

Justification, Sanctification and the Great Divide of Christianity

And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled.

I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.

-John 17: 11-12, 20-23

It is of the most extreme form of sad irony that the great divide between Catholicism/Orthodoxy and Protestantism can easily be described by the title of William Shakespeare's famous play: *Much Ado About Nothing*. While I cannot speak for all Christians, the Devil, at least, certainly believed in what Jesus had to say when Jesus said: And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18). Satan has clearly decided to attack the Church from the inside, by splitting off members from it. The fact that there are about 36,000 (and rapidly growing) different flavors of Christianity in the U.S. alone is unquestionable proof of his success. And his harvest is terrifying. For my generation, the fastest growing Church was the "nones," those who claimed to be Christian but never attended any service. We were told to find solace in the fact they were still Christians and presumably worshiped at home. But for the current generation, the fastest growing Church (not that it can properly be called a "church") is "Spirituality," and Atheism is likewise growing at an incredible rate.

So, where did all this internal strife come from, and why is it important? Without a doubt, the dividing line between Catholic/Orthodox and Protestants is the issue of Justification versus Sanctification. I am going to take some time to talk about it here.

A) Definitions: It seems like every flavor of Christianity has its own unique meaning for the following words. As such, it will be impossible for me to give definitions that can both make any Church happy with it and still be meaningful for general discussion. I will attempt to define them in a manner that will allow for an understanding of what is going on while at the same time still be recognizable for the majority of Christians. I ask the gentle reader to accept these definitions, at least for this paper. To argue over petty variations will only serve the Devil by keeping us from the unity Jesus prayed for above.

1) Grace: In its highest sense, a gift from God to an unworthy person (which we all are) that allows passage to heaven. In a lower sense, any other gift from God which is intended to build one up to the highest form (a "blessing," as some would say).

2) Justification: Justification is the permanent receiving of this highest form of Grace. For

Catholics and Orthodox, it is the end state of a Christian life, something hoped for during the Judgment. For most Protestants, it is what makes them Christians in the first place and happens during Baptism. This difference in opinions on Justification is the Great Divide I spoke of.

3) Sanctification: Sanctification is the process leading towards Justification for Catholics and Orthodoxy, but for most Protestants, it is the result of Justification at Baptism.

4) Baptism: The washing away of all sin and therefore preparing the body for Grace, which the Holy Spirit provides as the event unfolds. The specific role of Baptism and how it applies to Justification and Sanctification varies tremendously between Churches. Furthermore, it has been my experience that many members of the different Churches do not really understand what their Church's position on Baptism really is.

It is because of this confusion and misunderstanding over Baptism that most communication problems arise when discussing Justification and Sanctification. This confusion, in my opinion, becomes a distraction from what the real issue is: what happens afterwards (instant Justification or a life of Sanctification leading to final Justification). We find ourselves arguing over how many points a "goal" is worth without agreeing to which sport we are talking about.

5) Sacrament: A Sacrament is simply the outward (or Earthly) sign of God's Grace. It also embodies one of the unique and powerful aspects of Christianity: the marriage of the Ritual with the Philosophical. Of course, all Christian Philosophy ultimately comes back to attempts to understand the mystery of God's Grace. The one Sacrament all Christians seem to agree upon is Baptism. Here we see the use of water and a dedication of oneself to the Triune God (the Ritual) married with the mystery of receiving God's Grace (the Philosophical).

Christianity is the *only* religion in the world that requires an individual to participate in both the Ritual and the Philosophical. The seven Sacraments most commonly associated with Catholic religious development are perhaps the most famous, but any combination of "the real" with spiritual growth (i.e., receiving Grace) is properly called a Sacrament. Attendance at Church, missionary work, acts of "dying to oneself" and preaching the Gospel are all examples of Sacraments. A Sacrament need not even be a human activity, as a building dedicated to the worship of the triune God is also properly called a Sacrament.

B) Where Does the Confusion Begin?:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.
-John 3:36

I want to begin with the everyday Sacrament that involves having Faith while performing good deeds. Sadly, much debate arises over which aspect is more important than the other. To prioritize them weakens the Sacrament. For those who seem to think that one aspect can stand alone without the other, we see the Sacrament destroyed altogether. As we can see from the above Gospel of Saint John, Jesus Himself declares them inseparable. To declare that one can have "Faith" without being "Faithful" (hence, Obedient) is a heresy by the testimony of Jesus Himself. But through those who refuse to accept this fact, Satan has been able to find a backdoor into the Church.

