

Lecture 10: Faith Alone in the Fathers: The Gospel Before the Reformation

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 61 minutes

This is the lecture the course has been building toward: the claim that the Reformation's gospel is the early church's gospel, proven from the fathers' own mouths. Busenitz first documents from Roman Catholic sources what Rome teaches, then reads quotation after quotation of faith alone across seven centuries. Let the accumulation do its work; that is the point.

STUDYSHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

What evangelical actually means

Luther took the Greek word for gospel, euangelion, and made it the name of the Reformation church; Tyndale carried it into English. An evangelical, in the historic sense, is simply a gospel Christian, defined by two convictions: Scripture alone as the final authority, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So defined, the term is not political, not a synonym for compromise, and not confined to the years after 1517; it names true believers in every century.

02

Synergism and monergism

The dividing question is precise: in justification, does God do everything (monergism), or do God and man each contribute a part (synergism)? Rome teaches the latter, however carefully wrapped in the language of grace. Busenitz's method is to prove that from Rome's own documents before answering it from history.

03

Rome in its own words

The Catholic Catechism says salvation is attained through faith, baptism, and the observance of the Commandments, the ellipsis is Rome's own; Trent binds the Ten Commandments on the justified. Busenitz notes the eerie symmetry with Acts 15: the Judaizers demanded faith plus circumcision plus the law of Moses; Rome asks faith plus baptism, which it calls the new circumcision, plus the Commandments, the law's summary. The Catholic Encyclopedia adds that over and above faith other acts are necessary; Catholic Answers calls good works meritorious toward eternal life; and the theologian Ludwig Ott states it plainly: eternal life is both a gift of grace and a reward for one's own merits.

04

Romans 11:6 ends the synthesis

Grace plus works is not a hard balance; it is a contradiction. If it is by grace, Paul writes, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. A system in which grace merely enables the works that then merit heaven has made God's mercy the wages of a laborer, and the fathers, as the lecture will show, saw that clearly.

Root and fruit, in Augustine's own words

The evangelical distinction is ancient: the root of justification is faith, the fruit is works. Augustine says it exactly, reconciling Paul and James on Abraham: I have praise for the superstructure of action, but I see the foundation of faith; I admire the good work as fruit, but it springs from the root of faith. Luther was converted inside an Augustinian monastery, and Calvin cites Augustine over a hundred times; the reformers stood on this.

The earliest voices

Clement of Rome, whom Rome counts its fourth pope, writes that we are not justified by our own wisdom or godliness or even works wrought in holiness of heart, but by faith, the very answer to Rome's later claim that the regenerate merit heaven by holy works. Polycarp: saved by a gracious gift, not from works. And the anonymous letter to Diognetus sings the sweet exchange: the righteous one for the unrighteous, that the righteousness of one should justify many transgressors, substitutionary atonement in the early second century.

The parade continues

Origen: God, being just, could not justify the unjust, so he provided a propitiator, that by faith in him those who could not be justified by their works might be justified. Basil of Caesarea: justified solely by faith in Christ, boasting only in the Lord. Hilary of Poitiers says faith justifies some twenty times in one commentary: wages are owed to work, but God has given free grace by the justification of faith. Ambrose: no one is justified by his works; faith delivers us by the blood of Christ. Chrysostom, the father of expository preaching, marvels with Paul that enemies and sinners are through faith alone advanced to the highest favor.

Faith alone, in so many words

Jerome: faith alone suffices as righteousness. Ambrosiaster, the unknown commentator once mistaken for Ambrose: whoever believes in Christ shall be saved, not through works but through faith alone, without merit; Abraham was justified not by the works of the law but by faith alone. Victorinus on Ephesians: God's gift, not from anything deserved. Prosper of Aquitaine asks the killing question: would it not debase redemption in Christ's blood if justification were owed to preceding merits, the wages of a laborer rather than the gift of a donor? Theodore of Cyrus: all we bring to grace is our faith, and even in this faith, divine grace is our enabler, for faith is not a work but God's gift.

To the edge of the middle ages

Cyril of Alexandria: justified by faith, not by works of the law, in the one who suffered death for our sake. Even Leo of Rome, who did much to build what became the papacy, confesses justification not paid for by merits but simply given as a free gift. Fulgentius: saving faith is bestowed by God's free generosity. And the Venerable Bede, in the eighth century: no one obtains justification from works performed beforehand, for the gift of justification comes only from faith. Seven centuries, one confession.

When Rome crossed the line

Apostasy came gradually, tradition layering over the gospel, but Busenitz, following Geisler and Betancourt, marks the decisive line at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, where transubstantiation, the primacy of Rome's bishop, and the sacramental system were pronounced dogma; before the thirteenth century, they argue, most non-Catholics today could still have belonged to the church. Gregg Allison adds that Thomas Aquinas, more than anyone, fixed the synergistic doctrine of justification, grace plus human cooperation and merit, a substantial departure from Augustine that became determinative for Rome.

Recovery, not reaction

The reformers were not rebelling against church history; they were rescuing it from two and a half centuries of sacramental theology. The Waldensians were already preaching before Lateran IV met, so the testimony was never extinguished. Calvin, in his letter to the king of France, put it with uncharacteristic boldness: if the contest were decided by patristic authority, the tide of victory would turn to our side, for the greater part of what we teach meets with the fathers' approval. Busenitz's charge to his students: never concede church history to Rome; it is not theirs to keep.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Genesis 15 · Acts 15 · Romans 4 · Romans 10 · Romans 11 · Ephesians 2 · Titus 3 · James 2

KEY TERMS

Evangelical

Historically, a gospel Christian: one holding Scripture as final authority and justification by grace alone through faith alone; a term that spans all centuries of true believers.

