully rejecting it.”²² Of course, most Protestants agree with this. Many Protestants, however, Calvinists in particular, quickly add (as would Catholic Thomists) that it is God by his grace who brings about this cooperation. But he does this without destroying our free choice.

Fourth, in order to understand the pronouncements on the sacraments, one must remember that Trent understood justification in two ways: the first and second phases which Catholic scholars refer to as “initial” and “progressive” justification respectively. Baptism is operative in the first or initial justification, since grace to overcome original sin is “mediated” to us through baptism.²³ Both the Eucharist and penance pertain to the second or progressive sense of justification, and such justification (i.e., righteousness) is said to be “increased” by participation in these sacraments. There is, of course, a third or “ultimate” stage of justification by which—providing one had not committed a mortal sin—one is allowed into heaven.

17 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:72, emphasis added. The words “solely” and “merely” in these quotes indicate that Trent did not reject forensic justification as such.

18 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

21 Denzinger, 814, p. 258. For a good treatment of the Council of Trent from a Roman Catholic view, see H. Jedin, *History of the Council of Trent*, trans. F. C. Eckhoff (St. Louis and London, 1947). The standard Protestant work is Martin Chemnitz (1522–86), *Examination of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971).

22 H. George Anderson, *Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), p. 34.

23 A detailed treatment of the sacrament of baptism is beyond the scope of this chapter. There are differences concerning it, not only between Roman Catholics and evangelicals, but within the Protestant community as well. It should be noted that Luther had difficulty formulating his understanding of baptism in light of his concept of justification. On Luther and baptism, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 353–74, and Appendix 5.

Fifth, due to the stress that the Reformers placed on the concept of assurance of salvation, Trent was forced to deal with the subject. McGrath claims that they issued “an explicit condemnation of the Lutheran doctrine of assurance as an assertion contrary to proper Christian humility.”²⁴ However, the explicit condemnation deals with “infallible certainty,” which many Catholic scholars point out is not necessary, if indeed it is possible. In fact, “In many ways Roman [Catholic] dogmatics have pointed out that Rome’s rejection of personal assurance of salvation does not mean the proclamation of a religion of uninterrupted anxiety.”²⁵ For the Roman Catholic there is “an intermediate position between the assurance of faith and doubt. This position is that of moral certainty which excludes any anxiety and despair.”²⁶ Thus, Christians can be said to have “relative,” not absolute (i.e., infallible), certainty of salvation.²⁷

Sixth, Trent states that our initial justification must be seen as a “gift.” Thus, it comes as a surprise to many Protestants that Roman Catholics believe that “*If anyone shall say that man can be justified before God by his own works which are done . . . without divine grace through Christ Jesus: let him be anathema.*”²⁸ Further, “*nothing that precedes justification, whether faith or works, merits the grace of justification. For if it is by grace, it is no more by works; otherwise, as the apostle says, grace is no more grace.*”²⁹ The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says clearly: “The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness” (2009).³⁰

It is only fair to point out here that when Catholic scholars cite James 2:24 (“we are justified by works”) they do not mean this initial justification which comes only by grace. Rather, they are referring to progressive justification (growth in righteousness) which Protestants call sanctification. Trent does assert, however, that works are necessary for salvation in the progressive and eventual senses, making it dogma that “by his good works the justified man really acquires a claim to supernatural reward from God.”³¹ It is precisely here that Catholics and evangelicals disagree.

24 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:78.

25 Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Conflict with Rome* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), p. 114.

26 Bernhard Bartmann, *Lehrbuch der Dogmatik*, II, p. 109; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 115.

27 One Dominican theologian suggests that Luther and Trent are not as far apart as is often thought, contending that “a very different picture from that offered by the controversial theology of the past would emerge if the real content of the teachings of both confessions were once given expression” (Stephanus Pfürtner, *Luther and Aquinas—A Conversation: Our Salvation, Its Certainty and Peril*, trans. Edward Quinn [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964], p. 11).

28 Trent, as cited in Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 811.

29 Trent, as cited in *ibid.*, no. 801.

30 (*Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 1994), p. 487.

31 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 264.

CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR MERITORIOUS JUSTIFICATION

Since the defense of forensic justification goes hand-in-hand with the rejection of the Catholic teaching on merit, the doctrine of good works will be discussed first. The arguments will be divided into theological, biblical, and traditional ones.

THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE DOCTRINE OF MERIT

Catholic dogma states: “By his good works the justified man really acquires a claim to supernatural reward from God.”³² Of course, this demand is not intrinsic; it is only because God has placed himself in this situation because of his promise to reward good works. Further, eternal life is given to us on the grounds of our good works.³³ Thus the Council of Trent declared that “those who work well ‘unto the end’ [Matt. 10:22], and who trust in God, life eternal is to be proposed, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, ‘and as a recompense’ which is . . . to be faithfully given to their good works and merit.”³⁴ It adds, “If anyone shall say that the good works of the man justified are in such a way the gift of God that they are not also the good merits of him who is justified, or that the one justified by the good works . . . does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of eternal life (if he should die in grace), and also an increase of glory; let him be anathema.”³⁵

ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

Ott argues that “According to Holy Writ, eternal blessedness in heaven is the reward for good works performed on this earth, and rewards and merit are correlative concepts.”³⁶ He offers the following Scripture in support: “ ‘Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is very great in heaven’ (Mt. 5 , 12) . . . ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat’ (Mt. 25 , 34 et seg.)” He adds, “St. Paul, who stresses grace so much, also emphasized on the other hand, the meritorious nature of good works performed with grace, by teaching that the reward is in proportion to the works: ‘He [God] will render to every man according to his own labour’ (Rom. 2 , 6) .”³⁷ Other similar passages are cited (1 Cor. 3:8 ; Col. 3:24 ; Heb. 10:35 ; 11:6). He concludes, “he thereby shows that

32 Ibid.

33 While Protestants sometimes speak of the “reward” of eternal life in the sense of something graciously given by God, they do not believe this reward is based on our works but only on God’s grace received through our faith alone.

34 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 809, p. 257.

35 Ibid., no. 842, p. 261.

36 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 264.

37 Ibid., p. 265.

the good works of the just establish a legal claim (*meritum de condigno*) to reward on God. Cf. Hebr. 6, 10.”³⁸

ARGUMENTS FROM TRADITION

Catholic theology claims: “From the times of the Apostolic Fathers, Tradition attests the meritoriousness of good works.” For example, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to Polycarp, “Where there is great effort there is rich gain” (I, 3). Justin and Tertullian are also cited in defense of merit. Tertullian asserted that “the man who performs good works can be said to make God his debtor.”³⁹ Even though God is not indebted in any intrinsic sense, nonetheless, works are said to be the basis for getting this merit.⁴⁰ Ott claims that “natural reason cannot prove the reality of supernatural merit since this rests on the free Divine promise of reward.” However, “the general conscience of men bears witness to the appropriateness of a supernatural reward for supernaturally good deeds freely performed.”⁴¹

AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR SALVATION BY MERIT

We have already noted that the Council of Trent declared that no works prior to justification are meritorious.⁴² Nonetheless, several significant differences between the official Roman Catholic and orthodox Protestant views on salvation remain. Before stating the basis for the Protestant position, a response to the Catholic arguments in favor of merit is in order.

