

Pope Benedict on Justification

Pope Benedict said that Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone is correct if 'faith is not opposed to charity.' The Pope said this during a general audience in a speech on St Paul's teaching on justification. (November 2008 [link](#))

I am glad that the Pope corrected the false idea popularized by some irresponsible apologists that 'sola fide' (faith alone) implies freedom from doing good and license to sin ('antinomianism'). The Reformers vehemently resisted and opposed the antinomian heresy. The Protestant concept of justification by faith alone never excluded good works in the life of the believer. On the character of genuine faith, Luther wrote: 'Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever.'

Moreover the Pope also said that faith means to trust in Christ. 'Faith is to look at Christ, to entrust oneself to Christ...'. In traditional Catholic theology, faith is defined as the assent of the intellect to divine truth. Protestants emphasized trust ('fiducia'), in addition to knowledge and assent, as the essential element of saving faith. It is not enough to know God's Word, or even to be convinced that it is factually true – to be saved, one must entrust himself to Christ, resting on him alone for salvation.

The Pope noted that the apostle Paul 'places at the center of his Gospel an irreducible opposition between two alternative paths to justice: one based on the works of the law, the other founded on the grace of faith in Christ.' In other words, one cannot be saved by faith in Christ if he also attempts to be saved by 'works of the law'. This is exactly what Protestants mean when we speak of 'sola fide' – we are justified by trusting in Christ and not on account of our works.

By Faith and Works

Does this mean that Catholics and Protestants are now in agreement on the doctrine of justification? Unfortunately this is not the case. The Pope's speech highlights the sad reality that the modern Catholic Church is still insisting on the Council of Trent's doctrine on justification by faith *and works*. The divide between the two religions remains as wide today as it was in the 16th century.

On one hand the Pope endorses Paul's teaching of justification by faith, apart from works of the law; on the other, he insists that we can really be just in the eyes of God on account of our love for God and neighbor. That is justification by love, or, justification by human works, for how can we express love apart from doing good works?

The Pope argues that faith unites us with Christ, enabling us to love God and others, and in so doing, we fulfill the law and become really righteous. He said that 'the double love of God and neighbor the whole law is fulfilled. Thus the whole law is observed in communion with Christ, in faith that creates charity.' He concluded his speech by saying that 'transformed by his love, by love of God and neighbor, we can really be just in the eyes of God.'

To be sure such works of love are not done by our natural abilities; we must have faith, we must be united with Christ to really love. But ultimately, it is on account of these personal works that we are justified by God, according to Catholicism.

Works of the Law

How does the Pope resolve the contradiction between Paul's teaching and Catholic doctrine? Didn't Paul clearly state that 'we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law'? (Romans 3:28).

In effect the Pope says that Paul was only referring to the Torah, the first five books of Moses. The Torah included rituals and cultural observances, in addition to ethical and moral principles, which distinguished and guarded Israel from the false religions of the pagans. But since the coming of Christ, those observances are no longer necessary. Thus when Paul says that we are not justified by the works of the Law, he was really saying that we are not justified by the Law of Moses, but he does not exclude that we are justified by the works of love. That's the Pope's argument in a nutshell.

The Pope rightly points out that in his epistles Paul discusses the division between Jews and Gentiles, and that now all believers are united in Christ irrespective of the ethnic background. But that was not his only concern. Paul also addresses the universal human tendency to self-righteousness, that is, our attempts to gain favour with God on account of personal works and merits.

We agree that when Paul spoke about the Law, he was thinking particularly of the Torah, the Law of Moses, and not of the law in general. But that does not mean that we can dismiss his argument as irrelevant since we are no longer required to obey Jewish ceremonies and rituals. The Torah did indeed include ceremonial and civil precepts, but it also included moral laws. Jesus summarized the Law of Moses as the supreme love for God and love for our neighbor, and said that ‘on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’ (Matthew 22:37-40).

What then, if the Mosaic Law - with its ceremonial, civil and moral laws – could not justify, how can we now become just in God’s eyes if we take away the ceremonial and focus on the law’s moral teaching, namely love? Can we obey the law perfectly?

The problem is not with the Law of Moses; Paul declares that ‘the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good’ (Romans 7:12). The problem is with us, sinners by nature, and even after regeneration, the remaining corruption prevents the most mature Christians from reaching moral perfection on this side of eternity. If the Jew could not be justified by the works of the perfect Law, no-one could be justified by the works of *any* law. After all did not the Gentiles, though ignorant of Moses, also have ‘the law written in their hearts’ (Romans 2:14)? Yet they too were unable to be justified by works.

The Law of Moses served the purpose of keeping God’s covenant people, Israel, distinct from pagan idolatry, as the Pope said. But the moral aspects of the law, whether written on tablets of stone or on the human conscience, also served to expose our depravity, guilt and helplessness. ‘Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin’ (Romans 3:20).

By Faith, Not Works

Moreover Paul could not have limited the concept of ‘works of the Law’ to the Torah. He presented the Patriarch Abraham as the primary witness to his doctrine. He wrote:

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness’ (Romans 4:1-5).

In this context ‘works’ could not refer exclusively to obedience of the Torah, *for Abraham lived many centuries before Moses*. It is therefore wrong to force Paul’s concept of ‘works of the Law’ exclusively to the Law of Moses. Clearly Paul applies the same principle to works in general. Abraham could not boast before God because he was justified faith and not by works. The same applies to us all.

Paul then gives an example from ordinary life – when a worker receives his payment at the end of the month, could it be considered as grace, a free gift, a favour? Certainly not! The worker has every right for the money he earned by his labour.

But justification is not based on the principle of merit. The very opposite is true. Justification is by grace, pure and undeserved grace. Only he is counted as righteous by the divine Judge who ‘does not work’ but ‘believes’ God. That is grace!

Faith Working Through Love

Once more it must be pointed out that the question is not about the propriety and necessity of good works in the life of believers. On this point, Paul, Luther and the Pope are in agreement. The question, though, has to do with the *purpose* of such works.

In Catholicism, the faithful are urged to do works in the hope that they will eventually become ‘really’ just in the eyes of God on account of their ‘love to God and neighbour’. In Paul’s teaching, we are not justified on account of any personal works, but by faith; good works follow after faith and justification. In Catholicism faith is insufficient; it must be supplemented by works to really justify. In biblical Christianity, faith is sufficient, faith truly justifies the believer on account of Christ’s blood and righteousness, and having justified the sinner, faith then works by love (Galatians 5:6) to the glory of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. In Catholicism justification is by faith and works – therefore it cannot be of grace (Romans 11:6); in biblical Christianity justification is by faith, that it might be of grace (Romans 4:16).

Here then is the dividing line between Luther and Trent, Protestantism and Catholicism, the true gospel and its counterfeit. May God give us the grace to believe in Jesus his Son, and being justified by faith alone, to give ourselves to love God and our neighbour from our hearts.