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Why Are Evangelicals Joining the Catholic Church?

by David Dunlap

Martin Luther had tried everything: sleeping on hard floors, fasting for days, even upon bloodied knees climbing the staircase of the church of St. John Lateran in Rome. His teachers said he was doing enough to have peace in his soul, but he had no peace, for his sense of sin was too deep. He had been studying the Psalms and he often noticed the term, the *“righteousness of God.”* This statement brought conviction to his soul. He knew he was a sinner and did not possess this righteousness, and these words of Scripture condemned him all the more. One day he opened the Bible and began to read in the book of Romans chapter one. *“For in it is the righteousness of God revealed...”* - there was that word again. But then he read on in verse 17, *“The just shall live by faith”* and suddenly the truth of salvation by grace through faith alone came rushing into his soul. At that moment the torch was lit which would lead the world in a spiritual revolution: a return to the biblical doctrine of justification.

A Recent Trend Toward Catholic Churches

Recent news broadcasts and newspaper articles are publishing reports that Gen Z evangelical men are leaving Baptist and evangelical churches for Catholic churches in record numbers. Recently, Dr. Christopher Kaczor, the writer of a recent online article entitled, *“Why Are So Many Young Adults Becoming Catholic?”* He writes,

“This Easter(2026), the University of Notre Dame, in South Bend, Indiana saw a record number of students enter the Catholic Church. This trend is happening not just at Notre Dame but around the country. Los Angeles dioceses reportedly welcomed 5,500 new Catholics in 2025. The New York Post ran an essay entitled “Young people are converting to Catholicism en masse...” As reporter Matthew McDonald posted in another article, “Dioceses are reporting increases of 30%, 40%, 50% and even more than 70%.”¹

Two stated reasons many are joining the Catholic Church is that it is more “masculine” and more “traditional” than modern evangelical churches. But what about the doctrine they espouse? In this article we would like to examine the doctrine of the Roman Catholic church.

The Roman Catholic Church & the Doctrine of Justification

While the light of this great truth of justification is widely proclaimed the world today, the Roman Catholic church continues to cling to a doctrinal position established in the 16th century at the council of Trent. Alarmed at the teaching of Luther and Calvin, brought to light in the Reformation, the

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“Fox News reports, “In 2025, the typical Gen Z churchgoer attended services nearly two weekends a month—the highest level since tracking began and a 100% increase from 2020 levels.”

Church formulated a doctrinal position set forth through a series of decrees and canons. The “decrees” state the church’s teaching in a positive form while the “canons” express its teaching in a negative form. Even until our present day the Roman Catholic church has never repudiated or revised her position set forth in the Council of Trent.

What does the Roman Catholic Church teach? What do the majority of Roman Catholics believe about justification? Both of these questions are answered by looking more closely at the decisions of the Council of Trent(1545-1563) for these decisions form the foundation and teaching of the Roman Catholic church on this subject.

In Roman Catholic theology, according to Trent, justification is an infusion of grace which results in a change in man’s spiritual nature. For proof of this we note the following decree from chapter 7 of session 6 of the council of Trent,

“Whence in the very act of being justified, at the same time that his sins are being remitted, a man receives through Jesus Christ, to whom he is joined, the infused gifts of faith, hope and charity.”²

In Canon 9 of the same chapter we read the following,

“If anyone says that a sinful man is justified by faith alone,... let him be anathema.”³

Here Trent sharply attacks the biblical position in denying Romans 4:5, “But to him that works not, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” On this point the Roman Catholic church rejects the very cornerstone of the Reformation: Man is justified by grace through faith alone. In a careful reading of Trent, one discovers that it’s concern is spiritual renewal, not the forgiveness of sins.

The How Does the Council of Trent Influence Doctrine?

According to Trent, justification is not the declaration that one is righteous, but rather an infusion of grace which brings about sanctification. At this juncture it is important stress the biblical distinction between justification and sanctification that is so crucial. Three points of contrast should be recognized

- 1. Justification** – legally removes the guilt and penalty of sin, whereas sanctification removes the pollution of sin and enables the believer to grow in their likeness to Christ.
- 2. Justification** – takes place outside the believer and is a legal declaration by God the Father. Sanctification takes place within a believer and transforms him.
- 3. Justification** – takes place once and is not a process nor a repeated event. Sanctification is a process continuing throughout the believer’s life.

