

FAITH ALONE OR WORKS?

Perhaps the greatest divide between Catholics and Protestants revolves around the theological issue of “justification by faith”. Justification is the act of God to make sinners righteous.

Under the Mosaic Law, if one should break the command of God, it was a sign and reality that the covenant was broken. To rectify that, God allowed the Israelites to make sacrificial offerings to the Lord. However, it was also clear that (1) the sacrifice would include a contrite heart (not just throwing an animal on the altar and calling it a day) and that (2) God was the one who justifies the sinner. Finally, it was clear that the repentant sinner would comply with the Ten Commandments and precepts of the Lord.

Unfortunately, as time passed, the obvious would happen. People would break the commandments and (if they were caught), they would offer a sacrifice to God at the Meeting Tent (later, the temple) and without contrite hearts. Time and time again, God would send prophets to challenge the people to “rend their hearts and not their garments.” In other words, God wanted to see contrite sinners who had a desire to be in a covenantal relationship with the Lord.

Over time, humanity would sin and fail to be faithful to God’s commandments and covenant. So, God became man and dwelt among us. However, “He was like us in all things, but sin” (Hebrews 4) and so was able to justify us by his faithfulness and sacrificial offering - his very life - on the cross.

We are reminded of the famous passage often quoted by Protestants from Romans 3:28: “For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” By this, he means “Faith in Christ.”

Does this passage mean that to participate in the laws or commands of God has no merit? Not necessarily. For Martin Luther, the great reformer, Paul means to say that our works cannot justify us since Christ has already accomplished the works for us. Catholics and Protestants can agree on this.

However, Luther added a word in his German translation from the Greek text that would forever create a theological debate about justification. In his German translation of Romans 3:28, we read, “So halten wir nun dafür, daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben (Luther’s Bible). “Allein” (alone) is not found in the Greek text, but was a large part of Luther’s theology on justification; namely that “a person is justified by faith alone apart from the works of the law.”

Sola Fide (Faith Alone) became the central theme for Luther who rightly argued against the abuses of

the Church during the reformation. Selling indulgences to gain heaven was an abuse by many in the Church - an abuse that the Church itself recognized and corrected at the Council of Trent (1546 AD).

Trent recognized that the selling of indulgences to gain heaven was a desperate act on the clergy to build their cathedrals and small kingdoms and a convenient way for the (not so) faithful to buy their way into heaven. Further, it was an affront to the Church’s long standing teaching against the heresy of Pelagianism. The Council of Trent reaffirmed the teachings at the Second Council of Orange (529 AD) which condemned Pelagius who taught that one could be saved through works apart from Christ.

Trent further argued that one is justified by faith in Christ as St. Paul clearly states in Romans 3:28. However, while one is justified by faith in Jesus Christ, it is argued that Luther’s addition of the word “alone” created a needless argument between Catholics and Protestants. Protestants have charged Catholics as using works for justification. Catholics have shot back with a defense that Faith and Works are necessary and added to their argument the words of St. James, “So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (2:17).

Lutherans and Catholics have come a long way and have attempted to heal the rift by agreeing that Jesus is our justification and faith in Him leads us to salvation. There is further agreement that the words *Faith Alone* are true if *Fide* means an assent of the will and not just an intellectual assent that Jesus is Lord. In this way, *Fide* (Fidelity) is our heartfelt response (rending one’s heart and not one’s garment) to God’s covenant through the merits of Jesus Christ alone.

There is no denying that Jesus merited our salvation, but we are called to be faithful to him. Our Sacramental, prayerful, and charitable works are the faithful works of the Body of Christ in union with Jesus, the Head. In this way, the whole Christ (Head and members) is faithful to the Father. Taking up our cross each day and following him, being Baptized in Christ, receiving Christ in the Eucharist, feeding and clothing Christ in the poor are all commands of Jesus to His Body - the Church. Our fidelity to Christ alone (*Sola Fide*) leads us to communion with God.