A CRITIQUE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION

With all due recognition to the common Augustinian core of salvation by grace (see chap. 5), there are some important differences between the Roman Catholic and evangelical views of justification. Unfortunately the noble but unsuccessful recent statement by “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” lacked precision in this very area, speaking of a common belief that “we are justified by grace through faith.”⁴³ What it failed to note,

38 Ibid.

39 Tertullian, *De paenitentia* 2; 1.323.44–46.

40 Of course, in Catholic theology these works grow out of faith, but it is the works that are the basis for the merit and which are necessary for obtaining eternal life.

41 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 265.

42 Council of Trent, “Decree on Justification,” chap. 8.

43 “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” final draft (29 March 1994). This statement was signed by noted Catholics

however, is what the Reformation was fought over, namely, that Scripture teaches, as Protestants affirm, that *we are saved by grace alone through faith alone*. As we will see, there is a common belief in salvation by grace, but Roman Catholics hold that justification takes place at baptism of infants, which is long before they can believe in any conscious sense. Further, as the Catholic doctrine of merit reveals, they do not believe that salvation is by grace alone (*sola gratia*), since meritorious works are also necessary, at least for those that live beyond infancy. Further, for evangelicals, salvation is not simply “through faith” but “by faith alone” (*sola fide*). Since this was at the very heart of the Reformation, many evangelicals refuse to sign the statement since they believe it would betray the Reformation. Indeed, their protest led to a follow-up statement which strikes a more distinctively Protestant note: “We understand the statement that ‘we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ,’ in terms of the substitutionary atonement and imputed righteousness of Christ, leading to full assurance of eternal salvation; we seek to testify in all circumstances and contexts to this, the historic Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*).”

Many criticisms of the Catholic view of justification revolve around the concept of merit that was made into infallible dogma of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent. The Catholic doctrine of meritorious works has been a target of Protestants since the Reformation. For Luther and his followers, it is “misleading to speak of any rewards as ‘merited.’”⁴⁴ Indeed, the Reformers believed that at Trent the Roman Catholic Church apostatized and denied the true gospel. “For I thoroughly believe, more firmly than I believe in God, that they are acquainted with more human doctrine, and also with more villainy, because they are proving it before my very eyes by the things they are doing, and so they are apostles, evangelists, and prophets just as little as they are the church; that is to say, they are the devil’s apostles, evangelists, and prophets. The true apostles, evangelists, and prophets preach God’s word, not against God’s word.”⁴⁵

It confuses reward and merit. While Catholics wish to remind us that the whole doctrine of merit should be viewed in the context of grace,⁴⁶ they overlook the fact that Scripture teaches that grace and meritorious works are mutually exclusive. Part of the reason for the difficulty is that the Catholic use of the word “reward” has an equivocal sense that leads to a confusion between a reward based on grace and one based on merit (i.e., on works), albeit prompted by grace. Often the problem seems to stem from a

like James Hitchcock, William Bentley Ball, Peter Kreeft, Cardinal John O’Connor, and Richard Neuhaus. Evangelicals signing it included Chuck Colson, Os Guinness, J. I. Packer, Bill Bright, and Richard Land. Conspicuous by their absence were the names of top evangelical theologians who are experts on Roman Catholicism, such as Harold O. J. Brown, Carl Henry, David Wells, and R. C. Sproul. Many of these have expressed criticism of the statement (see Appendix F).

44 Anderson, *Justification by Faith*, p. 54 (citing the *Apology for the Augsburg Confession*, 4:194).

45 George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church* (London: John Murray Publishing, 1914), p. 347.

46 See Avery Dulles in Anderson, *Justification by Faith*, p. 274.

fallacious inference that simply because something is prompted by grace it is not obtained by merit. Just because the previous graciousness of a friend may prompt one to do a job for him that one would not otherwise have accepted does not mean that the wages earned from it were not at least partly merited, even if they were higher wages than one deserved. Thus, neither merit in the strict sense of what is justly earned nor merit which is based in part on what is earned but goes beyond that by God's goodness is compatible with grace.

Catholic theology rightly points out that the Bible sometimes speaks of eternal life as a reward (e.g., Gal. 6:8) that one can "inherit" (Luke 18:18).⁴⁷ In this sense, however, works are not a condition of salvation;⁴⁸ salvation is a gift of grace received by faith alone apart from meritorious works. None of us works for an inheritance; it is something graciously *given* to us by a benefactor. If, however, we are "rewarded" for our work by salvation or eternal life, then it is not truly and solely God's grace, despite Catholic protests to the contrary. When one is rewarded for works, the reward is not a matter of grace, since the payment is *owed* (at least in part) for work done. As Paul said emphatically, "But if by grace, it is no longer because of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (Rom. 11:6). It is in this latter sense that the New Testament clearly speaks against obtaining salvation (whether justification or sanctification) as a reward (i.e., wage)⁴⁹ for work done. For the Scriptures insist that "a worker's wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due" (Rom. 4:4). If the Catholic concept of merit (that progressive justification [= sanctification] is obtained by good works) is true, then the grace of sanctification would be bestowed, at least in part, on the basis of good works. But what is worked for is not of grace, and what is given by grace is not obtained by works (Rom. 4:4; Eph. 2:8–9). So the Catholic concept of merit as a necessary condition for obtaining eternal life or ultimate justification is contrary to this clear affirmation of Holy Writ.

It makes works a condition of eternal life. The Council of Trent declared clearly that "those who work well 'unto the end' [Matt. 10:22], and who trust in God, life eternal is to be faithfully given to their good works and merit."⁵⁰ Even the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which tends to state doctrine in a way less objectionable to Protestants declares that "*the merit of good works is to be attributed* in the first place to the grace of

47 The New Testament also speaks of eternal life in the sense of the kind or degree of reward one will inherit, based on the kind of faith that produces works which one performs. Gal. 6:6–10 seems to fit in this category, since it speaks of believers reaping "eternal life" by what they sow in their life.

48 While works are not a condition of faith they are a concomitant and fruit of true faith (James 2:24).

49 This is true whether the wage is an equal payment or an overpayment for work done. Salvation is a complete gift from God for which no work can be done to merit it (Rom. 4:4–5). Otherwise, Christ's sacrifice was not the complete payment for our sin and we have some ground for boasting, both of which are rejected by Scripture (cf. John 19:30; Eph. 2:8–9; Heb. 10:11–18).

50 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 809, p. 257.

