

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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“False Light” After 500 Years

By Brad K. Gsell

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With “prayers of repentance and lamentation for past divisions,”¹ the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) met with leaders of the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity (PCPCU), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the World Methodist Council (WMC), and others, in a major ecumenical event. The ceremony, held on July 5, 2017, was to mark the association of the WCRC with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, first signed by the Roman Catholic Church and the LWF in 1999.² The WMC affirmed the Declaration in 2006. Letters of encouragement were received from Pope Francis, Eastern

Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and the World Council of Churches.³

Held during the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the ceremony was held in the *Stadtkirche* (Town Church) in Wittenberg, Germany, where Martin Luther once preached. Instead of celebrating the Reformation principles brought to light from the Scriptures by Luther and the other Reformers, the event was an insult to this Biblical heritage, which revolutionized the church and the world at large.

The action of signing this Joint Declaration was in effect a repudiation of these Reformation principles — *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), *Sola Fide* (by faith alone), *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone), *Solus Christus* (in Christ alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (for the glory of God alone).

The Joint Declaration declares that the “condemnations” found in the Protestant Confessions and the Canons and Decrees of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent “are still valid today and thus have a church-dividing effect.” However, the remainder of the document declares that the churches have come to “new insights,” and that “the divisive questions and condemnations” are now seen in “a new light.” “By appropriating insights of recent Biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification....” Because of this new “consensus,” “the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today’s partner.”

Were the Reformers mistaken on the doctrine of justification by “faith alone”? Has Roman Catholicism

¹ Stephen Brown, “WCC Hails Wittenberg Declaration Aiming to Overcome Reformation Divisions,” World Council of Churches press release, July 5, 2017, <https://pres-outlook.org/2017/07/wcc-hails-wittenberg-declaration-aiming-overcome-reformation-divisions/>.

² See Michael Gryboski, “Reformed Church Body Signs Declaration on Justification to ‘Overcome Divisions’ with Catholic Church,” *The Christian Post*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/reformed-church-body-signs-declaration-on-justification-to-overcome-divisions-with-catholic-church-191494/>, December 28, 2017. — *Editor*.

³ See note 1 above.

changed its doctrine to eliminate the necessity of human “merit” for salvation? The answer to both these questions is No. The “new insights” discovered by these men and organizations in recent times is a clear result of their apostasy and departure from the Scriptures, which never change.

Such agreements can only take place because of several important factors:

1. Most of the leaders of these “Protestant” organizations have long ago discarded belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and in the doctrines clearly presented there. Through tortuous theological obfuscation, the clear and original meanings of Bible terms have often been supplanted with definitions far removed from what the Bible teaches.

2. The desire for “Christian unity” is given greater place than the desire for purity and obedience to God’s Word. True unity always requires fidelity to the truth of Scripture.

3. Advocates of the social gospel, Liberation Theology and other such heretical movements often wrest theological terms from their Biblical meaning to be deceptively applied to so-called “social justice.” All Christians are to care for the poor and disadvantaged, but these men often advocate an unbiblical, utopian, socialistic agenda. This replacement of the Scriptural emphasis on God and all His attributes, the duty God requires of man, and the true Gospel of Jesus Christ leads to a dangerous and unwarranted misunderstanding of what the Scriptures teach.

4. Vague, and often incomprehensible, statements are made which are difficult to nail down and thus often allow different meanings to be held by the most ardent Christ denier, as well as by the compromising evangelical. This practice is seen in pronouncements both of liberal Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church, and allows for a false unity.

Years ago, Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng stated concerning the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent that “the Church...never looked at these decisions as rigid and frozen formulations, but rather as living signposts for continued research...”⁴ This, of course, is not true to historical fact. Many of the statements in the Canons of Trent bear an “anathema” if one fails to hold to Rome’s doctrine. Merriam-Webster defines “anathema” as “a ban or curse solemnly pronounced by ecclesiastical authority and accompanied by excommunication.” Does this sound like Trent was

issuing “living signposts for continued research”? But ecumenical documents are full of such doublespeak in order to bring together what has hitherto been unreconcilable.

Interestingly enough, Küng made this comment in a book about Protestant theologian Karl Barth, who was the principle advocate of Neo-Orthodoxy, a mid-20th century movement which itself spoke in vague terms and redefined Biblical terms to fit “new insights.”

