

A review of Sproul Book on Catholicism: Are We Together?

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Part 2: Justification

Quoting from Luther who asserted that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the article upon which the church stands or fall¹, Sproul stressed the importance of justification - the material cause of Reformation. On the issue of justification, i.e. how a sinner finds salvation in Christ, there are a number of irreconcilable differences between the Reformers and the Catholic Church.

1. The meaning of the (Greek) verb δικαιωω (to justify)

According to Sproul, the early Latin fathers who used Latin instead of Greek (in which New Testament books were written), developed the doctrine of justification based on their understanding of the legal system of Roman Empire and this explains why to them to justify means “to make righteous”. The English word “justification” comes from Latin “iustificare”, while in Greek it is “δικαιωσις” – it is related to righteous (Greek δικαιος) and righteousness (Greek δικαιοσυνη). The Reformers, on the other hand, based on original Greek meaning, understand the same verb to mean “to declare righteous”.

The Protestant Reformation, which followed the revival of the study of antiquities, focused attention on the Greek meaning of the concept of justification, which was the word dikaios, which means “to declare righteous” rather than “to make righteous”.

Sproul: *Are We Together*, page 30

While it is true that the Church in the west switched to Latin perhaps sometime in 3rd century AD, the Church in the East, which is now known as Eastern Orthodox Church, continued using Greek to this day. But they do not follow the same understanding of justification as taught by the Reformers². Certainly the use of Latin, instead of Greek, is not the source of difference understanding of Greek verb “to justify”.

2. According to the Reformers justification is by faith alone and occurs before sanctification. They separate sanctification from justification but these two must come together³. The Catholic Church, on the other hand teaches that justification is a process that starts from faith and includes sanctification⁴.

What Paul wrote in Romans supports Catholic teaching: “*And those whom he [God] predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified*” (Romans 8:30, RSV). In the above verse Paul did not even mention sanctification, but jumps directly to glorification, which is the state after dying. Scripture says that through sanctification we are saved (2 Thessalonians 2:13) and sanctification is the work of God (1 Thessalonians 5:23). If Romans 8:30 supports Reformers teaching then the last part should say “those whom he justified he also sanctified; and those whom he sanctified he also glorified”. Catholic teaching on justification, perfectly explains why sanctified does not appear in Romans 8:30, i.e. it is included in the word “justified”.

In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul wrote (RSV): *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.* Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul placed “justified” after, and not before, “sanctified”.

According to what Paul wrote in Romans Abraham was justified by faith but he was also justified by his obedience to God in James. On page 45 – 46, Sproul wrote that it would be nice if those books use different Greek word and different patriarch. Certainly it would be nice if James 2:21 says Abraham was

sanctified when he offered his son, but it does not. James 2:24 even plainly denies justification by faith alone. What Sproul proposed to reconcile Romans and James is typical among Protestants, i.e. James talks about manifestation of our faith-alone justified state in the form of works of obedience before men. But this does not explain why Romans and James use the same Greek word “to justify” - it is only an attempt to tie justification only with faith. Catholics, who understand justification as a process and includes sanctification, do not need to reconcile Romans and James.

On the relation between justification and works Sproul wrote:

A living faith shows its life by obedience. Such works of obedience contribute nothing to our justification, but if the works are not present, that absence is proof positive that justification has not occurred.

Sproul: *Are We Together*, page 46

Note that while Sproul stated that works of obedience do not contribute to justification their absence indicates justification never takes place. The question is how much works (amount and/or frequency) need to be present in order to manifest the existence of our faith-alone justification? It is very unlikely to have a situation where works are totally absent in a believer, which according to Sproul means the person was not justified in the first place. Even during Reformation Luther had to admit that good works are necessary for salvation, even though our justification is by faith alone⁵.

3. According to the Reformers through justification is the righteousness of Christ imputed on us while according to the Catholic Church the righteousness of God infused in us

The Reformers taught that through justification by faith alone we are declared righteous, whereby the righteousness Christ is *imputed* on us. This means we are both righteous and sinner at the same time – there is no change within us. *Thus a Christian man is righteous and a sinner at the same time⁶, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God*, wrote Luther⁷. This does not mean the justified persons continue remaining like that; it is their state at the time they were justified by their faith alone – God will change them through sanctification⁸.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, through Council of Trent, defines justification as *translation* from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Saviour⁹. Through justification the righteousness of God through Christ is *infused* by the Holy Spirit in us and this implies a change within us, from sinner to righteous, from enemy of God to child of God. That's why Catholics understand the Greek verb “to justify” to mean “to make righteous” and through justification we really become righteous. Scripture does say through Christ we are made righteous (Romans 5:19).

Why did the Reformers believe in imputation? Sproul gave the answer as follows:

The psalmist asked, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (Ps. 130:3). In other words, if we have to stand before God and face his perfect justice and perfect judgment of our performance, none of us would be able to pass review. We all would fall, because as Paul reiterates, all of us have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

Sproul: *Are We Together*, page 41

Thus according to Sproul we must have perfect performance in order to pass God's perfect justice and perfect judgment, which is certainly impossible. That is the reason why we have to rely on Christ' perfect righteousness, imputed on us to cover our unrighteousness.

