

SOLA FIDE

Protestants and Catholics often disagree over the meaning of "*to justify*" (*dikaioo* in Greek).

Protestant Position Protestants insist that *dikaioo* means "to declare righteous", but not "to make righteous". The image is that of a legal courtroom. God is the righteous judge, we are the guilty criminals, and Christ is the innocent but willing substitute. Justification is a kind of legal exchange: We get Christ's righteousness, which is externally imputed to us, and He gets our punishment. And since this declaratory act is distinct from any ethical quality within us, it must take place by *faith alone (sola fide)*. Protestants do affirm the importance of doing good works, but they deny that good works play any role in our justification.

Catholic Position In addition to what Protestants believe, Catholics see justification is God the Father's declaring us to be His sons and daughters. His judgment, then, is that of a Father, and is based solely on what He has done in generating us anew through grace. In other words, God's declaration is so effective that it also *makes* us righteous. (For when God's word go forth to declare something to be true or still or cleansed or just, it makes it so.) Therefore, we are justified by God's grace alone, through faith working in love.

"Aren't we saved by faith alone as Paul says in Romans 3:28?"

When Paul says, "*For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law,*" he is teaching that the works of the Old Testament Mosaic law, such as circumcision, could not bring salvation. On the contrary, "*real circumcision is a matter of the heart*" (Rom. 2:29), and Jews and Gentiles are justified in the same way that Abraham was justified: by faith. This faith is not opposed to good works but includes them, for it is only "*the doers of the law who will be justified*" (Rom. 2:13). As a matter of fact, Paul stresses "the obedience of faith" at the beginning and the end of the epistle (Rom 1:5, 16:26).

"Anywhere else in the Bible to support your view?"

In the New Testament, it is shown that faith does bring justification, provided it is made alive by charity. Saving faith is active : it is "*faith working through love*" (Gal 5:6). In 1 Cor 13:2, Paul tells us that faith without love (charity) is nothing.

Charity means love of God, and Jesus says that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments (Jn 12:41). When the rich man asks Jesus what he must do to be saved, Jesus answers : "*keep the commandments*" (Mt 19:16-17). It is not enough to have faith in Him; we must also obey His commandments (Luke 6:46, Matt 7:21-23).

James also condemns the idea that we are saved by faith apart from good works: "*See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*" (Jam 2:24).

“But, are you saying you can be justified by good works?”

Not by good works alone. We are justified by grace only. We do not earn grace, but God plants his love in our hearts, and we should live out our faith by doing acts of love (Gal. 6:2). We do not earn our salvation through good works alone (Eph 2:8-9, Rom 9:16), but our faith in Christ puts us in a special grace-filled relationship with God so that our obedience in love, combined with our faith, will be rewarded with eternal life (Rom 2:7, Gal 6:8-9).

History of Sola Fide

The early Church Fathers believed that our actions play a part in our justification, as the Catholic Church teaches. Clement of Rome wrote, *“Let us clothe ourselves in concord, being humble and self-controlled, keeping ourselves far from all backbiting and slander, being justified by works and not by words”* (Letter to the Corinthians 30:3). Jerome, the great Bible scholar, also noted that *“whoever would be faithful and would conduct his life according to the faith can in no other way arrive at the faith or live in it except first he be a just man of pure life, coming up to the faith by certain degrees”* (Commentaries on Galatians 2:3:11).

Faith has been a crucial element for justification in their teachings, but not faith alone. The idea of sola fide did not come up until the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther. While meditating on Romans 1:17, Luther was overwhelmed by the teaching of Paul that we are justified by faith. Soon, he preached that works play no role in our justification, but we are saved by faith alone. He added the word “alone” to his translation of Romans 3:28 because he thought that was the sense of the text. He also found James 2:24, the only verse in the Bible which says “faith alone”, so problematic that he referred to the Book of James as an “epistle of straw” and was prepared to remove it from the canon. Anyhow, all Protestant churches embrace the doctrine from then on.

In 1999, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. The phrase “faith alone” is still used by LWF, but their definition of “faith” broadly includes hope and charity, which does not fall under the condemnations of the Catholic Church. The event drew criticisms within the Lutheran circle. For instance, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod called the accord “an opportunity for Rome to appear ecumenical without conceding a thing, and it is but the latest example of Lutherans sacrificing God’s truth on the altar of unity. The document does not represent a change in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.”

READINGS

Not By Works (*This Rock*, June 1997)

Not By Faith Alone (*This Rock*, October 1997)

Further Research

- When “works” are mentioned in NT, are they always bad? (Read Ephesians 2:8-10, Matthew 5:16, Colossians 1:10, John 10:32, Acts 9:36, 2Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 10:24, James 2:26) What do these passages say about the necessity of “good” works?