Monergism

The biblical teaching that God alone accomplishes justification, from first to last.

Synergism

The teaching that God and man each contribute to justification; Rome's system, however wrapped in the language of grace.

The sacramental system

Rome's channel of salvation through sacraments, made official dogma at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.

The sweet exchange

The letter to Diognetus's celebration of substitutionary atonement: the righteousness of one justifying many transgressors.

Ambrosiaster

The anonymous fourth century commentator once mistaken for Ambrose, whose commentary repeatedly says justified by faith alone.

The Fourth Lateran Council

The 1215 council where transubstantiation, Roman primacy, and the seven sacraments became dogma; the line Busenitz marks for Rome's apostasy.

Merit

The Roman category of works earning reward toward eternal life; the very thing Prosper said would debase redemption in Christ's blood.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. Where does the word evangelical come from?
 - A. A Latin word for protest
 - B. Luther's use of the Greek word for gospel, carried into English by Tyndale
 - C. A nineteenth century political movement
 - D. The name of a medieval order
2. What is the difference between monergism and synergism?
 - A. Two views of the millennium
 - B. Whether God alone accomplishes justification or God and man each contribute
 - C. Two theories of church government
 - D. Greek versus Latin theology
3. According to the Catholic Catechism as quoted, salvation is attained through what?
 - A. Faith alone
 - B. Faith, baptism, and the observance of the Commandments
 - C. Baptism alone
 - D. The church's intercession alone
4. What parallel does Busenitz draw between Rome's formula and Acts 15?
 - A. Both councils met in Jerusalem
 - B. Faith plus baptism plus the Commandments mirrors faith plus circumcision plus the law of Moses
 - C. Both affirmed faith alone
 - D. Both were rejected by Peter
5. How does Romans 11:6 answer any grace plus works system?
 - A. It permits the mixture in small measure
 - B. If it is by grace, it is no longer of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace
 - C. It applies only to Israel
 - D. It speaks of wages, not grace
6. How did Augustine reconcile Paul and James on Abraham?
 - A. He said James was in error
 - B. The good work is the fruit springing from the root of faith
 - C. He said Paul spoke only of Gentiles
 - D. He removed James from his canon
7. What in Clement of Rome's wording answers Rome's later claim that the regenerate merit heaven?
 - A. He never mentions works
 - B. He excludes even works wrought in holiness of heart from the ground of justification
 - C. He requires baptism first
 - D. He cites the Ten Commandments

8. What is the sweet exchange in the letter to Diognetus?
- A. Rome trading peace for taxes
 - B. The righteous one given for the unrighteous, his righteousness justifying many transgressors
 - C. The exchange of letters between churches
 - D. Barter replacing sacrifice
9. What does Hilary of Poitiers's wages line teach?
- A. Work harder for heaven
 - B. Wages are owed to work, but justification comes as free grace through faith
 - C. Faith is a wage paid to God
 - D. Grace is a loan
10. What question does Prosper of Aquitaine put to every merit system?
- A. Who ordained the priest?
 - B. Would not justification owed to merits debase redemption in Christ's blood, making the gift a laborer's wages?
 - C. Which council decided?
 - D. Whose tradition is older?
11. How does Theodoret answer the objection that faith itself is a work?
- A. He concedes it
 - B. Even in this faith, divine grace is our enabler; faith is God's gift, not our work
 - C. He replaces faith with love
 - D. He appeals to the emperor
12. What did even Leo of Rome confess about justification?
- A. It is paid for by merits
 - B. It is not paid for by merits but simply given as a free gift
 - C. It requires pilgrimage
 - D. It comes through Peter's chair
13. What line does Busenitz mark for Rome's decisive apostasy?
- A. The fall of Rome in 476
 - B. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, where the sacramental system became dogma
 - C. The Council of Nicaea
 - D. The crowning of Charlemagne
14. What was Calvin's claim about a contest decided by the fathers?
- A. He refused to cite them
 - B. The tide of victory would turn to the Reformation's side
 - C. He conceded them to Rome
 - D. He called them irrelevant

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 B · 3 B · 4 B · 5 B · 6 B · 7 B · 8 B · 9 B · 10 B · 11 B · 12 B · 13 B · 14 B

TALKITOVER

1. Busenitz read a dozen fathers saying faith alone before Luther was born. How does that change the confidence with which you would talk to a Roman Catholic friend about the gospel?
2. Prosper asked whether merit debases the blood of Christ. Where do subtle merit systems creep into evangelical life, in how we pray, give, or measure our standing with God?

3. Grace enabling works that then earn heaven still ends in wages. Why is that distinction worth guarding precisely, and what is lost pastorally when it blurs?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

Paul's unanswerable arithmetic from Romans 11: if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace.

GOFURTHER

The lecture's own commendations: Steven Lawson's Pillars of Grace, tracing the doctrines of grace through the centuries; William Webster's study of Scripture's authority in the fathers and his The Church of Rome at the Bar of History; and Gregg Allison's Historical Theology on Aquinas and justification.

Lecture by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/historical-theology-1-10