

THE GOSPEL UNDER SIEGE

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I. INTRODUCTION

To borrow a phrase from Zane Hodges, the gospel is under siege!¹

There is a battle presently being waged between those who hold to a grace understanding of the gospel and those who do not. There are three major systems attacking the gospel of grace: Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Arminian. All three are distinct theologies, but it is their commonalities that make them a united threat. This article seeks to demonstrate just that—that these three theologies are more similar than one might think.

II. THE ROMAN CATHOLIC POSITION

Justification is a lifelong process in Catholicism, which begins with baptism and continues within the confines of the church. Karl Keating says “[Christ] did his part, and now we have to cooperate by doing ours.”² The Council of Trent states:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate, in order to obtain the grace of justification...let him be anathema.

If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law [canons and decrees of the church] are not necessary for salvation but...without them...men obtain from God through faith alone the grace of justification...let him be anathema.³

¹ Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992).

² Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 166.

³ *The Council of Trent*, Session 6, Canon 9.

The Roman Catholic Catechism notes that “living faith works through charity”⁴ and “service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation.”⁵

From this theology, it logically follows that:

According to the Lord’s words “Thus you will know them by their fruits” [Mt 7:20]—reflection on God’s blessings in our life and in the lives of the saints offers us a guarantee that grace is at work in us and spurs us on to an ever greater faith and an attitude of trustful poverty.⁶

Thus, looking for “fruit” and “God’s blessings” in one’s life is the way by which a person can know whether or not they will be saved.

The following summarizes Catholic teaching: “To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love, and serve God in this world.”⁷ Without good works, no one will get to heaven.

III. THE REFORMED POSITION

Although the nomenclature “Reformed” and “Reformation” should connote drastic change, the position is closer to Rome than most would think. Radmacher states, “I fear that some current definitions of faith and repentance are not paving the way back to Wittenberg but, rather, paving the way back to Rome. Justification is becoming ‘to make righteous’ rather than ‘to declare righteous.’”⁸

Given the fact that S. Lewis Johnson calls the Westminster Confession the “standard of reference that evangelicals as a whole will accept in the main,”⁹ this document is a good place to start.

Although hypocrites, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions:

⁴ See, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 3, Sect 1, Ch 1, Art 7, Sub-Sect II, Paragraph 1815, <http://www.christusrex.org>.

⁵ *Ibid*, Paragraph 1814.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 3, Section 1, Chapter 3, Article 2, Sub-Section III, Paragraph 2005.

⁷ “Catholic Beliefs,” 1990-2001, catholic.org/clife/prayers/beliefs.shtml.

⁸ Earl Radmacher in “First Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.,” *JETS* 33:1 (March 1990): 40-41.

⁹ S. Lewis Johnson, “How Faith Works,” *Christianity Today* (September 1989): 21.

of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed.¹⁰

Thus, the Confession states that only those who truly believe, love God in sincerity, and endeavor to walk in all good conscience before him, may be assured that they will make it to heaven.

James Montgomery Boice concurs:

...this is not only a matter of our demonstrating a genuinely changed behavior and thus doing good works if we are justified. It must also be that our good works exceed the good works of others...When Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law..." he meant, "Unless you who call yourselves Christians, who profess to be justified by faith alone and therefore confess that you have nothing whatever to contribute to your own justification—unless you nevertheless conduct yourselves in a way which is utterly superior to the conduct of the very best people who are hoping to save themselves by their own good works, you will not enter God's kingdom because you are not a Christian in the first place."¹¹

R.C. Sproul sums this view up by stating, "In the Reformed view works are a necessary fruit of justification."¹²

Charles Hodge, the famous Reformed theologian writes:

False security of salvation commonly rests on the ground of our belonging to a privileged body, the church, or to a privileged class, the elect. Both are equally fallacious. *Neither the members of the church nor the elect can be saved unless they persevere in holiness.* And they cannot persevere in holiness without continual watchfulness and effort.¹³

¹⁰ See www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html.

¹¹ J. Montgomery Boice, *Amazing Grace* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1993), 73-74.

¹² R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 156.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 181, emphasis added.