God, then *to the faithful*” (2008, emphasis added, p. 486). Hence, it is grace *plus* good works. By contrast the Bible declares clearly and emphatically that “the wages of sin is death, but *the gift of God is eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23 , emphasis added). Further, in direct opposition to the Catholic position, the Bible guarantees that eternal life is a present possession of those who believe. Jesus said: “I say to you, whoever hears my words and believes in the one who sent me has [present tense] eternal life and will not come into condemnation, but is [currently] passed from death to life” (John 5:24). But according to the Roman Catholic view, one must await a final justification at death to know whether one has eternal life and will not see God’s condemnation. This same truth that eternal life is a present possession of the believer is repeated over and over in Scripture. John records Jesus proclaiming, “Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life” (John 3:36), and later adds, “I write these things to you so that you may *know* that you *have* eternal life” (1 John 5:13 , emphasis added). Catholic dogma excludes Catholics from claiming that they can know with assurance that, if they were to die, they would have eternal life.⁵¹

In the Gospel of John only one condition is laid down for obtaining eternal life: belief (e.g., John 3:16 , 36 ; 5:24 ; 20:31). If salvation were not by faith alone then John’s whole message would be misleading, since it states that there is only one condition for salvation when actually there are two: faith plus works. Indeed, John states explicitly that the only “work” necessary for salvation is to believe. When asked, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” Jesus replied, “This is the work of God, that you *believe* in the one he sent” (John 6:29 , emphasis added). There simply is nothing else we may do in exchange for our salvation. Jesus did it all (John 19:30 ; Heb. 10:14).

It makes works of sanctification a condition of ultimate salvation. The Council of Trent affirmed: “When he [Paul] characterizes the eternal reward as ‘the crown of justice which the Lord, the just judge, will render’ (2 Tim. 4 , 8), he thereby shows that the good works of the just establish a legal claim to reward on God.”⁵² Of course, this “legal” claim is not intrinsic but only because God has promised it. Nonetheless, it is a promise to give us salvation based in part on our works. “If anyone shall say that the good works of the man justified are in such a way the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him who is justified, or that the one justified by the good works, which are done by him through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ (whose living member he is), does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life (if he should die in grace), and also an increase of glory: let him be anathema.”⁵³ But one cannot work for a gift (Rom. 4:4–5). We work *from* our salvation but never *for* it (Gal. 3:11 ; Eph. 2:8–10). We are not saved *by* our works but in order to *do* good works.

51 But Protestantism teaches that we can know with assurance right now that we have eternal life. This is true of Calvinists (and even Armenians, who believe they could later commit a serious sin and lose the gift of eternal life). But this is not true for a Catholic that cannot know with confidence that he possesses eternal life right now.

52 Cited in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 265.

53 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 842, p. 809.

Even granting that, for infants, works are not a condition for receiving initial righteousness (= justification), nonetheless, Catholic theology makes works a condition for progressive righteousness (= sanctification). In other words, one cannot receive a right standing before God by which one has the divine promise of salvation (eternal life) without engaging in works of righteousness. But this is precisely what Scripture says is not the case: It is “not because of any righteous deeds that we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us” (Titus 3:5).⁵⁴ “It is not from works, so no one may boast,” wrote Paul (Eph. 2:9). To repeat the apostle, “if by grace, it is no longer because of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6). A right standing before God comes by grace through faith alone! Grace means unmerited favor, and reward based on works is merited. Hence, grace and works are no more compatible than is an unmerited merit! Trent overreacted to Luther, and in so doing, obfuscated the purity and clarity of the gospel of God’s grace.

The Catholic response that not all Protestants agree that one has the promise of heaven on the basis of initial justification⁵⁵ alone (Arminians believe people can lose their salvation) misses the mark. For the question is not how we *keep* salvation after we get it, but how we *get it* to begin with. It is a fact that some Protestants (evangelicals) do believe like Catholics that one can *lose* his or her salvation (a belief the authors do not share), but this in no way justifies the Catholic belief that eternal life cannot be *obtained* without meritorious works. But as we have seen, the Bible makes it clear that eternal life, not just initial (and some say forfeitable) justification, is a *present* gift that believers possess (Luke 23:42–43 ; John 3:16 ; 5:24 ; Rom. 6:23). So the fact that some Protestants believe people can lose their salvation (eternal life) in no way justifies making works a condition for *obtaining* this salvation. The fact is that, even once the confusing terminology is cleared up and we understand that by eventual justification Catholics mean what Protestants call justification and sanctification, the official Catholic position is unbiblical. For it insists that works are necessary for salvation; that is, *they are a condition for obtaining a right standing before God that entails the promise of heaven.*⁵⁶ This is precisely what the Reformation rejected.

54 This cannot apply only to initial justification as Catholics claim, since the present tense (“renewing”) is used in this text.

55 That is, by initial (forensic) justification and its concomitant benefits, such as sonship, the forgiveness of sins, imputed (alien) righteousness, etc.

56 Catholic insistence that a right standing can be obtained without works is insufficient because, for Catholics, this standing does not entail the gift of eternal life. The Catholic argument that this gift is merited by works (though not deservedly earned) also is wanting. For even if one is given, say, a million dollars in exchange for a loaf of bread, the person obviously did not earn it but did do *some* work and, hence, it was not by grace alone. Likewise, if someone spends a *lifetime of works* (however long) as a condition for receiving eternal life, then it was clearly not by grace alone. Furthermore, the argument by some Catholic apologists that one need not work for eternal life but simply avoid mortal sin misses the mark for two important reasons. First, the question is not how one *loses* salvation but how he *obtains* it to begin with. Second, and most importantly,

It confuses working for and working from salvation. Put in traditional terms, Catholicism fails to recognize the important difference between working *for* salvation and working *from* salvation. We do not work in order to get salvation; rather, we work because we have already gotten it. God works salvation *in* us by justification, and by God's grace we work it *out* in sanctification (Phil. 2:12–13). But neither justification nor sanctification can be merited by works; they are given by grace. Gifts cannot be worked for, only wages can. As Paul declared, “when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

In spite of the fact that the Catholic understanding of salvation does not logically eliminate forensic justification, it nevertheless obscures it. For when one fails to make a clear distinction between forensic *justification* and practical *sanctification*,⁵⁷ then the good works Catholics believe are needed for sanctification tend to obscure the fact that works are not needed for justification. Perhaps this is why hundreds of thousands of Catholics are coming to know Christ personally outside of the Catholic church. Indeed, this may be why Catholicism has not produced any of the great evangelists (such as Wesley, Whitfield, Sunday, Moody, and Graham) and has no widely circulated equivalent to “The Four Spiritual Laws” or other simple plan of salvation.

It makes a false distinction between “works” and “works of the law.” The New Testament verses against salvation by works are clearly opposed to the Catholic teaching that salvation can be merited. In order to counter this Roman Catholic scholars have made an artificial distinction between “works of the law” (which they admit are not a condition for salvation) and works (which they insist are a condition of salvation). But contrary to the Catholic claim, Paul's statements against “works” cannot be limited to only “works of the [Mosaic] law” (such as circumcision) but extend equally to all kinds of meritorious good works, for all such works will in one way or another be works in accordance with God's law. They would not be *good* works if they were not in accordance with God's standard of goodness, namely, his law. Since God is the standard of all righteousness, it follows that all true works of righteousness will be according to his law and nature. It is only *our* righteousness (= self-righteousness) that is abhorrent in God's eyes (cf. Isa. 64:6 ; Rom. 10:3). It makes no difference whether these works are prompted by grace; they are still meritorious works as a condition for eternal life. They

regardless of whether one only loses salvation by a mortal sin (and not by lack of works) or not, if he lives after initial justification he still has to work as a condition for receiving eternal life. If this is so, then salvation is not totally by grace.