Despite all the “new insights,” the present, official Roman Catholic *Catechism* still teaches its long-standing heresies.

Rome Still Mixes Sanctification with Justification, which Strikes at the Heart of the Gospel

Rome still holds a doctrine which mixes sanctification with justification. The answer to *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Question 33 declares: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” The answer to Question 35 states: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” The *work* of sanctification always accompanies justification and begins in the new believer immediately, but it is distinct from the instantaneous *act* of justification and has no saving merit of its own.

Yet, the Roman Catholic *Catechism*, quoting Trent, states: “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.”⁵ Rome teaches that because of Christ’s work we are *infused* with righteousness by the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are *actually* made righteous. The Bible teaches that we are guilty sinners who have Christ’s righteousness *imputed* to us. To put it very succinctly, our justification comes from what Christ did *for* us, not in any goodness *within* us.

This unbiblical teaching of Rome sets the stage for additional heresies.

Rome Still Believes in a Doctrine of “Merit,” “Cooperation with the Spirit” and “Good Works.”

Rome still believes in a doctrine of faith plus works. The official Roman Catholic *Catechism* states:

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of

⁴ Hans Küng, *The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 101.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC hereafter), Second Edition (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 1994, 1997), 482.

forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.⁶

In several other places, the Roman Catholic *Catechism* states: “The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful.”⁷ “Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods.”⁸

Indeed, the Council of Trent had declared:

If anyone says that the good works of the justified man are gifts of God in such a way that they are not also the good merits of the justified himself, or that the justified person, by the good works he performs through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ (whose living member he is), does not truly merit an increase in grace, eternal life, the attainment of eternal life itself (if he dies in grace), and even an increase in glory, let him be anathema.⁹

Elsewhere, it stated: “If anyone says that...[good] works themselves are solely fruits and signs of justification received, and not also a cause of its increase, let him be anathema.”¹⁰

Trent further declared:

If any one saith, that, after the grace of Justification has been received, to every penitent sinner the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out in such wise, that there remains not any debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world, or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened (to him); let him be anathema.¹¹

Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge wrote:

⁶ CCC, 487, ¶2010.

⁷ CCC, 486, ¶2008.

⁸ CCC, 490, ¶2027.

⁹ *Dogmatic Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Trent hereafter), Canon 32, Session VI, January 13, 1547 (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1912), 57.

¹⁰ *Trent*, Canon 24, 54-55.

¹¹ *Trent*, Canon 30, 56.

The doctrine is so repugnant to the inward teachings of the Spirit, as well as to the teachings of His Word.... The children of God...do not trust for their salvation, either in whole or in part, to what they are or to what they do; but simply and exclusively to what Christ is and has done for them.¹²

Despite Rome’s very clear, continuous belief in the necessity of good works in justification, the World Communion of Reformed Churches says that they “value the careful nuancing of the place of good works among the justified”¹³ in the Joint Declaration. We would describe the language of the Joint Declaration — unlike what is taught in the Word of God — as vague and incomprehensible.

In contrast, the Scriptures are clear on this subject, and bring great joy to the heart of the believer:

Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight.... For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. (*Romans* 3:20, 23-28)

Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. (*Romans* 4:6-8)

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (*Ephesians* 2:8-9)

The great hymns of Protestantism are likewise replete with this wonderful testimony of the Scriptures. Here are just a couple of examples:

¹² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Volume III (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 242-243.

¹³ “Association of the World Conference of Reformed Churches With the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” 5. See document at <http://wcrch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/WCRC-Association-to-JDDJ-EN.pdf>.

In the hymn “Rock of Ages,” Augustus Toplady wrote:

*Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

Norman Clayton, in his hymn “My Hope Is in the Lord,” wrote:

*No merit of my own
His anger to suppress,
My only hope is found
In Jesus’ righteousness.*

Rome Still Believes that Baptism Is Necessary to Justification and Salvation

In addition to good works, the Roman Catholic *Catechism* has quite a bit to say concerning the necessity of baptism for one to be justified:

Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies and sanctifies.¹⁴

From the time of the Apostles, becoming a Christian has been accomplished by a journey and initiation in several stages...certain essential elements will always have to be present: Proclamation of the Word, acceptance of the Gospel entailing conversion, profession of faith, Baptism itself, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and admission to Eucharistic communion.¹⁵

