

PROTESTANT OR CATHOLIC?

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During the last few years a challenge has been offered to Seventh-day Adventists. Do we truly know if we are Protestant in our understanding of the gospel, or are we more Catholic than Protestant? This is not a minor challenge, for the Catholic way of salvation is definitely not Biblical, and if we are clinging to the Catholic gospel unwittingly, we are certain to have faulty and even dangerous perceptions of the gospel. We need to know if our gospel is Biblical or is a twisted, counterfeit version of the gospel.

The Challenge

In a Review column we were given a short quiz to test our understanding of how a person is saved. The questions were divided by odd and even numbers, which will be indicated in the sampling of statements below.

Odd: "Our right standing with God is based solely on what Christ has done for us. True or false?"

Even: "Our right standing with God is based on what Christ has done for us and in us. True or false?"

Odd: "We are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ alone. True or false?"

Even: "We are justified by God through the merits of Christ, and through the work of His Holy Spirit in our lives. True or false?"

Odd: "God gives us right standing with Him by accounting us righteous in His sight. True or false?"

Even: "God gives us right standing with Him by actually making us righteous in His sight. True or false?"

Odd: "After accepting Christ's righteousness, a believer experiences the new birth, which results in a transformed life and character. True or false?"

Even: "After having a new birth experience, in which a person's life and character is transformed, that person is then justified before God. True or false?"

After these test questions, the author drove the point of the column home.

"If you answered 'true' to all the odd-numbered questions and 'false' to all the even-numbered ones, then

you line up with what has classically been the Protestant point of view. On the other hand, if you had placed 'true' after any or all of the even- numbered ones then, to some degree at least, you are inclined toward the teaching that Roman Catholicism has embraced since the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century."

However, the most important issue is which of these statements reflects the Biblical teaching about how human beings are saved. The author continues, "All the odd-numbered statements reflected the biblical teaching that our right standing with God is based, not on anything that we can do--or even what God can do in us--but solely on what Christ had done in our stead through His life and death. In contrast, the even-numbered statements reflect the idea that our right standing with God is based not just on Christ's merits imputed or credited to us, but also on what God does in our lives. This latter position has been attractive to several Christian groups, Roman Catholics (and some Adventists) included....In a desire to accentuate the holiness of God and His high expectations of His people, many sincere believers are attracted to ideas not supported in Scripture." (Clifford Goldstein, Adventist Review, Sept. 23, 1999)

In a later Review article, the author expanded his understanding of the true gospel. "Since the Reformation, Lutherans along with almost all Protestants have insisted that justification by faith is an act by which God declares us righteous....The Reformers taught that justification was something that God does for us, not in us--a crucial distinction....We're justified only by what Christ did for us, apart from us, outside of us....Protestants understand 'the grace of justification' as purely a legal declaration; for Rome justification is a process of inner renewal, something that happens in us. (Clifford Goldstein, Adventist Review, June 22, 2000)

Another author comes to the same conclusions in an earlier Review article. "Put simply, papal Rome supplants justification by faith alone, which accounts or reckons the sinner as righteous for Christ's sake, with a justification that makes a sinner righteous through an inner, sanctifying or transforming grace. Through this transforming grace, the sinner is declared to be justified....Put still another way: Rome teaches that the sinner is justified because of what grace does in him or her." (Woodrow Whidden, Adventist Review, May 25, 2000)

Some Recent History

About twenty years ago, Desmond Ford mounted a major challenge to several Adventist beliefs, including justification by faith. In support of his position, an Anglican clergyman wrote a book detailing the ongoing struggle over righteousness by faith in the Adventist Church. His analysis of justification follows.

"Whereas Rome taught that justification means to make the believer just by the work of inner renewal in his heart, the Reformers taught that justification is the declaration by God that the believer is just on the grounds of the righteousness of Christ alone, which is outside the believer." (Geoffrey Paxton, The Shaking of Adventism, Zenith Publishers, Wilmington, DE, 1977, p. 39)

He charged that to focus on "the indwelling Christ is to abandon the Reformation doctrine of justification." (Ibid., p. 42) "The grace of God always refers to God and never to what is in the believer's heart." (Ibid., p. 40)

It seems that the same challenge was being made in the late 70's by a Reformed scholar. The very same issues were being raised then, and we were asked to decide between the Protestant gospel and the Catholic gospel. The challenge is simple and basic. If we believe in an inward work of grace as necessary to and preceding salvation, we are said to be Catholic. If we believe that salvation is Christ declaring us righteous as a legal statement, we are said to be Protestant.

