

Salvation and Works: Part I

By Greg Witherow

The Protestant-Catholic dialogue over salvation is fraught with misunderstanding and confusion. The problem is two-fold. First, many Catholic's mistakenly believe that just "being good" warrants them salvation (i.e. justification). Secondly, there is a semantic problem as what a Protestant means by "works" is vastly different from what a catechized Catholic means by "works". (This will be examined in a future essay). Now at the end of the day there is still a difference, but not nearly as great as first appears.

Because of the above most Protestants believe the Catholic Church teaches a "salvation by works" (i.e. we can earn our salvation by merely doing a checklist of stuff) when in fact the Church does not teach such a doctrine. There are however a few Protestants that have done their homework and understand (for the most part) the Catholic teaching of salvation. Two such men are Hank Hanegraaff and R.C. Sproul. In this short essay we will examine the views of these two men in regards to the Catholic view of salvation. In subsequent essays, we will further explore the Catholic position.

Hank Hanegraaf is the host of the Bible Answer Man radio program, a widely listened to show heard on Christian stations across the country. While Mr. Hanegraaf is strongly committed to the evangelical dogmas he is fair-minded in trying to understand the position of his opponent. As a well-known and respected voice in the evangelical world, his comments below hold weight as he tries to set the record straight for his Protestant audience. (The emphasis **highlighted** below is mine).

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CATHOLICS AND SALVATION

By Hank Hanegraaf

“Some people say that the Catholic Church teaches salvation by works. Is this true?

To begin with, let me state up front that **Catholics do not teach salvation by works**. In fact, the Catholic Church firmly maintains that **man can only be saved by God's grace**. However, ask Catholics whether they believe that they are justified by faith alone and chances are pretty good you'll get "no" for an answer. Consequently, some evangelicals have mistakenly concluded that Catholics hold to salvation by works.

Justification, to evangelicals, means that God declares us righteous the instant you or I repent and receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and this, despite our sinfulness. Actually, it's a singular event, something that is completed instantaneously. Catholics, on the other hand, understand justification to mean that God makes us righteous. It's seen as a process whereby God gradually perfects us; and this is, incidentally, why Catholics believe that only in the end

will believers be sure as to whether they're truly justified or saved. In addition, evangelicals believe in justification by faith alone. And by faith we mean not only knowledge and agreement, but also personal trust in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life. In sharp distinction, Catholics see faith as nothing more than passive agreement, which again is why they don't believe in justification by faith alone. Catholics actually consider human works as vital elements in the process of justification. This is because they are held to be **the result of God's grace** working through and perfecting believers.

Well, in sharp contrast to the evangelical belief that works are the fruits of justification, Catholics say that justification results from a combination of faith and works **made possible by God's grace**. Yes, we regard the Catholic conception of justification to be confused. Yes, we take serious issue with the numerous doctrines and practices that it has produced. Though they can be rightly faulted on these points, **no one can legitimately claim that Catholics teach a crass system of salvation by works**.

So, once again, it is important to understand that while many Catholics believe in salvation through works, the official stance of Roman Catholicism is that justification results from a combination of faith and works, **which is made possible by the grace of God**. On Catholics and the doctrine of salvation, that's the CRI Perspective. I'm Hank Hanegraaff¹”.

R.C. Sproul is one of the leading theologians in the Protestant world today. His Renewing Your Mind broadcast is heard nationally and he's written over 60 books and countless articles. One such essay is entitled, “Justification By Faith Alone”. While various evangelical reviewers have praised the essay, one reviewer was somewhat taken back by a comment Sproul makes in his article about Catholics. The reviewer writes,

“Sproul succinctly explains the differences between the **Augustinian (Roman Catholic)** view of justification of being made righteous as a process of sanctification and the Protestant biblical view of being counted or reckoned just before a holy God. All the authors of this book cite the standard Council of Trent references in their criticism that Roman Catholic justification is not by faith *alone*. However, Sproul weakens his opposition to the Catholic view of justification by faith *plus* merit when he says that “**it is slanderous to Rome to charge them with a pure Pelagianism that teaches justification by works**.”²”

Sproul correctly notes that St. Augustine was a Catholic in his views of justification. While Calvinists often praise Augustine, it is also true that he would be regarded as a Catholic heretic if he were alive today. But most importantly, Sproul concedes that the Pelagian system of salvation by works is not what the Catholic Church teaches. Here we've heard the testimony of two Protestant leaders who understand the Church does not teach salvation by works. In our next two essays we'll examine our topic in more detail.

¹ See the following website to view Mr. Hanegraaf's article, <http://www.equip.org/free/CP0802.htm>.

² See the following website for a full review, <http://www.dbts.edu/journals/1997/PrRev.pdf>