

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Reformation Studies</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>6</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### THE REFORMERS vs. ROME: THE ISSUES (PART 1)

At the very heart of the Reformation lies the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. It shapes the understanding of everything, from the nature of the sacraments to the nature of church authority to the shape of the Christian life. That we are justified by a divine declaration based on the imputed righteousness of Christ is a matter on which both Luther and Calvin, and the Lutheran and the Reformed traditions, agree. This unites us in opposition to the view of Roman Catholicism, as expressed at the Council of Trent, which sees justification as a process involving the impartation of Christ's righteousness. Medieval theologians differed from both Reformation traditions on the matter of grace. Faith as fiducial trust, the foundation of Reformation teaching, stood in strong contrast to the view of Roman Catholic opponents of Luther and Melancthon, Calvin and Bullinger. The exclusive role of Christ's death and resurrection emphasized by the Reformers made these opponents fearful that public order – society itself—would collapse if human merit played no role in salvation.<sup>1</sup> The Roman Catholic Church taught that the ground of approval for acquittal is the improved sinner himself. God's justification consists in God making people righteous here on earth through the sacramental system, and in the life hereafter through the fires of purgatory. Through their system of temporal punishments, God acquits them on the basis of their righteousness. Romanism believes that God improves the sinner enough to declare him acquitted on the basis of that improvement. Their steps in the process of justification may be seen as follows:

- Man is born in sin and is liable to pay the penalty for his actual sinning.
- Man is made just through his faithful participation in the sacramental system. The sacramental system requires self-payment of sins in the form of penances and works.
- Justification is a process which starts with baptism and is ongoing. However, most Romanists believe that they can only be purified enough to warrant acquittal after having suffered in purgatory for a season.<sup>2</sup>

I. **A TREASURY OF MERIT.** At the heart of the Roman Catholic position on justification is their understanding of *merit*. This is twofold: condign merit and congruent merit. This is how the Encyclopedia of Catholicism defines these terms: **condign merit** (kath'din; Lat., [*con*]-*dignus*, "worthy"), a human entitlement to a divine reward, based upon God's acceptance of human actions that are performed with the aid of grace. This merit, grounded in the value of Christian activity, stands in contrast to merit *de congruo* (Lat.), which is a reward (of grace or heaven) given out of "fittingness," solely out of divine generosity, and with less reference to human activity. Merit *de condigno* makes no human claim in strict justice upon divine gifts or rewards but does suggest a human claim upon further grace and heaven by graced human activity. Condign merit flows from the free, graced actions of an individual who is citizen and heir of the reign of God.<sup>3</sup> A recent Roman Catholic defended the Church's position on merit, pointing out: "Rome says it is the custodian of a vast reservoir of merit called the *Church's treasury*. It dispenses this as *indulgences*, the yielding of temporal punishment [CCC 1032, 1471, 1476]. The Second Vatican Council explained that Christ earned this merit *with the help of others*. [*italics mine*]. 'This treasury includes as well the

prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them. In this way they attained their own salvation and at the same time cooperated in saving their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body.”<sup>4</sup> Notice the expression in regard to Christ earning this merit *with the help of others*. This reflects the official teaching of Rome as set forth in the Council of Trent. The late R. C. Sproul addressed this: “Remember that the sacrament of penance is designed to restore fallen sinners to a state of justification. For that restoration to occur, sinners must make some satisfaction and atonement offered by Christ. These works of satisfaction, though assisted by the grace of Christ, are necessary prerequisites for justification. Full justification rests on both the satisfaction rendered by Christ *and* the satisfaction rendered by the sinner in cooperation with Christ. Justification here is clearly a synergistic work. Rome anticipates a *protest* from Protestants at this point: ‘. . . no Catholic ever understood that through our satisfactions the efficacy of the merit and satisfaction of our Lord Jesus Christ is either obscured or in any way diminished; but since the innovators wish to understand it so, they teach, in order to destroy the efficacy and use of satisfaction, that a new life is the best penance.’ Here Trent labors the point that Rome has no desire to *obscure* or *diminish* the efficacy of Christ’s merit and satisfaction. But saying these words is not enough to make it so. What other conclusion can be reached than that Roman doctrine vitiates the merit and satisfaction of Christ by whose merit and satisfaction alone we are justified? Calvin was deeply troubled by this view of satisfaction:

It is enough for me to know the two following things – first, that they devise a Repentance altogether different from that which is recommended to us in Scripture; and secondly, that they enact a condition for obtaining the remission of sins, from which he, to whom alone the power of remitting belongs, wished us to be free. . . . For they do not permit him to pardon our sins, unless it be on the condition of our performing an observance which they alone make binding.

Perhaps most troubling to the Reformers was the notion that the works of satisfaction done as part of the sacrament of penance possess a kind of merit: congruous merit. Merits of congruity (*meritum de congruo*) are so-called because, though the merit achieved does not reach the level of condign merit, it is meritorious enough to make it *congruous* or *fitting* for God to reward it. Condign merit imposes a legal obligation for reward, whereas congruous merit does not. If God did not reward congruous merit, however, he would be acting in an incongruous or unfitting way. Donald Bloesch remarks:

The Reformers stoutly challenged the Catholic conception that sinful humanity can prepare the way for justification, though always with the assistance of grace. Late medieval theology taught that even apart from prior grace works of contrition can merit justifying grace, albeit only in a loose sense. William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel spoke of merits *de congruo*, meaning that we can do works that may induce God’s favor, so long as they are done in sincerity and so long as we do what in us lies. Merit in the strict sense – works that truly deserve God’s favor (*de condigno*) – is not possible apart from His assisting grace. The Council of Trent held that works before justifying grace cannot merit grace, but after justifying grace we can merit final justification (i.e., eternal life) through cooperating with grace. The Protestant Reformation challenged this whole legalistic schema by contending that no Christian can merit God’s favor.<sup>5</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** The Roman Catholic teaching on merit and the need to supplement the work of Christ with the merit of others strikes at the very heart of the finished work of Christ. H. M. Carson correctly observed: “The apostle John speaks of the completeness of God’s pardon as he writes: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all iniquity*. Indeed he has already stressed this point that the blood of His Son Jesus Christ *cleanseth us from all sin*. Here is an echo of the Old Testament promises, *If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red*

as crimson, they shall be white as wool. I have blotted out thy iniquities as a cloud and thy sins as a mist: return to me, for I have redeemed thee. The whole idea of a continuing punishment for sin for which satisfaction must be offered does despite to the perfection of Christ's atoning death. To say that I, by the performance of penance, or by the suffering of purgatory, must satisfy the offended justice of God, is to say that Christ's offering has not adequately met God's just demands. Otherwise it would be unjust to exact a satisfaction for sin if that satisfaction had already been made. But Christ's satisfaction is surely perfect. His offering, after all, was provided by the Father. Thus Paul writes of the Saviour *whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood*. 'He,' says John, *is the propitiation for our sins*. His present position at the right hand of God is a clear declaration that the propitiation He has offered has been accepted. God's justice has been satisfied, and the guilty sinner needs a humble reliance upon Christ alone."<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>R. Kolb and C. R. Trueman, *Between Wittenberg and Geneva: Lutheran and Reformed Theology in Conversation* (Baker, 2017), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup>R. M. Zins, *Romanism: The Relentless Roman Catholic Assault on The Gospel of Jesus Christ* (CWRC, 1994), p. 181.

<sup>3</sup>R. P. McBrien, *The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (Harper Collins, 1995), p. 344.

<sup>4</sup>J. R. Waiss & J. G. McCarthy, *Letters Between a Catholic and an Evangelical* (Harvest House, 2003), p. 336.

<sup>5</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Baker, 1995), pp. 146-147.

<sup>6</sup>H. M. Carson, *Roman Catholicism Today* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 99.