

Faith Pulpit

The Catholic View of Salvation: A Fundamentalist Evaluation

Introduction

On March 29, 1994 a declaration was released entitled, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” It states, “We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ.” But is the evangelical (or fundamentalist) view of salvation really the same as the Roman Catholic? The evangelical/fundamentalist view teaches that the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross accomplished our salvation and that this salvation is applied by personal trust in this sacrifice.

The Roman Catholic View of Salvation

1. Salvation is accomplished by the death of Christ.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (page 160, paragraph #615) states: “By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant, who ‘makes himself an offering for sin,’ when ‘he bore the sin of many,’ and who ‘shall make many to be accounted righteous,’ for ‘he shall bear their iniquities.’ Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.”

At first glance, this seems to be identical to the fundamentalist view. However, Catholic teaching concerning what happens during the Lord’s Supper makes these two views radically different.

First, the Catholic Church teaches that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice: ...’In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner’ ” (page 344, paragraph #1367).

Second, the Catholic Church teaches, “As often as the sacrifice of the cross ... is celebrated on an altar, the work of our redemption is carried on” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” The Documents of Vatican II, Abbott edition, page 16). In contrast, the Catholic Bible teaches something else. It says, “By this [i.e., God’s ‘will,’ we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ... For by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated” (Hebrews 10:10, 14 New American Bible Revised NT – a Roman Catholic Translation).

2. Salvation is applied through faith.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “Believing in Jesus Christ and in the One who sent him for our salvation is necessary for obtaining that salvation” (page 44, paragraph #161). Again, this seems to be identical to the fundamentalist view. However, it is not.

First, saving faith in Catholic theology is not merely trusting completely in the finished work of Christ at Calvary for salvation. It is trust, but the object of trust is “God” rather than the death of Christ; the nature of this trust emphasizes assent to teaching rather than reliance on the Son of God who died for our sins, and the character of this trust is church-related rather than individual. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

Faith is a personal adherence of the whole man to God who reveals himself. It involves an assent of the intellect & will to the self-revelation God has made through his deeds and words. ... ‘Believing’ is an ecclesial act. The Church’s faith precedes, engenders, supports, and nourishes our faith. The Church is the mother of all believers (page 48, paragraphs 176 & 181).

What does the Catholic Bible say? “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood” (Romans 3:23–25 New American Bible Revised New Testament).

Second, Catholic theology differs from a fundamentalist view of saving faith on the sufficiency of faith. Catholic theology says: “Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament” (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, page 320, paragraph #1257). And what does Catholic theology say about those to whom the gospel has not been proclaimed? “Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience” (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” The Documents of Vatican II, Abbott edition, page 35). The Catholic Bible, however, does not agree with this view. It teaches that faith alone in the death of Christ brings salvation.

In John 3, Jesus explains to Nicodemus what it means to be born again. In doing so, our Lord refers to an Old Testament event in which the Israelites (1) sinned against God, (2) were punished by God with poisonous snakes, (3) repented, and (4) were told to look on an uplifted bronze snake and they would live (Numbers 21:4–9). Jesus said, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14,15).

What brought deliverance to the Israelites was not merely assent to God’s revelation but a personal trust in God’s provision (the uplifted bronze serpent). Likewise, what brings eternal life to people today is personal trust in the One who was lifted up on the cross for our sins. This same Bible states, ‘For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law’ (Romans 3:28). That is why Paul refused to identify water baptism with the gospel: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 1:17). And that is why Paul contrasted saving grace with good works: Explaining that even at the present time God, by grace, was saving a small group of Jewish people, Paul says, “But if by grace, it is no longer because of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11:6 New American Bible Revised NT).

Conclusion

Sincere as the writers of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” surely are, they are also misguided. Producing a document in which the affirmations are so couched in biblical terminology that views radically different in substance can agree on the wording is not really helpful.

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.