

# Are You Catholic?

*John Robbins*

1. Do you believe that the grace of God in your heart is able to make you acceptable to God?
2. Does God justify a person by putting Christ's righteousness into his heart?

If you answered yes to either of these questions, please read on.

## Three Aspects of Salvation

Justification by faith is the heart of the Gospel. As sinners we are all condemned before God; we deserve whatever punishment he is pleased to give us. But Christ died for the sins of his people; they are justified, rather than condemned. How can God, who is just, forgive the guilty?

The Bible presents three aspects of God's work of salvation:

1. God the Father planned the salvation of his people before time began.
2. God the Son came to Earth in Jesus Christ and accomplished salvation for his people by living a perfect life and dying an innocent death.
3. God the Holy Spirit gives to God's people the gifts Christ earned by his innocent life and substituting death.

The *first* aspect of salvation— election— is God's choosing those who will be saved.

Election occurred before the creation of the world. It is wholly outside of our experience.

The *second* aspect of salvation is the Gospel—the sinless life, innocent death, and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of those whom God the Father chose to save.

The *third* aspect of salvation is the application of the benefits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to the people God chose to save.

Number 1 is the basis of the Gospel; number 3 is the fruit of the Gospel. They must not be confused, but they must not be separated from each other either.

Many churches today ignore or even deny numbers 1 and 2 and concentrate on number 3. These churches have lost the truth of the Gospel.

## The Roman Catholic Church

In the Middle Ages the pursuit of extraordinary religious experience was a passion. People sought visions, stigmata—signs of Christ's wounds in their hands and feet—and ecstasies. People were so absorbed in their own experiences that little progress was made in any field of knowledge for a thousand years. Men carried heavy wooden crosses around Europe, sat on high poles for weeks, marched and killed in "holy" wars called Crusades, went on pilgrimages to "holy" places, worshiped "holy" relics and generally indulged in any superstitious practice that promised a religious experience. People did these things—the more devout they were, the more they did—because they thought they were pleasing God and meriting God's favor. They were being fooled by the Roman Catholic church. "Christendom" was dominated by ignorance and superstition.

The religious reason for all this superstition was the Roman Catholic church's doctrine of justification. The Roman church used, and still uses, Biblical language—it spoke of grace and justification and faith—but it

changed the meaning of the words. In the Bible, “justification” means an act of God completely external to man: God’s forgiving sins and declaring a man innocent because Christ had died once and for all in his place

In the Roman Catholic church, justification means God’s actually making a man innocent, God’s working in a man’s heart. The church changed “grace,” an attribute of God, his undeserved mercy and favor, into a quality of man. The medieval Roman church taught—and still teaches today—a different gospel: that men are justified by God’s grace in their hearts. That is not the Gospel proclaimed by the apostles. The Roman church teaches that the correct answers to both questions above is yes. Its teaching is accepted by many who think they are Christians, many who do not belong to the Roman Catholic church.

### “What Does the Bible Say?”

The Bible teaches that believers in Christ are saved, not because of good works, good intentions, religious experiences, or religious rituals — not even because of what the Holy Spirit has done in their hearts — but solely and only because of what Christ did 2,000 years ago when he carried out the plan of God in salvation. Jesus Christ lived a perfect and sinless life, thus fulfilling the demands of God’s law for his people. He died a substitutionary death, taking the punishment that his people deserve for their sins. He came to life again the third day, proving that God was satisfied with his perfect life and sacrifice.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is objective. It is about things that happen wholly outside of us, not about our subjective feelings, experiences, or works.

Paul summarizes the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Paul explains the Gospel more fully in Romans 3: “By the deeds of the law no flesh [no sinful human being] will be justified in his sight for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed...even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe, for there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

Faith itself, Paul explains, is a “gift of God.” It is not something that people can work up on their own power. No one can believe in Christ unless God causes him to. Faith is not the cause of our salvation, but the evidence of it. God gives the chosen people faith in Christ because of what Christ did for them 2,000 years ago.

Christ lived a perfect life *for* his people.

Christ died *for* the sins of his people.

Christ was killed *for* the offenses of his people.

Christ obtained eternal redemption *for* his people.

Christ prays *for* his people.

The contrast between what the Roman Catholic church teaches and what the Bible teaches about justification may be summarized as follows:

#### **Roman Catholicism**

Justification is subjective, psychological and internal.

We are justified by God’s work *in* us.

Justification is man-centered.

God justifies a person by making him personally righteous.

## **The Bible**

Justification is objective, legal and external.

We are justified only by Christ's work for us.

Justification is Christ-centered.

God justifies a person by imputing Christ's righteousness to him and declaring him righteous because Christ has taken the punishment he deserves.

In theory, the Roman Catholic idea of justification teaches men to rely on God's work in them for their justification and salvation. In practice, it leads them to depend on their own works, for the works are the evidence of God's work in them. That explains why the most devoted followers of the Roman church have always been the most preoccupied with religious experience: long and repetitive prayers, life in monasteries and convents, pilgrimages to "holy" places, miracles, veneration of relics, prayers to Mary and the "saints," good works, and so forth. None of these things can save. The person who trusts in them will die in his sins.

The Bible teaches that the best works of the best men are not sufficient to merit salvation. Christ alone is the reason for our justification and salvation.

### **Let's answer the questions with which we began:**

1. Grace is an attribute of God— his unmerited favor — not a substance that God injects into our hearts. We are justified only by the grace of God displayed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone.

2. God does not justify anyone by infusing righteousness into him, but only by imputing Christ's righteousness to his account. Christ has been punished for the sins of his people, and God applies his righteousness to their account. "Justification," "condemnation," "pardon," and "forgiveness" are all legal terms, and those events happen wholly outside of us.

"For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.... Much more, then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life" (Romans 5).

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