57 Of course there can be forensic or positional aspects of sanctification as well (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2 ; Heb. 10:10). We speak here of forensic justification in the sense of the legal aspect of the initial act of salvation, namely, God's graciously saving us from the *penalty* of sin. Sanctification, at least in the practical sense, is salvation from the *power* of sin in our lives (“glorification” is being saved from the very *presence* of sin when we enter heaven). There are also non-forensic (or actual) aspects of the initial state of salvation, such as our being made a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) and becoming “sons of God” (John 1:12) at the initial moment of salvation.

are not based on grace and *grace alone*. That is, part of the basis for obtaining eternal life is meritorious works.

Further, when condemning works for salvation Paul does not limit himself to “works of the law” but sometimes simply refers to “works” or “works of righteousness” (cf. Eph. 2:8–9 ; Titus 3:5–7). Contrary to the Catholic view, the Ephesians passage is clearly aimed at Gentiles with no suggestion of works of the Jewish law such as circumcision.⁵⁸ Nor does the Jew-Gentile conflict diminish the fact that he is speaking to Gentiles about “works” other than those unique to the Jewish law. And the argument offered by some Catholics that the boasting mentioned in Ephesians 2:9 is an indication that it is Jewish boasting (since they boasted about works of the law) is implausible for many reasons. First, unbelieving Jews are not the only ones who boast in their good works; pride is a condition of all fallen creatures, not just Jewish ones. Furthermore, in this context Paul explicitly addresses the issue of Gentiles who were “alienated from the community of Israel” (Eph. 2:11–12), not Jews. Likewise, Titus 3:5–7 does not refer to “works of the law” but simply “works of righteousness.”⁵⁹ The fact that the tense being applied to salvation refers to the past does not help the Catholic explanation that this refers only to what Protestants call justification, not to sanctification. Paul is speaking to people who have already been saved and therefore his words would naturally be in the past tense.⁶⁰

Also, the Catholic claim that “works” are sometimes an abbreviation of “works of the law” (e.g., Rom. 3:27–28) fails for several reasons. Even if “works of the law” were sometimes summarized as “works,” it would not mean the reverse is necessarily true. All works of the law are works, but not all works are works of the law.

Further, when Paul is speaking to Gentiles (who, as Rom. 2:14 says, “do not have the [Mosaic] law”), he does not speak of them performing works of the Mosaic law as such but simply to “works” (e.g., Eph. 2:8–9). They too are said not to be justified by works (Rom. 3:21–24). To be sure, in the New Testament “works” often arise in the context of circumcision (cf. Rom. 4 ; Gal. 3). But this is only because that was the specific situation that occasioned Paul’s condemnation of any kind of works deemed necessary for salvation (cf. Acts 15). To limit all of his condemnations of “works” to only works of the Mosaic law is like limiting God’s condemnation of homosexuality in the Old Testament

58 This is evident from the fact that Paul’s audience is (predominantly) Gentiles (Eph. 2:11) who were “alienated from the community of Israel” (2:12).

59 Some Catholics argue that this refers to works of Jewish almsgiving, since the concepts parallel Jewish literature. This is implausible since it is contrary to the context of the Titus passage, almsgiving not being in view. Further, even if Jewish almsgiving was a work of righteousness, not all works of righteousness were acts of Jewish almsgiving.

60 Further, this stretched interpretation is contrary to the Catholic claim that the “washing of regeneration” in this passage is baptism. Since they practice infant baptism, this would have to refer to initial justification, not to progressive justification (= righteousness), which evangelicals call sanctification.

(cf. Lev. 18:22 ; 20:13)⁶¹ to Jews since these passages occur only in the Jewish law which was written to Jews! And to grant that a moral law (e.g., natural law) exists outside the law of Moses is to grant the Protestant point that “works” here are not just limited to works of the Mosaic law. The truth is that the condemnations are more broadly applicable than the immediate context in which they arose. The same is true of Paul’s condemnation of meritorious “works” as a means of salvation. To limit Paul’s condemnation to works of self-righteousness as opposed to meritorious works is reading into the text a distinction that is not there. What is more, if our works contributed anything to our obtaining salvation, then we would have grounds to boast and would still come under Paul’s condemnation.

Finally, the basic moral character of God expressed in the Ten Commandments is the same as that expressed through the natural law to all people. The fact that someone is not consciously or deliberately doing works according to the law of Moses does not mean that the basic moral standard is not the same. In one sense all moral “works” are “works of the law,” in that they are in accord with the moral principles expressed in the law. This is why the apostle Paul said that “when the Gentiles who do not have the law [of Moses], by nature observe the prescriptions of the law . . . they show that the demands of the law written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:14–15). In the final analysis, when it comes to the *moral*⁶² demands of the law, there is no substantial difference between “works of righteousness” and the “works of the law.” Thus, the Catholic argument that Paul meant the latter but not the former is a formal distinction without a real difference. The simple truth is that no works of any kind merit salvation. Eternal life is a gift received only by faith (John 3:16 , 36 ; 5:24 ; Rom. 6:23).

It is similar to the error of Galatianism. By insisting that works are not a condition for obtaining initial justification (righteousness) but only for sanctification (progressive righteousness) Catholics do not avoid the charge of soteriological error. Claiming that sanctification is by works, even if justification is not, seems akin to the error that Paul addressed in the Book of Galatians. The Galatian Christians were already justified, or declared righteous, in the forensic sense (or, to use Catholic terminology, they had already received “initial justification”). They were “brethren” (Gal. 1:11 ; 6:1). They were “in Christ” (Gal. 2:4). Otherwise, they would not have been in danger of “falling from grace” (Gal. 5:4) as a way of living the Christian life. They had initial (forensic) justification but were in danger of losing their sanctification (progressive justification).

Paul’s warning to them clearly related to their sanctification. His fear was not that they would *lose* their initial (forensic) justification but that they would fall back into

61 In fact, God said that the pagans, who do not have the Mosaic law, would be condemned for homosexual practices as well (cf. Lev. 18:24–26).