Baptism is necessary for salvation... The church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude.¹⁶

By baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as punishment for sin.¹⁷

Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte “a new creature,” an adopted son of God, who has become a ‘partaker of the divine nature,’ member of Christ and co-heir with him...¹⁸

Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just

by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life.¹⁹

This shows that the Roman Catholic Church still stands with the pronouncements of Trent, which declared concerning justification: “The instrumental cause is the sacrament of baptism, which is the sacrament of faith, without which no man was ever justified....”²⁰ “If anyone says that baptism is optional, that is, not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema.”²¹

Baptism is certainly very important, but the Reformed churches have uniformly held the Scriptural view that “Although it is a great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance [baptism], yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”²²

Both Roman Catholics and Protestants Make “Justification” to Include “Social Justice”

Protestants and Catholics have always placed importance on helping the poor and sick and those who are being treated unjustly. Protestants hold to the Biblical teaching that the believer, justified through faith alone, grows in grace and brings forth good fruit pleasing to the Lord.

However, in the 20th century, a “social gospel” was formulated whereby the Gospel of Christ, as taught in the Scriptures, was changed into a here-and-now philosophy of “empowerment of the disenfranchised,” aiding the poor, *etc.* Some of these efforts were not bad in themselves, but this eventually led to more radical movements such as so-called “Liberation Theology.” This began in the 1960s in Latin America, and eventually spread around the world. It often promoted some of the principles of Marxism and considered capitalism to be inherently evil. The World Council of Churches developed its Programme to Combat Racism, which gave large sums of money to Communist terrorists in Africa and elsewhere.

The Roman Catholic Church had many priests who adhered to this philosophy, but the Vatican itself often had strong words against it. For many years, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — later to become Pope Benedict XVI — headed the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which often spoke authoritatively to doctrinal issues within the Church. Under Ratzinger’s leadership,

¹⁹ CCC, 482, ¶1992.

²⁰ Trent, Session 6, Chapter VII, “What the Justification of the Impious Is, and What Are the Causes Thereof,” 30.

²¹ Trent, Canon 5 (“On Baptism”), Session VII, March 3, 1547.

²² Westminster Confession of Faith, 18:5.

¹⁴ CCC, 315, ¶1227.

¹⁵ CCC, 315, ¶1229.

¹⁶ CCC, 320, ¶1257.

¹⁷ CCC, 321, ¶1263.

¹⁸ CCC, 322, ¶1265.

the Congregation issued an “instruction” concerning Liberation Theology. It stated in part:

The present Instruction [is] to draw the attention of pastors, theologians, and all the faithful to the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought...²³

It continues:

...But the “theologies of liberation,” which reserve credit for restoring to a place of honor the great texts of the prophets and of the Gospel in defense of the poor, go on to a disastrous confusion between the “poor” of the Scripture and the “proletariat” of Marx. In this way they pervert the Christian meaning of the poor, and they transform the fight for the rights of the poor into a class fight within the ideological perspective of the class struggle. For them the “Church of the poor” signifies the Church of the class which has become aware of the requirements of the revolutionary struggle as a step toward liberation and which celebrates this liberation in its liturgy.²⁴

Pope Francis, however, has abruptly changed course, and is an active evangelist for Liberation Theology. He may express criticisms of some tenets of Marxism, but many of his teachings have sounded quite similar. Even socialist Bolivian President Evo Morales, who presented Francis with a crucifix which had Christ hanging on a hammer and sickle (the Communist symbol), approvingly told the Associated Press that the Pope’s “emphasis on a world without exclusion amounts to socialism.”²⁵

In line with this, a letter was read at the ceremony in Wittenberg from Pope Francis. The Pope exhorted the signers of this Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: “May it mark a new stage of fellowship and cooperation in the service of justice and peace in our human family.”²⁶ True justice and peace on this Earth are important, but this is not at all what the Scriptures include in the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches also includes many who have advocated for Liberation Theology. The WCRC states that justification comes from the same Greek word as “justice.” Thus, they quote the International Reformed–Catholic Dialogue report, “Justification and Sacramentality: The Christian Community as an Agent of Justice,” where it states: “...the doctrine of justification cannot be seen in the abstract, divorced from the reality of injustice, oppression and violence in today’s world.”²⁷