Justification in the Bible

The first place we need to go is to Scripture, and then to the Spirit of Prophecy. It is only from inspired sources that we are safe in drawing any conclusions about so important a subject as salvation.

A classic statement by Paul is in Romans 5:1. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The context of Romans 3-5 is clearly justification, which always produces peace in the heart because we are right with God. Romans 4:7, 8 describes what happens in justification. "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." So justification is forgiveness of sins, covering sins, not crediting sin to the believer.

Ellen White expands on the meaning of this forgiveness. "God's forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation....It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart.

David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.' Ps. 51:10" (Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing, p. 114) Notice very carefully that forgiveness is a judicial act--a legal declaration--but it is not restricted to that. Forgiveness is the transformation of the heart--an inward work. It is the creation of a new heart and spirit within us.

In a similar statement we read, "To be pardoned in the way that Christ pardons is not only to be forgiven, but to be renewed in the spirit of our mind. The Lord says, 'A new heart will I give unto thee.'" (Review and Herald, Aug. 19, 1890) Pardon from sin is not followed by renewal--it is renewal. Pardon is a new heart. There is no difference between pardon, forgiveness, renewal, and transformation. They are all describing the same act of God, which we know best as justification.

In Titus 3:5-7 we have a very clear description of justification. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." How does Jesus save us? By regeneration and renewing of the heart by the Holy Spirit. Notice that the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in this saving experience. This process of renewal leads to justification. (It has been suggested that justification in verse 7 actually precedes the renewal of verse 5. However in verse 5 the renewal is the method by which God "saved us." Would we really want to suggest that justification occurs before we are saved? This would destroy the crucial place of justification in the salvation process.) Clearly these verses teach that renewal and regeneration are the methods by which God saves or justifies us. Justification is much more than a legal declaration or accounting.

1 Corinthians 6:11 has a unique perspective on the salvation process. "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of our Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." Did Paul get a little mixed up in his order of events here? Perhaps in our Western logical minds we have created a rigid sequence which is not always seen in Scripture. Maybe Paul is trying to tell us that the washing and sanctifying and justifying are more alike than they are different. They describe one process of salvation which is unified. One part is not more crucial or necessary for salvation than any other part. Once again, we see that salvation is an inward work, which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 8:1,9,10 there are some interesting parallel statements. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit...But

ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness." To be "in Christ Jesus" is to be "in the Spirit," which is the Spirit dwelling "in you," which is the same as "Christ in you." These are all describing the same salvation process in the person who believes in Jesus. To divide these concepts up, and say that some of them justify us, while others are only the fruit of justification, is to twist the words of Scripture to suit our own theological preconceptions.

We have a beautiful description of the conversion process in the following paragraph. "As the sinner, drawn by the power of Christ, approaches the uplifted cross, and prostrates himself before it, there is a new creation. A new heart is given him. He becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus....God Himself is 'the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.' Rom. 3:26" (Christ's Object Lessons, p. 163) At the moment of surrender to Christ's atoning death, God makes the sinner a new creature with a new heart, and this whole process is described as justifying.

"By receiving His imputed righteousness, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit." (SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 6, p. 1098) Here we have a combination of terms which are strictly separated in current scholarly writing on this subject. Imputed is placed in justification, while transforming is placed in sanctification. But in this sentence we learn that we receive imputed righteousness (justification) through the process of transformation by the Holy Spirit. Our only possible conclusion is that transformation and justification are one and the same thing.

Perhaps the clearest of all these statements is this one. "Having made us righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ, God pronounces us just." (Selected Messages, vol. 1, p. 394) It is important to note here that current popular thinking would rephrase this as follows: "Having declared us righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ, God makes us just." The way it is stated by Ellen White is totally unacceptable to those who are currently challenging the long-held Adventist view of the gospel. Ellen White is too clear to be misunderstood. First God makes us righteous inwardly (which is imputed righteousness), and then He pronounces or declares us just or righteous. God simply declares what He has already done.

