

Distinguishing the Faith

Is the Roman Catholic Doctrine of Justification Orthodox?

A Comparison and Contrast of Catholic and Reformed Doctrine

1. Historical Background:

- a. The Reformation and Protestantism (1517) – recovering the gospel.
- b. The Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent (1545-1563).
- c. Continued Catholic affirmation: Vatican II, the 1992 Catechism, and the irrevocability of dogmatic declaration¹.

¹ “The Church’s magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is, when it proposes, in a form obliging the Christian people to **an irrevocable adherence** of faith, truths contained in divine Revelation or also when it proposes, in a definitive way, truths having a necessary connection with these.” (CCC 88)

2. Key Terminology:

- a. Canon = An dogmatic declaration by the Catholic Church, often issued by a council, that defines specific doctrines or practices and carrying the weight of ecclesiastical authority.
- b. Anathema = Galatians 1:8-9 from the Greek *ἀνάθεμα* (anathma), meaning “accursed,” indicating excommunication due to heretical belief and final judgment if no repentance.

Catholic Canons on Justification from The Council of Trent	Contrasting Reformed (Orthodox) Beliefs
Canon 9: If anyone says that by faith alone the impious is justified, and that nothing else is required to cooperate in obtaining the grace of justification, let him be anathema.	We believe justification is by faith alone (<i>sola fide</i>), as taught in passages like Romans 4:4-5 and Galatians 2:16. Good works are the fruit of justification, not a condition for it.
Canon 11: If anyone says that men are justified solely by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness or by the remission of sins alone, let him be anathema.	We affirm justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Justification is a legal declaration by God, separate from inherent righteousness.
Canon 12: If anyone says that justifying faith is only confidence in the divine mercy that remits sins, let him be anathema.	We believe justifying faith is trusting in Christ’s finished work and God’s promises apart from our works (Ephesians 2:8-9).
Canon 14: If anyone says that man is justified because he believes himself to be justified, let him be anathema.	We believe that assurance of justification is grounded in the promises of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16, 1 John 5:13), not in self-confidence.
Canon 16: If anyone says that certainty of perseverance to the end is granted without special revelation, let him be anathema.	We affirm the perseverance of the saints, believing it is rooted in God’s sovereign grace (Philippians 1:6, John 10:28-29).
Canon 17: If anyone says that justification is only given to the predestined, and not to all who are called, let him be anathema.	We believe in a general call to all but an effectual call only for the elect. These alone are justified (Romans 8:29-30).
Canon 18: If anyone says the commandments of God are impossible to keep for those justified, let him be anathema.	We believe that it is impossible to perfectly obey God’s commandments due to the flesh but affirm that believers are empowered by the Spirit to grow in holiness (Romans 7:18-25, Galatians 5:16-18).
Canon 23: If anyone says a justified person cannot sin or lose grace, let him be anathema.	We affirm that believers can sin but are eternally secure in Christ if truly justified (1 John 1:9, John 6:37-40).

Catholic Canons on Justification from The Council of Trent	Contrasting Reformed (Orthodox) Beliefs
Canon 24: If anyone says that good works are only the fruit of justification and not a cause of its increase, let him be anathema.	We affirm that good works are the result of justification, not a means to increase it. Justification cannot be “increased” (Ephesians 2:10, Titus 3:5-8).
Canon 27: If anyone says grace is not lost by grievous sin, except by infidelity, let him be anathema.	We believe that justification is a gift of unconditional grace and is not obtained by obedience nor lost by disobedience to specific sins (Romans 8:1, 1 John 2:1-2).
Canon 30: If anyone says that after justification no temporal punishment remains, let him be anathema.	We reject the idea of purgatory or temporal <i>punishment</i> for sins, though the Lord disciplines His children (Hebrews 10:14; 12:5-6; Romans 8:33-34).
Canon 32: If anyone says good works do not merit eternal life or an increase in grace, let him be anathema.	We believe that eternal life is a gift of grace, not merited by works. Grace is not grace if it is payment for work (Romans 4:4, 6:23, Titus 3:5).
Canon 33: If anyone says the Catholic doctrine of justification detracts from Christ’s glory, let him be anathema.	We contend that doctrines requiring works for justification detract from Christ's sufficiency and the glory of His finished work (Galatians 2:21).
Canon 4 (Sacraments): If anyone says the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema.	We affirm that salvation is by grace through faith, not dependent on sacraments, though sacraments are signs and seals of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 4:11).

3. Are these differences serious?

- a. These dogmas represent irreconcilable differences between Roman Catholic and Reformed Evangelical doctrine on the central matter of justification.
- b. Justification is the topic of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, and he condemns as “accursed” any teaching on justification that is contrary to what he preached.
- c. Both of these doctrines cannot be true—one or the other is a false gospel!