The Catholic Church's position, which is shared by the Orthodoxy (although they place less

importance on the matter than either the Catholics or Protestants) and the Methodists, is to promote a lifestyle of participating in Sacraments. Baptism is the starting point where all sins (including the stain of Original Sin) are removed. By removing sin and accepting the Holy Spirit, Faith is born. But this is actually a second and stronger kind of Faith, as agreeing to being Baptized in the first place is also an act of Faith (in the case of innocents, the parents, godparents and congregation assume responsibility of teaching the infant this first and lesser form of Faith). Just like the seeds that Jesus uses to describe it, Faith must grow. Performing good deeds (faithfulness or obedience) with the Hope of eternal life is the Sacramental means of growing the Faith. This is the Catholic idea of Sanctification. Eventually, one will be judged by God and, if found worthy, will be Justified and made a saint. This is what the Apostles taught 2,000 years ago: For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from *faith to faith*; as it is written, "The one who is *righteous by faith* will live." (Romans 1:17, italics mine) Saint Paul is speaking how Faith grows through Obedience.

Almost 1,600 years after the Apostles, Martin Luther and others decided to shift the scales slightly so the Philosophical aspect took precedence over the Ritual. In all fairness, the Catholic Church had been doing so already. It took an infusion of more humble priests (most notably, Franciscan Monks) into the Magisterium (the College of Bishops) and then for one to hold the honor of becoming Pope to again balance the Philosophical with the Ritual. But while the Catholic Church eventually returned to a balance, the early Protestant Reformers proceeded to place the Philosophical slightly over the Ritual.

While many other changes were also made, the most profound change Martin Luther did was to declare that the Catholic idea of Sanctification promoting Justification was backwards. By endorsing *Sola Fide* (faith alone), he taught that one must have God's Grace before being capable of doing *any* good, so therefore one must need to be Justified before one could be Sanctified. As Baptism was still unquestioningly recognized as the removing of sin, he and other Reformers taught that this is the point where Justification takes place. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into all the details, most of the early Reformers (except for Calvin) acknowledged that those Justified could and would sin later, and that one could still sin to the point of losing the Grace received. One term for this is known today as "backsliding," but the phrase "false faith" also applies to some.

One of Luther's contemporaries, Calvin, took this idea one step further and suggested that, since God knew all that was going to happen since before the world was made, that one's Justification took place the moment God decided to create the universe. Therefore, Sanctification was not a means of Justification or a result of it, but rather an Earthly indication of those who were Justified.

Since the Reformation, innumerable variations of these ideas have arisen, but the general trend seems to be pulling farther and farther away from what either the Catholic Church or the early Protestant leaders taught. As Protestantism continues to divide, the Philosophical tends to grow while the Ritual diminishes. I will discuss shortly (**Topic D**) my views on what that trend means.

C) So, Who's Right?: In 1999, The Catholic Church and most members of the Lutheran World Federation (which represents almost all Lutheran denominations) signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). In 2006, the World Methodist Council signed it. In 2017, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (which represents about 80,000,000 Christians and include the Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting, and Waldensian Churches) also signed it.

While the JDDJ addressed many issues in detail, for this paper I am primarily concerned about the outcome. In it, all parties agreed that Grace, Justification, Sanctification and Baptism were all

essential parts to salvation and theologically sound. It further stated that, while the different Churches had different views, interpretations and reasons for their teachings, they all lead to the same end. Finally, none of the Churches disagreed on how a good Christian should act. The JDDJ essentially says that, while we all are taking a different route to get there, we all use the same tools Jesus gave us and we will still end up in the same Heaven.

As such, none of the Churches represented by this document can argue on theological grounds that the teachings of salvation is "wrong" for any other represented Church. So what? Well, the Catholic Church represents 50% of all Christians, the Orthodox represent 11% to 14% more, and the Protestant Churches that signed the JDDJ represent another 12%. This means that 3 out of every 4 Christians belong to a Church that officially supports the idea that the great divide between Catholicism/Orthodoxy and Protestantism is a matter of interpretation of the same truth, not heresy. While this is perhaps the single greatest event to reconcile the Church that Jesus built through Saint Peter, we still have a long way to go.