The WCRC then goes on to quote “Communion: on Being the Church,” a joint affirmation of the WCRC and the Lutheran World Federation: “God’s covenant of grace intends a ‘setting right’ that is world-embracing — including even political, economic and ecological realities.”²⁸ Instead of Christ’s Great Commission to “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel...” (*Mark* 16:15), the WCRC tells us that Christ “sends us into all the world to be a sign of God’s kingdom to preach and live the gospel of reconciliation in a common concern for justice, freedom, peace and care for creation.”²⁹

In addition, the concerns of the Feminist movement were brought in. The Rev. [*sic.*] Najla Kassab, of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon gave a message at the event, where she declared: “Here I stand, a Middle Eastern woman in the pulpit of Luther... If only Luther had imagined this, this could have been his 96th question to the church. Not, ‘Why there is a woman in this pulpit?’ but ‘Why did it take so long?’”

The One-World Church

The WCRC statement associating itself with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification concludes: “The present achievement and commitment are viewed

²³ Signed by Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect [later Pope Benedict XVI], this instruction was adopted at an Ordinary Meeting of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and was approved at an audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect by his Holiness Pope John Paul II, who ordered its publication. Given at Rome, at the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on August 6, 1984, the Feast of the Transfiguration. August 6, 1984. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html, accessed December 28, 2017.

²⁴ See note 23 above.

²⁵ “Is the Pope a Socialist?,” *Catholic News Agency*, July 22, 2015, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/is-the-pope-a-socialist-95558>, accessed December 28, 2017.

²⁶ Tom Heneghan, “Reformed churches endorse Catholic-Lutheran accord on key Reformation dispute,” *Religious News Service*, July 6, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/07/06/reformed-churches-endorse-catholic-lutheran-accord-on-key-reformation-dispute/>, accessed December 28, 2017.

²⁷ “Association of the World Conference of Reformed Churches With the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” 6.

²⁸ See note 27 above.

²⁹ See note 27 above.

by the four parties as part of the pursuit of the full communion and common witness to the world which is the will of Christ for all Christians.”³⁰ We have little doubt that there will be additional “new insights” forthcoming in the years ahead which will bring together a worldwide apostate church, based on human reasoning, rather than the precious truths of God’s Word.

Even the more conservative evangelical world has seriously compromised on these matters over the past 50 years. The World Evangelical Fellowship has ecumenical relations and has signed joint statements with the Roman Catholic Church, and its officials regularly travel to the Vatican for audiences with the Pope.

The “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” document, signed in 1994 by such men as Prison Fellowship’s Charles Colson, Southern Baptist Richard Land, Regent College’s J.I. Packer, Geneva College’s John White, and others, along with representatives of the National Association of Evangelicals and the World Evangelical Fellowship, was a major step in this false movement for reconciliation.

The 2005 book *Is the Reformation Over?* by Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, discusses many ecumenical ventures since the 1960s and states: “Among evangelicals and Catholics who are open to cooperation there now exists a broad and deep foundation of agreement on the central teachings of Christianity.”³¹ Yet, they fail to give any great significance to those differences which the Reformers believed were critical to the souls of men.

May those of us who are “outside the camp” (*Hebrews* 13:1) rejoice in this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which stripped away the superstition, tradition and apostasy that had so obscured the teaching of the Word of God, and brought the life-giving Gospel of Christ to multiplied millions. May our stand ever be “for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (*Revelation* 1:9).

New Lectures Posted

The lectures from the Reformation at 500 Conference have been posted to our web site and are available to download or purchase an

³⁰ “Association of the World Conference of Reformed Churches With the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” 7.

³¹ Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 230.

MP3 CD. There is also a new book package available with this CD collection.

Christian Worldview Essay Contest

The Trinity Foundation is please to announce the return of the Christian Worldview Essay Contest. The topic for the 2018 Christian Worldview Essay Contest is *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Richard B. Gaffin Jr’s Doctrine of Justification* by Stephen M. Cunha. In light of recent statements by John Piper about “final” justification by works (see the November, December 2017 *Trinity Review*), the topic book is apropos in dealing with a dangerous, heterodox view of justification. The Christian Worldview Essay Contest is open to those 16-25 years of age, and winners will be announced on October 31, 2018. See flyer in mailing or at our web site for details.

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