Interview of Robert Sungenis by Protestant Dr. Michael Horton
on the Topic of Justification

Venue: The White Horse Inn, a Protestant radio show broadcasted to over 50 stations nationwide, which includes a bi-monthly magazine titled Modern Reformation.

Comments by Robert Sungenis:

In this interview, Dr. Horton inquires, once again, into the Catholic understanding of Justification – how a person is justified before God from his sins so that he can go to heaven. Twelve years ago, Dr. Horton, along with his colleagues Robert Godfrey and Ken Rosenblatt, had a debate against Robert Sungenis, Patrick Madrid (now editor of Envoy magazine) and William Marshner (professor at Christendom College). Since that time, there has been no movement from either side in modifying their position on Justification.

In the September/October issue of Modern Reformation, Horton devotes the whole magazine to promoting the Protestant Reformed beliefs of Justification, and does so mainly by castigating any understanding of Justification that does not adhere to the “faith alone” formula that he and his colleagues believe. His radio program, The White Horse Inn, devoted itself exclusively to the subject of Justification the whole month of September and into October.

Dr. Horton presently teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California. Westminster Seminary is the leading breeding ground for all things believed from the Calvinistic persuasion. It is the seminary from which I graduated in 1984 and which subsequently put me in the unique position of knowing their beliefs from the inside out.

After the interview (which was conducted in the summer of 2007), I sent Dr. Horton my book Not By Faith Alone. I critique Dr. Horton and his views about a dozen times in the book (e.g., pages xli, 195, 360, 405, 439, 461, 574, 589, 593, 596, 598, 602, 628), along with all his other Calvinistic academic colleagues, such as John Murry, Richard Gaffin, R. C. Sproul, Robert Godfrey, Alister McGrath, Roger Wagner, et al.

As I flipped through the September/October issue of Modern Reformation and noticed the title of the cover and the articles, I couldn’t help but be disappointed. The cover title reads: “The Art of Self-Justification,” implying that if one does not hold to Horton’s “faith alone” concept of justification it is a form of “self-justification,” as if the person is rejecting that God alone justifies and has consequently accepted the erroneous belief that he can justify himself without God. The title of the articles, whose contents confirm my assessment, are as follows: 1) Does Justification Still Matter?, 2) Why Sola Fide is the Chief Article, 3) The Nature of Justifying Faith, 4) God is Just, 5) Assumed Evangelicalism: Some Reflections En Route to Denying the Gospel. It is amazing to read some of these articles, for they contain most of the same precise errors in Protestant thinking that I have painstakingly pointed out in my book.
Not By Faith Alone, most of which have never been addressed by Horton or his colleagues for the last ten years. It almost seems as if Horton, et al., will believe whatever they want about Justification regardless of how well the Catholic theologian explains the issue or answers the objections. Horton’s consistent mantra is that other views of Justification that do not employ the “faith alone” formula are views that deny grace, hence the title of the magazine: The Art of Self-Justification. It is the cudgel upon which Horton consistently leans to advance his views, but, unfortunately, it is his very concept of “faith alone” which is Horton’s weakest point. It is amazing to me that such a thoroughly unbiblical phrase, “faith alone,” has become the battle cry for over 475 years from people who claim to get their theological information from nothing but the Bible alone. Life certainly does have its ironies.

I don’t know how many times and in how many different ways I have explained to Horton and his colleagues that Catholic soteriology is built on the very foundation of grace that Horton holds in high esteem, but it seems that they either aren’t listening or don’t want to listen. Explanations delineated in Not By Faith Alone that have rocked other Protestants to the core of their being simply don’t seem to faze Horton at all. For example, in the interview with Horton I stressed the matter of David’s justification that St. Paul mentions in Romans 4:5-8. I mentioned the fact (as I do in my book) that it is obvious from Paul’s treatment of the account that David lost his justification by committing adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11-12) and that these sins are the very reason that Paul can then use David as an example of a person who, after he committed these heinous mortal sins, can now receive justification when he repents of those sins. If there is any passage of Scripture that supports the Catholic understanding of Justification, this is it. But to my dismay, Horton made no comment about the obvious conundrum the account of David’s justification creates for his own “one-time forensic event” and “eternal security” beliefs to which he holds so dearly in his Reformed theology, even though I referred to David’s account THREE times in the interview. Rather, each time I mentioned David he quickly turned to another topic of discussion and pretended as if the example of David didn’t even make a dent in his view.