D) The Real Harm: There would be no need for Christianity if there were no division in the world. If man had never separated from God, there would be no need for redemption and Justification would be a birthright. It is God's plan, through the work of Jesus, to bring us all back to Him. As such, there is no harm in one being Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic or Protestant as long as one works towards one's own salvation based on one's own rational and reasonable interpretation of what this means. To me, the real harm that the Protestant Reformation did was much more subtle than merely disagreeing over "which road to take."

By degrading the Ritual, the Sanctification process went from being proactive to reactive. For the early forms of Protestantism, this difference was very small. What they kept from their Catholic roots, an inherent fear of Hell and acknowledgment of man's continued existence as being sinful, meant most differences at this point were superficial (even if hotly debated). Non-Christians at the time probably would have had a hard time knowing one Church from the other. To this day, I often find it difficult to tell a Lutheran service from a Catholic one, with a wedding ring on the priest's finger often being the clearest indication. But a legacy of questioning how important the Ritual is to Christianity was started, and it has continued to grow to an alarming degree. I see videos on YouTube where, if I turned the mute button on and ignored the title, I would not know if I was watching open mike night at a bar, a random man standing on stage addressing fellow workers at the union hall, a comedian doing stand-up comedy or a preacher addressing a congregation in his "progressive" church. The only "tell-tale" would be if the speaker decided to hold up a Bible.

There are those who might say we have to adapt to the world in order to get the world to hear us. Certainly, Jesus Himself told us to be clever and pragmatic in this endeavor (see Matthew 10:16). He clearly tells His followers that evil ones do a better job teaching evil than holy ones do teaching holiness (consider the Parable of the Dishonest Steward from Luke 16:1-13, particularly verse 8). But He also tells us that the truth cannot be compromised. After giving His "Bread of Life Discourse" (John 6:22-59), Jesus is left with only 12 followers after 5,000 men and their families walk away because they didn't see what they wanted to see (a miracle to top the previous day's miracle of feeding these same 5,000 men and their families). How do we reconcile this? There is, of course, no simple answer. As one goes from time to time and culture to culture, the answer will change as well. But to truly teach Christianity, one must teach what Christianity is or else one is teaching something non-Christian. And no small part of Christianity is the union of Ritual and Philosophical.

E) The Cancer of Denying the Ritual: While the Philosophical helps us to learn the truth of God, it

is the Ritual that "makes it real." When the Philosophical and the Ritual become separated, individuals tend to cling to one or the other. For those who cling to the Philosophical, they tend to lose touch with what makes Christianity a religion and make their way towards Spirituality, then Agnosticism and possibly even into Atheism as God becomes more and more abstract. For those who tend towards the Ritual (which is the majority), the context for the Ritual becomes lost and its very meaning becomes perverted. In what I call "Ritualized Scripture," key passages of the Bible (often taken out of context to begin with) become the absolute truth, untouchable by any and all logic. Even other passages of scripture that are inconsistent with this viewpoint are downgraded or ignored.

I don't want to go item by item with every major Protestant division that has taken place, but it is clear that, as Protestantism has branched out over the past 500 years, Christians are losing their perspective. As stated before, those who tend towards the Philosophical (such as myself) tend to leave Christianity altogether (and it was with a great lesson in humility that I had to learn of my error). For those who tend towards the Ritual, Christianity becomes a mere shadow of the teachings Jesus and the Apostles gave us; just one more "quick fix" among millions that are being pushed on us in today's culture.

For example, Baptism has become less about the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles concerning salvation and more about "checking the box." The number of Christians on social media and standing on street corners claiming "all one has to do is claim Jesus as Lord and Savior" should be frightening to anyone who seriously contemplates one's Christian faith. While this is certainly a *part* of Christianity, it is far from being the *only* part of Christianity as suggested. If the Crucifixion of Jesus was merely a "Get Out of Jail Free Card," then can not one do what one wants without a second thought because Jesus has already paid for the sin? Why bother with Church, giving to charity, helping others, or examining one's own sins? Why even read the Bible?