62 This, of course, is not true of what are often called ceremonial or civil aspects of the Mosaic law; they were unique to Israel. And it is only true of the *duty* to obey God’s moral precepts, not the *punishment* for not obeying them which was often more severe in the Old Testament (e.g., capital punishment for fornication, adultery, homosexuality, rape, and even an incorrigible child).

bondage to the law (Gal. 2:4). Even if Paul did mean that they would lose their justification (as Arminians say) it merely intensifies the problem with the Catholic view, for then the failure to do good works results in the loss of both sanctification and justification. In this indirect sense, failure to do good works is a means of forfeiting one's (initial) justification too! Paul was afraid they would fall from grace as a means of *continuing* in the Christian life, not as a means of *obtaining* it to begin with, since they already had it (Gal. 3:3). To state it another way, if their initial righteousness was given by grace through faith, why should they think they could progress in righteousness in any other way than by grace through faith? In short, he did not want them to replace grace with works as the means of sanctification. This is evident from his pivotal plea: "Having *begun* in the Spirit, are you *now* being made perfect in the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3 NKJV , emphasis added).

Clearly, the message of Galatians is: You are not only justified by faith alone, but you are also being sanctified by faith alone. For "without faith it is impossible to please him [God]" (Heb. 11:6). Melancthon articulated this Reformation principle when he argued that "the importance of faith not be restricted to the beginning of justification."⁶³ Neither initial righteousness (justification) nor progressive righteousness (sanctification) is conditioned on meritorious works. Rather, both are received by grace through faith apart from any works of righteousness. Failure to understand that sanctification *and* justification are by grace through faith alone is the error of Galatianism. It seems to be the same error made by the Council of Trent.

It should be noted that Paul's reference to "false brothers" (*pseudadelphos*) is not to the believers in Galatia who had adopted their erroneous teaching about needing to keep the law of Moses as a means of sanctification. Paul was referring to false teachers (Judaizers) who were "secretly brought in" from the outside (Gal. 2:4). Since the Galatians had already been justified by faith alone, the danger of the Judaizers' teaching was that the true believers at Galatia would adopt this view as a means of progressive sanctification. This would have been a serious error, since it would have obscured the necessity of the pure grace of God as the condition for their progressive sanctification, just as it was the condition for their initial justification.⁶⁴

It confuses salvation and service. All the texts cited by Catholics about reward for works are not really speaking about rewards for *salvation* (whether it be justification or sanctification); they are talking about rewards for *service*. Justification is by faith alone and not by works (Rom. 4:5). It is true that all who are saved by God's grace through faith will be rewarded for their works in Christ (1 Cor. 3:10–14 ; 2 Cor. 5:10). These works, however, have nothing to do with *whether* we will be in heaven, but only with *what status* we will have there. As Jesus said, some of the saved will reign over ten cities

63 Melancthon, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 4.71; quoted in Anderson, p. 226.

64 We call the error of "Galatianism" (namely, works are necessary for sanctification) a "serious error." If it is a heresy, then many Protestants are heretical at this point too, since, at least in practice if not in theory, they too teach works are a condition for progressive sanctification.

and others over five (Luke 19:17–19), but all believers will be in his kingdom. The reward-for-works verses all speak of *rewards* for those who will be in the kingdom, not whether one will *be* in the kingdom. By contrast, in Roman Catholic theology one's progressive sanctification does affect whether one will make it to heaven. What a person receives at the moment of initial justification, apart from progressive sanctification, does not suffice to get one into heaven (unless, of course, the person dies immediately after regeneration). In this sense, for Catholics works are necessary for salvation, even if they are works subsequent to initial justification. Actually, works are only necessary for the degree of reward we receive in heaven; they are not a condition for getting into heaven.

Works-for-reward come under sanctification, not justification. They are what we do *as a result of* being saved, not what we do *in order to be* saved (i.e., to receive the gift of eternal life). In other words, merit makes sense if understood in the context of those who already are justified before God and simply are *working out* their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), not *working for* it. Even here the works are not a condition for being sanctified but a manifestation of it. Thus Catholics are left with a de facto denial of the grace that they officially claim is necessary for both justification and sanctification.

It adds works into its concept of faith. Roman Catholic biblical scholars admit “the absence of any reference to sacraments and good works in Paul's thesis in [Romans 1] 16f .” To this they respond by redefining faith to include works, saying, “Omission causes no difficulty if faith be understood in the sense of dogmatic faith, which accepts all the doctrines of the Gospel as true and obeys all its precepts as divine commandments. For in this faith sacraments and good works are included.”⁶⁵ This is a classic example of eisegesis, that is, reading into the text what is not there, indeed, in this case, the exact opposite of what is there. For Paul goes on to say that “when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5), and “a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Yet when commenting on this verse *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* says emphatically that “Another conclusion from [Romans 1 :] 28 that had to be rejected by the Council of Trent is that *before* justification only faith is necessary as a preparation and no other good works.” Faith, the commentary insists, is only the “immediate” preparation for justification; a “remote” preparation is also necessary, including “a resolution to receive the Sacrament of baptism and *to keep the commandments.*”⁶⁶ In other words, faith is only a necessary initial condition but not a sufficient condition for receiving the gift of salvation. However, the evident meaning of the Romans text (1–4) is that nothing in addition to faith is necessary for salvation (cf. Rom. 1:17 ; 4:4–5).

In spite of the commendable insistence on the necessity of grace for salvation and the need for explicit faith in adults as a precondition for justification, it is still true that Catholicism teaches that even justification (in adults) is preconditioned on faith plus the resolution to do good works. Hence, the promise to do good works is a condition of initial

65 See “Romans,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. by Dom Bernard Orchard et al. (Nashville: Nelson, 1953), p. 1049.

66 Ibid., p. 1055.

justification. Thereby sanctification is frontloaded into justification. That is, the promise to live a godly life is a condition for receiving the gift of eternal life. But if this is so then it is not of grace but works. And for Roman Catholics, salvation in the ultimate sense, not just initial justification, always requires faith plus works to obtain eternal life.

AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO THE ARGUMENT FROM TRADITION

As to Catholic arguments from tradition they too confuse reward of *salvation* and reward for *service*. In an attempt to stress the need for good works, as over against antinomians and others, some church fathers, like Tertullian, stated the importance of works so strongly that it left the impression that works were a condition for salvation rather than an inevitable consequence of it. This obscures the clear plan of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

Protestants have responded in a much more biblical and balanced way. They insist that while we are *saved by faith alone*, nevertheless, *the faith that saves us is not alone*. Faith inevitably produces good works; that is, we are saved *by faith and for works*. Works are not a *condition* of justification but a *consequence* of it. As James put it, we show our faith by our works (2:18). Further, as Paul taught in Galatians, good works are not a condition of sanctification. We are saved by grace and we are sanctified by grace (Titus 2:11–13). Also, we are justified by faith alone as well as sanctified by faith alone. Of course, as already noted, works flow from true faith. Thus, someone who is truly saved will manifest good works. If no good works are present there is no reason to believe that genuine faith is there. James said “faith without works is dead.” Such faith cannot save. “Can [mere intellectual] faith save him?” Only the kind of faith that produces good works can save. So, we are not saved (i.e., do not get eternal life) by works, but we are saved by the kind of faith that produces good works. Demons have mere intellectual faith (mere mental assent) and are not saved (James 2:19). And since works always flow from living faith (real heart commitment), it is appropriate that the Bible should declare that we will be rewarded according to our faith-produced works (1 Cor. 3:11–14 ; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Protestant theology clearly distinguishes between forensic justification⁶⁷ (by which alone one is promised a place in heaven) and sanctification (which determines how high a place one will have in heaven). Catholic theology does not agree. Further, Protestants affirm that justification is a forensic act by which God *declares* a person righteous legally, while practical sanctification is a process by which one is *made* righteous