The question is does the Bible teach that God demand from us to be perfectly righteous in order to pass His judgment? Before answering that question, how does the Bible define as being righteous? Ezekiel 18:5-9 provides us with definition of righteous persons, i.e. those who obey Commandments and they shall surely live (verse 9). 1 John 3:7 defines a righteous person as the one who does what is right, which is in agreement with Ezekiel. Does a righteous person must continue, without failing, not even once, in doing righteous acts? If we read Ezekiel 18:24, 26 it seems it is the case, because it says if a righteous person commits iniquity then he shall die and none of the righteous things he did will be accounted for. But Ezekiel 18:21-22, 27-28 says that if a wicked person turns away from his sins and commits righteous acts then he will live and none of his past sins will be accounted. Based on those verses, what ultimately counts is our state when we die, whether we are in righteous state (the Catholic Church refers it as in the state of grace) or not. Thus based on Scripture we don't have to be perfectly and continuously righteous through-out our life to enter heaven.

But Scripture says: *Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins* (Ecclesiastes 7:20, RSV). Yet Scripture refers Noah (Genesis 6:9, Ezekiel 14:14), Daniel, Job (Ezekiel 14:14), even Lot (2 Peter 2:7) as righteous persons. There are many verses indicating the existence of righteous persons, without naming them (Psalms 1:6, 5:12, 34:15, Matthew 5:45, 13:17, 10:41, 23:29, 1 Peter 3:12 etc.). Certainly they are sinners while being righteous. What Ecclesiastes 7:20 means is even righteous persons will commit sin – in other words being righteous is not being sinless. Protestants may argue that those righteous persons were only declared righteous through faith. But when Christ said in Matthew 25:46 that the righteous will go into eternal life, their righteousness is not based on being declared righteous by faith, but on doing righteous acts (verses 34 to 36), which agrees with Ezekiel 18:5-9 and 1 John 3:7.

Catholics believe that our ability to do righteous acts is only possible with grace of God. Thus what Sproul wrote on page 44 that infused righteousness means we will be judged by our own righteousness totally missed the point! Our righteousness comes from God – it is His grace that enables us to believe in Christ and to obey His Commandments, which make us righteous according to Scripture. Our justification comes from the grace of God¹⁰!

Based on Scripture (1 John 5:16-17), Catholics believe in the existence of deadly (or mortal) and non-deadly (or venial) sins. Luther still believed in mortal and venial sins, though he defined it differently, i.e. the former is applicable to unbelievers while the latter to the believers¹¹. Similarly Calvin taught that only the Reprobate, i.e. those whom God predestines to hell, commit deadly sins¹². Sproul was wrong when he wrote (on page 32) that there is no agreement in the Catholic Church on which sins are mortal. Mortal sin is defined as sin whose object is grave matter (breaking any of Ten Commandments) and done with full knowledge and full consent¹³. Christ Himself said in Luke 10:28: "*do this [the Commandments], and you will live*". What He said is in agreement with Ezekiel 18:5-9. Catholics believe that we will enter heaven if we die in the state of grace, i.e. without any un-repent mortal sin. That is why to Catholics both sacraments of Baptism and Penance are essential. Through the former Original Sin (which we inherit from Adam), all past sins as well as punishment of sins are forgiven and through the latter sins and their punishment committed after Baptism are forgiven. To Catholics Baptism is sacrament of regeneration that not only frees us from sin but also makes us reborn as sons of God. Through Baptism we enter the state of grace – thus our justification is conferred in Sacrament of Baptism¹⁴. Scripture says that through Baptism we have new life (Romans 6:4). Titus 3:5 talks about washing of regeneration, which the Catholic Church refers to Baptism – and so did Luther¹⁵ and Calvin¹⁶. This state of grace is lost when we commit mortal sin and it is restored back through sacrament of Penance *only if the person truly repents*. We cannot repent unless we are moved by Grace. Contrary to what Sproul wrote Luther still believed in Baptism of Regeneration¹⁷. In 1519 he wrote a trilogy on three Sacraments: Penance,

Baptism and Lord's Supper; and one year later he dropped Sacrament of Penance¹⁸. Calvin taught that through Baptism all sins, including future sins, are forgiven¹⁹.

According to Sproul confession of sins is not an issue; the issue is on the fact that repentant sinners must perform "works" (like pray, Scripture reading, acts of charity etc.) in order to return to the state of grace. To him this means we do additional works for the forgiveness of sins, which was already accomplished by Christ on the cross. Yet Scripture does not forbid expression of works as *outward* sign of repentance like fasting, weeping, wearing sackcloth (Jonah 3:8, Joel 2:12). Without genuine repentance all those "works" are meaningless.

End Notes:

¹ Actually Luther did not write that phrase – the phrase appears in the Introduction of *the Disputation Concerning Justification*.

