

JUSTIFICATION: FAITH, WORKS AND THE REFORMATION

The doctrine of justification was of central importance to the 16th Century Reformers and became the fundamental point of contention between them and the Roman authorities.

“Catholics insisted on good works as a sign of faith, as necessary for salvation, and Protestants said no, no, no, it's only the grace of Christ,” explained Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The Reformers were concerned that the Church's emphasis on good works had created a situation in which people might consider that they had “earned” salvation, that God “owed” them a place in the Kingdom because of the works they had done on earth. The Reformers held this to be at odds with their reading of the Sacred Scriptures, which stressed that justification – the forgiveness of sins, liberation from the Law, and communion with God – is brought about by the grace of God through Christ Jesus (*Romans 3*). We are saved through our faith in the redemptive actions of Christ, which faith itself is a gift from God. Not even Abraham, our father in faith, was justified by his works, but by his faith in God (*Romans 4*). For the Reformers, the doctrine of justification was a unique and indispensable criterion that oriented the teachings and practices of the faith community to Christ.

The Roman Church, on the other hand, held that faith necessarily gave rise to good works and that without works, faith was dead. While not claiming that good works without justification by God could merit salvation, the Church did teach that the good works performed by a justified person had merit. Still, it held that nothing that precedes justification by the grace of God, whether faith or works, merits that justification. Man has no claim on God's grace, but is the beneficiary of God's freely-given love. The Church looked to James 2:14-26 in support of its position on the necessity of works as a witness to faith.

The differing stances on the controversy hardened into opposition and each side eventually issued doctrinal condemnations of the other's position. After Vatican II, a new dialogue was initiated with the Lutheran Church, as theologians on both sides recognized that new insights had occurred in their respective histories. Advancements in biblical studies and developments in the history of theology and dogma brought them to examine the divisive questions and condemnations in a new light. Biblical passages which had been relied on for support became the grounds for a shared understanding.

The resulting consensus on the basic truths involved brought the churches to formally make the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999. This has become a foundational step towards church unity as other churches have ratified it. The Anglican Church's acceptance in October 2017 marks the completion of this process with the original Reformation churches.