67 By “forensic justification” we do not mean to exclude the other positional things bestowed on us at the same moment, namely, sonship, forgiveness of sins, imputation of alien righteousness, etc. Our status is not merely legal (as in forensic justification) but also ontological (real), for we become the actual children of God at the initial moment of salvation (John 1:12 ; 1 John 3:1), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), and our sins are actually washed away (Acts 13:38 ; Eph. 1:7).

morally.⁶⁸ The initial acts of salvation received the moment one believes, which for Protestants include forensic justification, are not only a necessary requirement for heaven (as Catholics also believe);⁶⁹ they are a sufficient condition (which Catholics do not believe). While practical sanctification flows inevitably from positional justification, sanctification (at least in any complete sense) is not necessary to get into heaven. This is evident from those who die the moment after they are justified, like the thief on the cross.⁷⁰ Jesus said the thief would be in paradise that very day, even though he had no time to perform good deeds. This is also true of believers who do not live a very sanctified life (such as Lot).⁷¹ Sanctification is the actual process by which one is *made* righteous after being *declared* righteous (by justification). The failure of Trent to make this distinction obscures the doctrine of justification. For if we must live a life of sanctification as a condition for our ultimate justification (i.e., to get to heaven), then works have nullified grace. Works have become a de facto condition for heaven. But we cannot work *for* our salvation (Rom. 4:5 ; Eph. 2:8–9); we can only work *from* it (Eph. 2:10). The failure to see this obfuscates the very grace which even Catholics admit is necessary for sanctification.

Works are not necessary for re-justification. Catholic teaching on re-justification makes it clear that works are a condition for receiving salvation—at least the second time. (Catholicism, like Arminianism, teaches that we can lose our salvation or initial justification.) When this happens we have to be re-justified. Since the Roman Catholic Church believes that one should not be rebaptized, they have to offer another way to come back into the fold. This is the function of penance. The Council of Trent declared that the sacrament of penance “is necessary (normatively) for the salvation of those who have fallen after baptism, as baptism itself is for those as yet not regenerated (can. 6).”⁷² And even though Trent declared that justification “in adults is to be understood as the result of antecedent grace . . . without any previous merit on their part,”⁷³ nevertheless, there is a real sense in which works are a condition for this initial re-justification, since the work of penance is necessary as a condition for obtaining it. For doing penance is explicitly listed as a precondition for adults who wish to be saved.⁷⁴ The Council of Trent cited both Jesus and Peter to prove their point: “The Lord also said: ‘Except you do penance, you shall all likewise perish’ (Luke 13:3). And the prince of the apostles,

68 Of course, at the moment of forensic justification one is also made righteous in an ontological sense (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17 , 21). But practical sanctification refers to a moral process by which one becomes more like Christ in an ethical or behavioral sense (cf. Heb. 5:14 ; 6:1).

69 According to Catholic theology initial justification is not sufficient for salvation, at least not for those who live after they are regenerated.

70 See Luke 23:43 .

71 Lot is an example, since the Bible calls him “righteous” and yet teaches that his righteous soul was marred by his constant commerce with the wicked Sodomites (2 Pet. 2:7).

72 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 895, p. 273.

73 Council of Trent, chap. 5; cited in Bouyer, p. 51.

74 Of course, the work of penance is to spring from a penitent heart.

Peter, recommending penance to sinners about to receive baptism said: ‘Do penance and be baptized every one of you’ (Acts 2:38).”⁷⁵

Stressing the need for good works decreases motivation to do them. The Catholic insistence on good works to attain progressive and final justification does not provide the proper motive toward sanctification, namely, God’s love and grace working in our lives (cf. Rom. 5:5). Recognizing this grace by God, which declares one righteous apart from any meritorious works on his part, a believer is more highly motivated to do good works. For the love of Christ “impels us” (2 Cor. 5:14), and “we love because [we realize that] he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).⁷⁶ As Paul said, the grace of God not only brings us salvation (Titus 2:11) but it *trains* us “to reject godless ways” (2:12). By contrast, keeping laws in order to obtain grace only brings one into further bondage (cf. Rom. 8:2–3 ; Gal. 4:3–7 ; Col. 2:22).

The areas of agreement and disagreement may be summarized as follows:

Justification (Righteousness)

	<i>Initial Act</i>	<i>Progressive</i>	<i>Final Act</i>
<i>Legal (Extrinsic)</i>	R.C. allow	R.C. allow	R.C. affirm
<i>Actual (Intrinsic)</i>	Prot. affirm	Prot. deny	Prot. deny
	Both affirm *	Both affirm	Both affirm
<i>Grace Needed</i>	Both affirm	Both affirm	Both affirm
<i>Works Needed</i> **	Both deny	R.C. affirm	R.C. affirm
		Prot. deny	Prot. deny

⁷⁵ Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 894, p. 272. Peter is not speaking here of the sacrament of penance but of the fact of penance. Nonetheless, Catholics believe that, for adults, works are a necessary precondition of salvation. Of course, so is faith, but it is faith plus works that are the condition of salvation. Only infants are not required to have works as a precondition of salvation because they receive baptism (justification) before they can do any works.

⁷⁶ A Catholic response might be that the Protestant stress on grace produces libertarians. The abuse of grace, however, does not prevent the proper use of grace. Paul’s response is still appropriate: “God forbid! How shall we who have died to sin live any longer in it?” (Rom. 6:2 KJV). The fear of Protestant libertarianism does not justify Catholic legalism. (Of course, neither is the fear of legalism an excuse for antinomianism.)

* Though Protestants insist this is not the basis of justification.

** Works are needed normatively but not absolutely.

OTHER PROBLEMS WITH SALVATION BY MERITORIOUS WORKS

There are many difficulties with the Roman Catholic position that salvation is merited. Three important ones will be discussed here.

The Catholic Arguments for Salvation by Sacraments. While Roman Catholic theology claims that there is no salvation apart from God's grace, their view of the sacraments tends to take away in practice what they have affirmed in principle. The Catholic view of a sacrament, unchanged by Vatican II, is that it is given "not merely as a sign but as a cause of grace."⁷⁷ Catholic dogma states: "If anyone shall say that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer that grace on those who do not place any obstacle in the way, as though they were only outward signs of grace or justice, received through faith . . . let him be anathema."⁷⁸ Furthermore, it is anathema to believe that "grace is not conferred from the work which has been worked" but has come from "faith alone."⁷⁹ This being the case, salvation is by sacraments. God's normative way of saving sinners is, according to Catholic dogma, through the Catholic sacramental system (see chap. 13).