Lutheran World Federation President, Bishop Christian Krause, and Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy (Roman Catholic Church) sign the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999.

Social Review

If Christ is our Justification, why keep the Commandments?

As mentioned on the previous page under FAITH VIEW, we know that keeping the commandments of God does not negate the faith that we must put in Jesus Christ. Living according to the commands and precepts of the Lord are expected since such a life is our faithful response to Jesus. The good news is that we don't have to offer bulls or lambs to God in sacrifice to atone for our sins. We simply turn to Christ who has done this for us.

However, to simply say that "Christ will cover my many sins and so I can do whatever I want" puts us right back where the early Jews were with God and their sacrifices. Many of those who lied and cheated tried to appease God by throwing oxen, sheep, or doves to the priest for sacrificial offerings; but their sacrifices were incomplete. There needed to be contrite hearts. God expects the same from us.

If I just make an intellectual assent of faith that Jesus is my Lord, but cheat my brother or sister, I am missing the bigger picture. True faith is an assent of my will to follow the Will of God through Christ. As St. James reminds us, "What good is faith, without practicing it?"

The Commandments to Love God above all god's, to honor father and mother, to not steal, to not covet a neighbors goods are all a part of our fidelity to God in Christ. Jesus himself said, "I have come not to change even a letter of the Law (the Commandments)" (Mt 5:17). Clearly, if the Head of the Church does not abandon the Law, the members of Christ's Body cannot either.

All commandments and precepts have their place in the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "*Following Jesus Christ involves keeping the Commandments. The Law has not been abolished, but we are rather invited to rediscover it in the person of our Master, who is its perfect fulfillment.*" (Catechism, 2053).

Because Jesus did not abolish the Law, "*No one can dispense from them. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart.*" (Catechism, 2072)

Jesus summed this all up with, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (Jn 15:12)

If I love God with my whole heart, soul, and strength and love my neighbor as myself, I am fulfilling the Law. To abide in the love of Jesus is our faithful response to God - a love that naturally obeys the Ten Commandments.

My Review

What are the Precepts of the Church?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that, *The precepts of the Church are set in the context of a moral life bound to and nourished by liturgical life. [They are] meant to guarantee to the faithful the very necessary minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort, in the growth in love of God and neighbor.*" (Catechism, 2041)

Clearly, living the commands of love for God and neighbor is nourished through the Sacramental life of the Church.

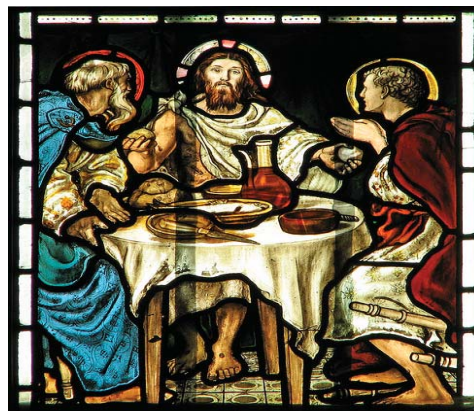
Attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days and resting from our labors (1st Precept) give us an opportunity to celebrate our faithful love with God and neighbor regularly.

Confessing our sins at least once a year (2nd Precept) brings us back to that faithful and loving covenant that we can easily stray from when we sin.

Receiving the Sacrament of Eucharist (3rd Precept) at least during the Easter season, is our response to be in loving communion with God and the Church.

Periods of fasting and abstinence (4th Precept) marked out by the Church allows us to empty ourselves and remember that abiding in the love of God in Christ is greater than any other need - even our basic need for food.

Providing for the needs of the Church - the Body of Christ - each according to his/her ability (5th Precept) reminds us that love for God and neighbor demands a charitable response.



Questions for My Personal Review

In what way am I living out the Commandment to Love God with my whole heart, soul, and strength?

How am I living out the Commandment to love my neighbor(s)?

How am I living out the Commandment to love myself?