Though Luther was not a theological systematizer in the manner of Melancthon or Calvin, he recognized that all aspects of evangelical theology were related to the one article of faith by which the church stands or falls. That is why he said in the preface to this disputation, "As you have often heard, most excellent brothers, because that one article concerning justification even by itself creates true theologians, therefore it is indispensable in the church and just as we must often recall it, so we must frequently work on it."

Introduction to *the Dispute Concerning Justification* (underlined emphasis added)
English translation from Luther's Works, Vol. 34, page 147

² I cannot find official teaching (something equivalent to Catechism of the Catholic Church) of the Eastern Orthodox Church on justification, but the following links may help:

<https://orthodoxwiki.org/Justification>

<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/how-are-we-saved>

³ *God justifies not only by pardoning but by regenerating, he asks, whether he leaves those whom he justifies as they were by nature, making no change upon their vices? The answer is very easy: as Christ cannot be divided into parts, so the two things, justification and sanctification, which we perceive to be united together in him, are inseparable.*

Calvin: *Institutes of Christian Religion* III.11.6

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church # 2019, available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P72.HTM.

⁵ *I reply to the argument, then, that our obedience is necessary for salvation. It is, therefore, a partial cause of our justification. Many things are necessary which are not a cause and do not justify, as for instance the earth is necessary, and yet it does not justify. If man the sinner wants to be saved, he must necessarily be present, just as he asserts that I must also be present. What Augustine says is true, "He who has created you without you will not save you without you." Works are necessary to salvation, but they do not cause salvation, because faith alone gives life. On account of the hypocrites we must say that good works are necessary to salvation. It is necessary to work. Nevertheless, it does not follow that works save on that account, unless we understand necessity very clearly as the necessity that there must be an inward and outward salvation or righteousness. Works save outwardly, that is, they show evidence that we are righteous and that there is faith in a man which saves inwardly, as Paul says, "Man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved" [Rom. 10:10]. Outward salvation shows faith to be present, just as fruit shows a tree to be good.*

Luther: *The Disputation Concerning Justification* (underlined emphasis added)
English translation from Luther's Works Vol. 34, page 135

⁶ The underlined phrase in Latin is *simul iustus et peccator*

⁷ Luther: *Lectures on Galatians*. English translation from Luther's Works, Vol. 26, page 232.

⁸ Refer to end note 3

⁹ Council of Trent: Chapter 4 of the Decree on Justification, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.v.i.i.iv.html>.

¹⁰ *Our Justification comes from the grace of God*

Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1996

¹¹ *Therefore it is a pernicious error when the sophists distinguish among sins on the basis of the substance of the deed rather than on the basis of the persons. A believer's sin is the same sin and sin just as great as that of the unbeliever. To the believer, however, it is forgiven and not imputed, while to the unbeliever it is retained and imputed. To the former it is venial; to the latter it*

is mortal. This is not because of a difference between the sins, as though the believer's sin were smaller and the unbeliever's larger, but because of a difference between the persons.

Luther: *Lectures on Galatians*
English translation from Luther's Works, Vol. 27, page 76

But from this text a gloss has flowed, namely, one sin is venial, another is mortal. I understand a mortal sin to be like the sin committed by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, about which one reads in Num. 16:15, where Moses prays against them, saying: "Lord do not respect their offerings. Thou knowest that I have never taken even an ass from them." Sins of this kind are those that are committed under the guise of godliness and do not mean to be sins, as they actually are. Sins of this kind are those of the heretics, who are hardened after one or another rebuke.

Luther: *Lectures on 1st epistle of John*
English translation from Luther's Works, Vol. 30, page 324

¹² Calvin Commentary on 1 John, available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom45.v.vi.v.html>.

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1857 and # 1858 available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6C.HTM

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1992 available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6Y.HTM.

¹⁵ Refer to end note 17

¹⁶ Calvin Commentary on Titus 3:5 is available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.v.v.ii.html>.

¹⁷ *In Titus 3:5 St. Paul terms Baptism "a washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit." In the last chapter of Mark we read that "he who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). And in this passage Christ declares that whoever is not born anew of the water and the Holy Spirit cannot come into the kingdom of God. Therefore God's words dare not be tampered with. Of course, we are well aware that Baptism is natural water. But after the Holy Spirit is added to it, we have more than mere water. It becomes a veritable bath of rejuvenation, a living bath which washes and purges man of sin and death, which cleanses him of all sin.*

Luther: *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapter 3*
English translation from Luther's Works Vol. 22, page 284

Baptism, then, signifies two things—death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification. When the minister immerses the child in the water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth again it signifies life. Thus Paul expounds it in Rom. 6[:4]: "We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." This death and resurrection we call the new creation, regeneration, and spiritual birth.

Luther: *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*
English translation from Luther's Works Vol. 36, page 68

¹⁸ Luther's Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I

¹⁹ Institutes of Christian Religion IV.15.3, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.xvi.html>