The most famous conversion chapter in the Bible is John 3. Let us look for some parallels in verses 14, 15, 3, 6. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life....Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God....That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In these verses receiving eternal life comes only through being born again, and the new birth comes only through the work of the Holy Spirit. All of this is an inward process of transformation.

There are more parallels in Ephesians 4:22-24. "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." When we leave the "old man" condition, which is another term for being lost sinners, we are created a "new man," which means being renewed in our minds. The Bible consistently describes the change from "lost" to "saved" status as a new creation or renewal, which is always an inward process.

There are more parallels in Galatians 2:16, 20. "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified....I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Here we have the strongest possible statement by Paul that we are justified by faith alone, and never by works. He then describes this as crucifixion and new life in Christ. So, justification is the same as being crucified with Christ and Christ living in me. These are all terms meaning exactly the same thing - the change from lost to saved status.

There is one more insight in Galatians 3:11, 2, 3. "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith....

Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" In the process of justification, the Holy Spirit is very much involved. He begins the work of justification by faith, which automatically makes justification an inward process.

Justification in the Reformers

In the challenge placed before us, we were told that the Protestant reformers believed and taught the old-numbered statements, while the Catholic Church taught the even-numbered statements. We are assured about Luther's "mature concept of justification: it is the forensic or legal imputation of Christ's righteousness to the repentant believer." (Hans LaRondelle, Ministry, November, 2000) "Forgiveness and making right contradict one another." (Hans Heinz, Ministry, November 2000) We are told that Luther and the other reformers believed in justification as legal declaration or accounting righteous, rather than making righteous. Let us look at some representative statements by Martin Luther.

"...this movement of justification is the work of God in us." (Luther's Works, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, 1963, vol. 34, p. 177 [1536])

"He therefore draws us into himself, and transforms us....It is thus in Romans 5, 'We are justified by faith.'" (LW, vol. 32, pp. 235-36 [1521])

"Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life." (LW, vol. 26, pp. 129-30 [1535])

"But so far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him....Faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated....This faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife." (LW, vol. 26, pp. 167-68 [1535])

"Then what does justify...the Holy Spirit who justifies." (LW, vol. 26, p. 208 [1535])

"This faith justifies you; it will cause Christ to dwell, live, and reign in you." (LW, vol. 27, p. 172 [1519])

At the beginning of his sermons on John 3, Luther said, "This chapter stresses above all else that sublime topic: faith in Christ, which alone justifies us before God." (LW, vol. 22, p. 275)

All of these statements are telling us the same basic thing. Justification is transforming us. When Christ lives in the heart, God counts us righteous. Justification is Christ living in me and I in Him. Faith is

cementing us to Christ so that we cannot be separated. Justification is done by the Holy Spirit. The new birth experience is justification. All of these statements stress inward righteousness as the essence of justification, and yet we are told that Luther's mature concept of justification is the "legal imputation of Christ's righteousness to the repentant believer."

How did this misunderstanding come about? Why do we have an erroneous picture of what the major reformers believed? Perhaps this might be the key. "In time, Lutherans began to draw an increasingly sharp distinction between the event of being declared righteous (justification), and the process of being made righteous (sanctification, regeneration)." (Raoul Dederen, Ministry, November, 2000) It was the followers of Luther that began to make a sharp distinction between being declared righteous and being made righteous.

Another scholar says it even more plainly. "Luther's concept of justification, his concept of the presence of Christ within the believer...all were rejected or radically modified by those who followed him." (Alister McGrath, Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, vol. 2, p. 32) McGrath describes specifically how this happened. Melancthon promoted legal-only justification (Ibid., pp. 23-26). Martin Chemnitz defended Luther against Catholic attacks, and he followed Melancthon's reasoning. Chemnitz said that there is no Scripture evidence for internalized righteousness. He said that "Christ in you" is figurative language, and we are counted as righteous even though we are not really righteous. (Ibid., p. 29). Orthodox Lutheranism came to follow Chemnitz on this issue and thus rejected Luther's position. (Ibid., pp. 44-45)