Sacraments are effective objectively, whether or not their efficacy is experienced subjectively. "Sacraments confer grace immediately, without the mediation of fiducial faith."⁸⁰ In order to designate the objective efficacy of a sacrament, Catholic theology coined the phrase *ex opere operato* (by the work that is worked); that is, "the Sacraments operate by the power of the completed sacramental rite." The Council of Trent adopted this phrase, which the Reformers vigorously opposed, for sacraments were said to "move God to bestow the grace by their objective value. As soon as the sacramental sign is validly accomplished God bestows the grace."⁸¹ This being the case, salvation is dependent on performing the works of the sacramental system. It is not really by grace alone through faith alone.

The Roman Catholic Church is an institution of salvation. The sacraments are mediated through the Roman Catholic Church, which bestows the grace of God on its recipient in seven stages from birth (baptism) to death (extreme unction). Roman Catholicism recognizes the validity of two Protestant sacraments practiced outside its

⁷⁷ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 325.

⁷⁸ Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 849, p. 262.

⁷⁹ Ibid., no. 851, p. 263.

⁸⁰ However, "it is true that in the adult recipient, faith is an indispensable pre-condition or a disposing cause, but it is not an efficient cause of grace" (Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 329). But in babies no actual (conscious) faith is necessary to receive the sacrament of baptism; the sacrament works its work automatically. Of course, if an adult profanes the sacrament it can bring condemnation (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30).

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 331.

jurisdiction, namely, baptism and marriage.⁸² It also believes grace can be dispensed through the Lord's Supper, though not in the way it is dispensed in the Catholic Eucharist.⁸³ More important, the sacraments, institutionalized as they are in the Roman Catholic Church, are necessary for salvation. The Council of Trent reminded Catholics that "If anyone shall say that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation, but are superfluous, and that, although all are not necessary individually, without them or without the desire of them through faith alone men obtain from God the grace of justification: let him be anathema."⁸⁴

The Catholic church also teaches that, "Except for Baptism and Matrimony, a special priestly or episcopal power, conferred by Holy Orders, is necessary for the valid ministrations of the Sacraments."⁸⁵ True, Catholic lay persons (e.g., nurses or doctors) and even Protestant ministers may administer baptism in the name of the Trinity. However, the Council of Trent soundly condemned the belief that "all Christians have the power to administer all the sacraments."⁸⁶ Only the Catholic church has the right to do this. Trent made it infallible dogma that the Catholic church is God's chosen organization to mete out all God's sacramental grace piece-by-piece from birth to death; the Roman Catholic Church is an institution of salvation. Protestants take strong exception to this view.

The sacrament of the Eucharist (see chap. 13) is a classic case in point. Not only is the Roman Catholic Church, through its priesthood, the only divinely instituted organization on earth to administer this sacrament, but they also have the divinely granted power to perform the ceremony by which the physical earthly elements of bread and wine are transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ! Perhaps one has to stand outside the Roman Catholic system to be properly impressed with the utter presumption that any institution on earth possesses such powers. Nowhere is the institutionalization of salvation more apparent than in this sacrament.

The Catholic view of the Eucharist as a sacrifice vitiates salvation by grace. Roman Catholics view the eucharistic feast as a "sacrifice" (although a bloodless one).⁸⁷ This idea of the Eucharist as a sacrifice is found in some early medieval Fathers.⁸⁸ Gregory

82 Roman Catholicism accepts the validity of all seven sacraments practiced by Eastern Orthodoxy since they have retained valid ordination.

83 Catholics believe that in the Protestant version of the Eucharistic Feast grace is only dispensed *ex opere operantis* [by the work of the worker], not *ex opere operato* [by the work that is worked]. That is, grace is given only due to the proper disposition of the receiver, not by the work of the sacrament itself.

84 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 847, p. 262.

85 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 341.

86 Ibid.

87 It should be noted that Eastern Orthodoxy agrees with Roman Catholicism on this point: "At the Eucharist, the sacrifice offered is Christ himself, and it is Christ himself, who in the Church performs the act of offering" (Ware, *Orthodox Church* , pp. 292–93).

88 See Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 405–7.

the Great (c. A.D. 540–604) was elected pope in 590 and is considered the father of the medieval papacy.⁸⁹ He held that at every mass Christ was sacrificed afresh, consequently, “this notion of the mass as sacrifice eventually became standard doctrine of the Western church—until it was rejected by Protestants in the sixteenth century.”⁹⁰

Protestants reject the concept of the mass as a sacrifice (see chap. 13). For example, Lutheran theology declares: “Since Christ died and atoned for sin once and for all, and since the believer is justified by faith on the basis of that one-time sacrifice, there is no need for repeated sacrifices.”⁹¹ Sacerdotalism or the need for priestly consecration is also rejected: “The presence of Christ’s body and blood is not a result of the priest’s actions. It is instead a consequence of the power of Jesus Christ.”⁹² Of course, it is to be understood that the priest does not do this by his own power but by the power of God invested in him. The Protestant point is not whether the priest is an efficient cause or just a secondary or instrumental cause of God working through him. What Protestants object to is the Catholic belief that such divine power is invested in the Roman Catholic priesthood to both consecrate the elements (transforming them into the actual body and blood of Christ) and properly administer them. Here again, Roman Catholicism has institutionalized salvation, and thus corrupted the pure grace of God by placing it in control of a human institution and its hierarchy.

THE PROTESTANT DEFENSE OF FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION

The heart cry of the Reformation was “justification by faith alone!” This formula was strongly opposed by the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, where they insisted on justification by faith *and* works. Interestingly, some modern Catholics have come to acknowledge that “Luther’s famous formula ‘faith alone’ . . . can have a good Catholic sense.”⁹³ However, it is not the same sense in which Protestants believe it, for, as we have seen, works are added to faith as a condition for ultimate justification. In order to appreciate the significant contribution of the Reformers it is necessary to examine the biblical background of the term *justification*. As we will see there are solid biblical grounds for arguing that the Protestant doctrine of forensic justification is correct. This doctrine is found in both the Old and New Testaments, and was expounded by the great Reformers and their followers.

89 Cross, *Oxford Dictionary*, pp. 594–95.

90 Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 247.