According to Trent faith does not have a central significance in justification. The Scriptures teach that we are justified by grace through faith alone. Romans 3:28 says, “Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

While Trent admits that there is a sense in which we can be justified by faith, its emphasis is upon works and baptism. Trent says, "We may then be said to be justified through faith, in the sense that 'faith is the beginning of man's salvation'..."⁴

In the teaching of Trent, what really justifies is not faith, but the sacrament of baptism. Is this what the Roman Catholic Church teaches today? Notice what a recent Catholic catechism for adults teaches concerning salvation,

*"What is necessary to be saved? You have to be brought into spiritual contact with the saving death of Jesus by faith and baptism and loyal membership in his church, by love of God and neighbor, and proved by obedience to His commandments, by other Sacraments especially Holy Communion, by prayer and good works and by final perseverance, that is persevering in God's friendship and grace until death."*⁵

This teaching reaches to the highest levels of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II has also gone on record affirming that salvation is by works. He stated in a printed interview with the Los Angeles Times,

*"Man is justified by works and not by faith alone."*⁶

Rome may admit that justification is by faith, but what she fails to affirm with conviction is that justification is by grace through faith alone. This was the heart cry of the Reformation, solo fide, solo fide - faith alone!

It was this very point, the denial of salvation by grace through faith alone, which the leaders of the Reformation so vigorously opposed. They were convinced that Rome's teaching on this point obscured and threatened the gracious character of justification, and made it necessary to add works to the once for all finished work of Christ. Through Rome's teaching, the biblical truth of the grace of God and the work of Christ were not only in jeopardy, but buried under a mountain of good works.

Why Are So Many Evangelical Men Joining the Catholic Church?

Furthermore, Catholic leaders argue disparagingly that the evangelical's view of justification is "legal fiction" or "merely a robe thrown over a corpse." Since this teaching is in opposition to the plain teaching of Scripture, Christians must continue to oppose Rome on this crucial doctrinal point.

Why then are so many Evangelicals joining hands with Rome, even to the point of calling them "brothers and sisters in Christ"? On March 29, 1994, a statement of cooperation was drawn up by eight protestant and seven Roman Catholic leaders called *"Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium."* This effort was led by the late Charles Colson and signed by such noted and respected evangelicals as J. I. Packer and Bill Bright, the former president of Campus Crusade.⁷

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INFORMATION

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How will this trend of Gen Z evangelicals joining the Roman Catholics affect the witness and work of the church of Christ to the lost? Moreover, how will this trend affect the doctrinal purity of the gospel of salvation, over which the Reformers, Scottish Covenanters, and others risked and lost their lives in seeking to protect it from compromise? Sadly, even now seeds are being sown which portend ominously for the spiritual and doctrinal future of the church.

Conclusion

This current trend serves to illustrate the perilous situation in which the evangelical church now finds itself. The evangelical church has found that in compromising its historic position concerning doctrine, she is also compelled to further compromise its mission and character. The evangelical church must make changes or better said, return to her former biblical and traditional position. In its seeking to appeal to the unchurched with modernism; it has lost scores of young adults to the more traditional Catholic Church. May we resist every subtle attack and attempt to further compromise the truth of the Word of God.

Endnotes

1. Dr. Christopher Kaczor, *Why Are So Many Young Adults Becoming Catholic?* Word on Fire, May 5, 2025 <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/why-are-so-many-young-adults-becoming-catholic/>
2. John F. Clarkson et al., *The Church Teaches, Documents of the Church in English Translation*, St. Louis, B. Herder Books, 1955, p.234
3. *ibid*, p.243
4. *ibid*, p.235
5. William J. Cogan, *A Catechism for Adults*, Youngstown, AZ: Cogan Productions, 1975, p.50
6. Pope John Paul II, Los Angeles Times, March 8, 1983
7. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, Institute on Religion and Public Life, 1992