So we see that the trouble spot is those who followed Luther in time and changed what he actually taught. Legal-only justification is actually post-Reformation scholastic Lutheranism. Unfortunately, this understanding of justification has become the standard position of churches and scholars of our day. Now some of our own Seventh-day Adventist thinkers are telling us that this is the Biblical position and the position of the Reformers. The harsh reality is that this position (the odd-numbered questions in the quiz) is neither Biblical nor Protestant. It is the position of what has come to be known today as the Evangelical gospel, which is a well-defined set of beliefs about how salvation works for individual Christians. What is called the Catholic gospel in the quiz (the even-numbered questions) is really the Biblical and Protestant position.

Justification in Catholic Teaching

Then what is the real Catholic position on salvation? Actually, it is spelled out very well in the Review articles quoted from earlier. "Christ's merits...are actually infused into the life of the believer through the sacraments administered by the Roman Catholic Church itself. Rome teaches that this saving merit doesn't remain outside of us but becomes something that happens inside a person, a change that gives that person merit before God....'Moved by the Holy Spirit,' says the Catechism, 'we can merit for ourselves and for all others the graces needed to obtain eternal life.'..."

'The church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.'...The Roman Catholic system is based on the crucial notion that all that Christ has done or does for a person comes mediated through the church itself. In other words, salvation...is dispensed to the faithful only through the church and its sacraments and priesthood." (Clifford Goldstein, Adventist Review, June 22, 2000)

"The sanctifying grace of God (is) infused into the believer through the sacraments of the church....This inner, 'infused' righteousness forms the meritorious basis of the penitent believer's justification....The Catholic way of salvation is a vast sacramental system that sees grace as being mediated through the sacraments administered by ordained priests. The sacraments and the human priests...are the channels of saving grace." (Woodrow Whidden, Adventist Review, May 25, 2000)

There are several clear Catholic teachings about salvation, which are spelled out very well in the quotations above.

1) God's grace is infused into the believer. Infusing is what happens in a blood transfusion. Another person's blood is infused into my blood supply so that the two become one, and can never be separated again. God infuses His righteousness into us so that it becomes an inseparable part of us, and we can then use this infused righteousness (now part of us) to obey God and do good works. This is not imparted righteousness, which is God sharing His power and grace with us moment by moment as long as we remain connected with Him. If we separate from Him, the connection of righteousness is broken, and we are left without any righteousness at all. We have no internal righteousness which we can use at our discretion.

2) We are infused with righteousness only through the sacraments. This is the crucial bottom line of salvation. We can't receive righteousness and justification by surrendering to God and confessing our sins to Christ. We can receive God's grace only through the sacraments of the church administered by the priests. The sacraments actually convey God's grace and righteousness to the believer.

3) Because we have righteousness infused into us, we have merit before God, and the good works we do by this infused righteousness will merit eternal life for us.

4) Salvation is only possible through the mediation of the church through the priesthood. It is impossible to be saved by individually approaching God in faith on the basis of Christ's atonement.

This is the real Catholic position on righteousness by faith. It is not about Christ dwelling in us. It is not about justification meaning to make righteous. It is not about the Holy Spirit's work in us leading to justification. It is not about the new birth being necessary before we are pronounced righteous by God. It is about the church and the sacraments and the priesthood.

What Is Going On?

Now we come back to the quiz with which this paper began. What was called the Protestant and Biblical position is really the Evangelical position, and what was called the Catholic position is really the Protestant and Biblical position. The real Catholic position of salvation is quite different from any of the questions selected from the quiz. (There were other questions in the original quiz which correctly differentiated between Protestant and Catholic beliefs, but the ones selected are the crucial ones for our study.)

Why is all of this worth our attention? Because if the Biblical gospel is all about an inward experience in which the Holy Spirit actually makes us righteous through the new birth before we can be pronounced righteous, then we are being warned to stay away from this teaching because it is Catholic. We are being warned against the Biblical gospel under the guise that it is a Catholic gospel. Further, we are being told that we should believe in another gospel, which is really the Evangelical gospel, under the guise that it is the Biblical gospel.