91 Martin Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, p. 140; quoted in *ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*

93 *A Catholic Catechism for Adults: The Church’s Confession of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 199.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION

Old Testament Use of Forensic Justification. The background for the doctrine of forensic justification (as with other New Testament doctrines) is found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament word *hitsdiq*, usually rendered “justify,” more often than not it is “used in a forensic or legal sense, as meaning, not ‘to make just or righteous,’ but ‘to declare judicially that one is in harmony with the law.’ ”⁹⁴ Another scholar notes, “He is righteous who is judged to be in the right (Ex. 23:7 ; Deut. 25:1); i.e., who in judgment through acquittal thus stands in a right relationship with God.”⁹⁵ Therefore, the majority of Reformed scholars would agree that “in the Old Testament, the concept of righteousness frequently appears in a forensic or juridical context. A righteous man is one who has been declared by a judge to be free from guilt.”⁹⁶ This thinking on the forensic nature of the Old Testament terms for justification and righteousness is not restricted to evangelicals. Hans Küng agrees that, “according to the original biblical usage of the term, ‘justification’ must be defined as a *declaring just by court order*.”⁹⁷

New Testament Use of Forensic Justification. In the New Testament, the verb translated “to justify” is *dikaioó*. Paul used this word in a forensic or legal sense: the sinner is declared to be righteous (cf. Rom. 3–4). It is the opposite of condemnation. As Hoekema notes, “The opposite of condemnation, however, is not ‘making righteous’ but ‘declaring righteous.’ ” Therefore, by *dikaion*, Paul means the “legal imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner.”⁹⁸

When a person is justified, God pronounces that one acquitted—in advance of the final judgment. “The resulting righteousness is not ethical perfection; it is ‘sinlessness’ in the sense that God no longer counts a man’s sin against him (II Cor. 5:19).”⁹⁹ Thus we find in the New Testament that “justification is the declarative act of God by which, *on the basis of the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death*, he pronounces believers to have fulfilled all of the requirements of the law which pertain to them.”¹⁰⁰

94 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 154.

95 George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 440.

96 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), p. 955.

97 Hans Küng, *Justification* (New York: Nelson, 1964), p. 209. For an extended treatment of the Old Testament understandings of these terms and the difficulties inherent in translating from the Hebrew into Greek and Latin, see Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 4–16.

98 Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*.

99 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 446. This is not to imply that Catholics believe that ethical perfection is received by justification; they do not. They distinguish complete ontological righteousness received at justification with perfect ethical (behavioral) righteousness which is not then received, although a measure of it is since the love of God is shed in our hearts (Rom. 5:5).

100 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 956.

A THEOLOGICAL EXPOSITION OF FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION

Next to Martin Luther, John Calvin is usually regarded as the most important figure in the Reformation. On the subject of forensic justification Calvin stated: “Man is not made righteous in justification, but is accepted as righteous, not on account of his own righteousness, but on account of the righteousness of Christ located outside of man.”¹⁰¹ The reason human beings need justification is that they are “totally depraved.” This Reformed doctrine has been misunderstood by some Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. The Reformed view is that although humans are lost, they are not nothing. On the one hand, “In constructing a Christian anthropology, we must not ignore the basic nobility of man.” On the other hand, “There is a glaring contrast between what man is truly and essentially and what he has become. Because man lives in opposition to his own God-given nature, his present nature signifies an existence in contradiction.”¹⁰²

Reformed theology teaches that total depravity involves several aspects. First, corruption is present at the center of our being. Second, depravity has extended to every aspect of humanity: physical, social, and spiritual. Third, it prevents us from being able to please God unless enabled by grace. Fourth, depravity extends to every corner and culture of the human race.¹⁰³ Total depravity does not mean that human beings are destitute of all natural goodness; the *imago Dei* has been “effaced” but not “erased.” This is often misunderstood by Catholics. For example, Karl Keating—who ordinarily is quite careful and precise in his criticisms—writes concerning Calvin’s understanding of the natural person and his or her works: “Your own acts are entirely worthless. Everything you do is worthless. Reason is unavailing since it can’t bring you closer to God. Worse, everything you do is a sin.”¹⁰⁴ However, Calvin (along with the other Reformers) was too careful an exegete not to be aware of Jesus’ statement: “If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in Heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 11:13).¹⁰⁵ Calvin acknowledged that people can do good socially and horizontally, but spiritually they are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1) and can initiate no meritorious action toward God on behalf of their sinful condition. They can receive eternal life by faith and faith alone.

Early Princeton Calvinistic theologian Charles Hodge indicates that sin has predisposed humanity against any move toward God and his salvation. Hence, “Every man should bow down before God under the humiliating consciousness that he is a

101 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:36.

102 Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 89.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

104 Karl Keating, *What Catholics Really Believe: Setting the Record Straight* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1992), p. 102.

105 Bloesch also comments on the Reformed doctrine of common grace: “It is not only the *imago Dei* but also the common grace of God that accounts for sinful man’s ability to arrive at a modicum of justice” (*Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 1:91).

member of an apostate race; the son of a rebellious parent; born estranged from God, and exposed to his displeasure.”¹⁰⁶ Likewise, for Calvin, the need for justification follows from the spiritual reality of total depravity, that is, our total inability to initiate or attain salvation. This justification is judicial, or forensic, in nature. Küng defines the term *justification* as “a declaring just. It really implies a declaring just, in the sense of a leaving out of the account, a not imputing.”¹⁰⁷ In the Old Testament, David put it this way: “Happy is he whose fault is taken away, whose sin is covered. Happy the man to whom the LORD imputes not guilt” (Ps. 32:1–2). In the New Testament, Paul said that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19). A contemporary Lutheran scholar has put it thusly: “Justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone is the absolute truth by which the church stands or falls. It is this truth that makes Christianity Christian and the church really the church, preserving it from idolatry, preventing its secularization, providing the charter of its career, and offering believers a solid basis and direction for their daily life.”¹⁰⁸

As we have shown, these valuable insights into the doctrine of justification had been largely lost throughout much of Christian history, and it was the Reformers who recovered this biblical truth. And although some contemporary Catholics are beginning to acknowledge the Protestant contribution of forensic justification, it was not spelled out by the Council of Trent. Indeed, while there may be no logical incompatibility of forensic justification with the Roman Catholic concept of initial justification, there are serious problems with the Catholic concept of progressive justification. In short, in spite of its insistence on the need for grace, it is a system of works based on merit that tends to negate in practice what has been affirmed in theory about (initial) justification by grace apart from works.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have shown that the characteristically Protestant concept of forensic justification is grounded in both the Old and New Testaments. However, during the patristic, and especially the later medieval periods, forensic justification was largely lost to an emphasis on the need for good works as a ground for justification in the progressive and final sense of the term, if not for initial justification. Still, the theological formulations of such figures as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas did not preclude a rediscovery of this “judicial” element in the Pauline doctrine of justification. Indeed, some scholars see at least implied forensic justification in these early Fathers.

The Reformers, however, recovered the biblical view of divine imputation of the alien righteousness of Christ to the believer and of forensic justification, that a person is legally

106 Ibid., p. 92.

107 Küng, *Justification*, p. 212.

108 Braaten, *Justification*, p. 82.

declared righteous by God on the basis of faith alone. In so doing, their principle of “salvation by grace alone through faith alone” gave a more biblical specificity to the common Augustinian view of “salvation by grace” held by Catholics and Protestants alike. However, the Catholic view of justification, made dogma by the Council of Trent, obscured the pure grace of God, if not at times negating it in practice. Indeed, it was condemned as heretical by the Reformers. Both sacramentalism and sacerdotalism vitiated and institutionalized grace so that it was incorporated into a system of works. Nonetheless, at least officially, though not in practice, Rome has always held the common Augustinian belief of salvation by grace. In this way they have avoided even more serious doctrinal error.