I've actually overheard someone ask what one needs to do to become a Christian, and the answer given to them was "do you accept Jesus as your lord and savior?" When the first person responded yes, she was told that's all there is to it! You could hear the disappointment in the woman's voice as she verified all that. She didn't want just another "wonder pill to fix her ills;" she wanted real answers. Yet the responder assured her that was all that was needed, apparently blind to what was to me a very real and desperate cry for help. And if we as Christians don't respond to this kind of real need with real answers, then we can't criticize them for going to Atheistic philosophers who claim they can offer more.

I have discovered for myself that these Ritualistic Christians can be people of strong Faith, yet many steadfastly deny any personal responsibility for their own salvation (I have even been called the anti-Christ for my attempts to "deceive" them with 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 on this matter; the scripture is at the end of this paper). While I think all Christians would do well to have Faith that strong, it is a faith based on what they were taught, *not* on reason. Pagans and Atheists have Faith such as this themselves. Can we honestly believe that God will only save those fortunate enough to be born to parents who were already Christian? The parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31) seems to suggest quite the opposite. Furthermore, I find it ironic that those who have Ritualized the Faith also tend to be those who are most opposed to Rituals! They will adamantly deny that sprinkling water on someone's head and saying "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" is a Ritual, presumably because it is directed by scripture.

F) Loss of Grace:

I want ask a simple, legitimate question: what happens when one loses the Grace received at Baptism, especially for those Churches who teach a single Baptism (which is the overwhelming majority). We see this is not a new question, as Saint Paul addresses it Galatians 5:19-26:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that *those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. *If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit*. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another. (italics mine)

The Catholic answer maintains the seamless union of Ritual and Philosophical. With Sanctification taking place after Baptism, and Justification only after death, we see the seed of Faith planted at Baptism and given a chance to grow (Jesus alludes to this in Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6) through a steady diet of Sacraments. As the question of what happens to one when one falls out of Grace, the answer is the Sacrament of Reconciliation (it combines the Ritual of confession with the Philosophical of self-examination). The Grace lost is not replaced, it is renewed.

For most Protestants, they have dropped the Ritual of confessing but have retained the Philosophical aspect of self-examination and asking God directly for forgiveness (in other words, cut out the "middle man"). Now, while confessing to a priest is certainly Biblical (although I won't discuss that here), I will not claim that God, in seeking to save as many of us as possible, would ignore any sincere plea for forgiveness. The Catholic Church routinely and formally prays for *all* souls to go to Heaven. Saint John Vianney the Confessor famously called out from inside his confessional to a woman who had waited hours to see him and was about to go home (he would spend 16 to 18 hours a day every day hearing confessions during the last 10 years of his life, so great were the numbers who came to him). Saint Vianney called out that her husband, who had committed suicide, had repented between the fatal moment of jumping and his actual death and would be saved! Saint Vianney then directed her to pray for him.

But my emphasis here is not on what it takes to reconcile with God, but rather the unintended consequence of belittling the Ritual part of the Sacrament of Contrition. Many Christians, and they tend to be the more vocal kind, claim that "once saved, always saved." Even if they themselves make self-examination a habit, they certainly cannot teach this effectively to those they "convert" with this message. How are the neophytes to know to examine themselves and why should they even care based on this message? There are even some Churches who preach that, since God is love, no one is going to Hell. Self-examination is a Biblical requirement and Hell is a Biblical reality. None of the Fathers of Protestantism believed otherwise.

Conclusion: How Justification and Sanctification interact with each other has been *the* cause of the massive division in the Church. It is sad irony that, after all the hatred and even bloodshed over this issue, many of the reasons for it have since been considered of secondary importance between the larger Churches. A proper understanding of our dependence on God's Grace is a common belief among Christians, as is recognizing the need to do good deeds to grow Faith. But while much of the theological damage has been reconciled, there are still the practical aspects to be considered. While I cannot say the conservative Protestants are "wrong" with regard to their idea of salvation, I can clearly see division within the Church growing at a horrifying pace as the split between the Ritual and Philosophical steadily destroys Christianity from the inside.

"According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire."

-1 Corinthians 3:10-15

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