This is a very subtle deception, because it links the obviously destructive and erroneous teaching of the Catholic Church about salvation with the true gospel of the Bible. We are instructed to throw out both because one is so obviously dangerous. We are being told that inward justification and the Holy Spirit making us righteous before pronouncing us righteous are the same as infused righteousness, the sacraments, merit, and indulgences. By means of carefully crafted articles and a quiz (in which we hardly know what the right answers should be) we are being told to exchange the Biblical gospel for the Evangelical gospel.

Since the Evangelical justification is a legal declaration of forgiveness, and not in itself a change of heart--the change of heart comes in sanctification, which they believe is never complete in this life--therefore justification by faith covers continued sinning to some degree. In fact, they see it as impossible to stop sinning as long as we are in mortal flesh with a sinful nature.

Sometimes we used to wonder how the "very elect" could be deceived. After all, the Adventist message was so clear and based on such solid Biblical evidence that deception was well-nigh impossible. And then came the winds of doctrine blowing about us during the last twenty years. Gradually those winds have infiltrated various levels of our church, until what was rejected out of hand in previous years has become mainstream thinking in some quarters. We are being told that what was once orthodox Adventist teaching about salvation is really Catholic and dangerous. We are being told that the gospel promoted by Ford, Brinsmead, and Paxton in the 70's is the true gospel which we should have accepted back then and we certainly need to get it right today. The winds of deception are very persuasive and can easily sweep away the "very elect" today.

Final Thoughts

I am going to conclude this study with some thoughtful perceptions of what is happening in the Adventist Church today.

In what we are dealing with here, there are only two distinct streams. There is the authentic stream of the everlasting gospel, as defined in Revelation 14:7, and there is the stream which is to be found enshrined today in the evangelical gospel. The two are absolutely, watertight, logical, and coherent concepts, but, as Sister White says, men start with a wrong premise and bring everything to bear upon it, which is exactly what Evangelical Protestantism has done.

These concepts have now plunged into the Baptist Church, the Church of Christ, and even into other more conservative groups. Incredibly, they are now making great inroads into the Seventh-day Adventist Church!

Today we are in no man's land in Seventh-day Adventism if we try to integrate some of these pagan, Augustinian, Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed concepts into Seventh-day Adventism. There is no consistency in having part of one, and part of the other.

Our brethren at Glacier View were wholly wrong in condemning his (Ford's) eschatology (end-time interpretation) while upholding his soteriology (salvational concepts). Either he was right on both or wrong on both. However, somehow those who were leading out in Glacier View did not have sufficient understanding of the situation to discern that Ford's eschatology and soteriology were wholly inseparable.

There is no way we can safely accept part of the everlasting gospel and part of the evangelical gospel, because error will eventually always win out. When truth and error are incorporated together, ultimately error is the victor.

Many Seventh-day Adventist preachers today are presenting a hybrid system of theology, and have an admixture of the everlasting gospel, and Evangelical Protestantism.

For example, take preachers who support the understanding that Christ took upon Himself our fallen nature, adult believer's baptism, and the possibility of victorious Christian living. These beliefs are all inconsistent with Evangelical Protestant concepts. Yet many of the same preachers will deliver sermons consistent with the evangelicals: a justification-alone salvation, sins do not separate us from God, the belief that the man of Romans 7 is the converted man.

As these preachers attempt to blend their evangelical teachings with portions of the everlasting gospel, they present an inconsistent gospel. It is not logical to have them together. However, most of us are just not sufficiently versed to distinguish such inconsistencies, and so members of widely different understandings receive from the sermons that which they believe, and so declare it all to be--a beautiful gospel.

The more we as Seventh-day Adventists neglect the study of God's Word, the greater will be our inability to perceive the lack of consistency in the presentations--either in sermons or in books. (Colin Standish, Our Firm Foundation, November, 1996)

The reality is that when we do not perceive inconsistencies in teachings, we will not perceive inconsistencies in practices either. Our confusion in doctrine is leading to confusion in worship styles, church growth methods, music, entertainment, church standards, and on and on.

Perhaps the best conclusion to this thought paper is Paul's admonition in Ephesians 4:13-15. "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ."