In a small booklet by John Piper, in which he discusses Perseverance of the Saints, he writes, “Election is unconditional, but glorification is not. There are many warnings in Scripture that those who do not hold fast to Christ can be lost in the end.”¹⁴

Arthur W. Pink makes the following “line in the sand” statement: “Readers, if there is a reserve in your obedience, you are on your way to hell.”¹⁵ He elaborates elsewhere by saying:

There is a deadly and damnable heresy being widely propagated today to the effect that, if a sinner truly accepts Christ as his personal Savior, no matter how he lives afterwards, he cannot perish. That is a satanic lie, for it is at direct variance with the teaching of the Word of truth. *Something more than believing in Christ is necessary to ensure the soul's reaching heaven.*¹⁶

Again, Pink writes:

...all faith does not save; yea, all faith in Christ does not save. Multitudes are deceived upon this vital matter. Thousands of those who sincerely believe that they have received Christ as their personal Savior and are resting on His finished work, are building upon a foundation of sand.¹⁷

The Council of Trent authors would probably give a hearty “Amen!”

IV. THE ARMINIAN POSITION

The Remonstrants, followers of Arminius, wrote in reaction to the Calvinists, “True believers can through their own fault fall into horrible sins and blasphemies, persevere and die in the same: and accordingly they can finally fall away and go lost.”¹⁸ The Remonstrants thus taught the possibility of a loss of justification.

¹⁴ John Piper and Bethlehem Baptist Church, *TULIP: What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism* (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 1997), 23.

¹⁵ A.W. Pink, *Practical Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1974), 16.

¹⁶ A.W. Pink, Quoted in Ian Murray, *The Life of A.W. Pink* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 248-49, emphasis added.

¹⁷ A.W. Pink, *Studies on Saving Faith*, www.reformed.org/books/pink.

¹⁸ Laurence Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 1991, 1999), 605.

John Wesley, in writing a letter to a Roman Catholic, tried to show how similar Catholics and Protestants are. He writes,

If he does not [act according to Christian principles], we grant all his faith will not save him. And this leads me to show you, in few and plain words, what the practice of a true protestant¹⁹ is...

A true Protestant believes in God, has a full confidence in his mercy, fears him with a filial fear, and loves him with all his soul. He worships God in spirit and in truth, in every thing gives him thanks; calls upon him with his heart as well as his lips, at all times and in all places; honors his holy name and his word, and serves him truly all the days of his life...²⁰

Shank concurs: "There is no valid assurance of election and final salvation for any man, apart from deliberate perseverance in faith."²¹ Agreeing Guy Duty states, "We have seen that God's salvation covenant is a continuing covenant. And it is a monstrous deception to teach that the continual sinner will be saved by a continued covenant that demands his continued obedience."²²

Daniel Corner's newsletter gives a vitriolic and thorough explanation of Arminian teaching:

to enter the kingdom of God Christians must endure hatred and persecution to the very end of their lives (Mt. 10:22; Heb. 3:14; Rev. 2:10, 11); live holy (Rom. 6:22; Heb. 12:14); bring forth good fruit (Mt. 7:19); and do good works (John 5:29), according to New Testament grace.²³

¹⁹ John Wesley notes, "I say *true Protestant*; for I disclaim all common swearers, Sabbath breakers, drunkards; all whoremongers, liars, cheats, extortioners; in a word, all that live in open sin. These are no Protestants; they are no Christians at all..." ("A Letter to a Roman Catholic," in *Selections from the writings of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Herbert Welch [New York: Eaton & Mains, 1901], 229).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Pubs., 1960), 293.

²² Guy Duty, *If Ye Continue* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1966), 65, 169.

²³ Daniel Corner, "Pairs of Truths," in *Fighting the Good Fight*, Vol. 8, Num. 2 (Summer 2002), 5.

It is clear that Arminians teach that by committing some gross sin the one who is justified can lose their justification and thereby forfeit heaven if they do not repent before they die. Thus, works are crucial in maintaining one's justification.

V. CONCLUSION

Anyone who reads from Catholic, Reformed, and Arminian writings will soon see that although they do not agree on everything, one thing is clear: all three believe that works are necessary in order to get to heaven. Consequently, all three fail to teach faith alone in Christ alone. In these systems, faith and works are co-conditions for entering into heaven. Such teaching has gone far astray from the Biblical doctrine that eternal life is given by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, in Christ *alone*, plus *nothing else*.