A second example occurred when I explained to Dr. Horton that Catholicism does not believe that a person gets to heaven by his own works. After I quoted from Session 6, Canon 1 from the Council of Trent to assure him of this truth, I then gave him the example I have consistently used for the last ten years (i.e., the difference between when an employer who, on a completely obligatory basis, pays his employee for work done as a matter of debt, as opposed to God who, on a completely non-obligatory basis, rewards his sons and daughters for their loving obedience to their Father), and which has convinced many other converts that Catholicism has been unduly criticized and distorted by Protestants, but none of this seemed to faze Horton at all, yet he had no rebuttal to it either. Other Protestants have been stunned by these new understandings. For example, Samuel Hutchens, Ph.D. (Protestant), Senior Editor of Touchstone Magazine, wrote the following commentary:

"For those who require an exhaustive exposition of the point, the best book I have found is Robert Sungenis' Not By Faith Alone...This reviewer thinks he has successfully made the point he started out to make, and that if one remains a Protestant after reading it (as I do) it will be vastly more difficult to mount his protest on the basis of belief that we are justified by faith alone apart from works..." (Touchstone: Sept./Oct. 1998).
Dr. Hutchens did not know me personally at all. I was relatively new on the Catholic academic scene at that time. I don’t even know how he got a hold of Not By Faith Alone, since he didn’t ask me for a review copy. Yet Hutchens, who is highly respected in the academic world, said it was the best defense of Catholic soteriology that he had ever read. The arguments against Horton’s view of Justification have never been stated as well or as detailed as they have been in Not By Faith Alone. I know this to be the case because my Catholic colleagues have told me so, and I have read almost every Catholic defense of justification written in the last few centuries. But I don’t think Horton has even read the book, much less is he inclined to address the arguments it presents against his views of justification.

Sadly, after doing the interview with Dr. Horton and browsing his current edition of Modern Reformation it has shown me that perhaps he probably isn’t as interested in the truth of this matter as he purports to be; or perhaps he has been teaching his own view for so long that he has developed a mental block toward considering another view or seeing the flaws in his own view. This often happens to people who are in esteemed academic positions such as his. It was apparent to me that Dr. Horton was going to ignore whatever explanation I offered, no matter how cogent or elucidating. It seemed that he wasn’t doing this interview to learn anything about Catholicism, but to subtly ridicule Catholic theology, which I could tell was his agenda when toward the end of the interview he tried to influence the minds of the audience by remarking on the Catholic practice of not eating meat on Fridays, implying that Catholicism was steeped in unnecessary legalism and ritual that denied the grace of God. Fortunately I was able to diffuse that attempt with a short but polite answer to his query.

Ironically, Michael Horton has been seeking for a “Modern Reformation” in Protestantism for almost 20 years now, decrying the sad state of affairs in Protestantism, and taking jabs at Catholicism whenever the opportunity presents itself to him. But the sad fact is that Dr. Horton will have no “Reformation” as long as he continues to propagate the self-contradictory theology he has been preaching for the last 20 years. No wonder few people are listening to him. If he won’t answer the simple objections of why St. Paul uses David as an example of Justification; or won’t see the difference between being paid from legal debt for work as opposed to being rewarded by grace for obedience; or won’t accept that it was Abraham’s faith (not an “alien righteousness”) that justified him before God (since St. Paul says in Romans 4:22: “This is why his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness”), then there is no hope that Dr. Horton will ever see the light in order to have a true Reformation. Protestants like Dr. Horton simply refuse to interpret Scripture by its face-value propositions, but continually force their own theological paradigms into it.

How fortunate we would be if someone the caliber and popularity of Michael Horton would suddenly be struck from heaven with the contradictions in his own theology and the truth of Catholic theology. We would, indeed, be on the path to a real Reformation. Recently, Francis Beckwith’s conversion to Catholicism showed us what an impact such high-profile conversions can have on the face of Christendom, but I think Michael Horton’s conversion would have ten times the power of Beckwith’s. Let us pray that Dr. Horton and people in the same circles as he travels will finally and completely open their eyes and see that there is only one truth – the truth that comes from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that Jesus Christ established 2000 years ago.
Robert Sungenis, Ph.D.

October 5, 2007

The interview follows in PDF format.
MODERN REFORMATION

The Art of Self-Justification
An Interview with Robert Sungenis

Not By Faith Alone: The Roman Catholic Doctrine of Justification

In March 2007, Michael Horton interviewed Dr. Robert Sungenis, president of Catholic Apologetics International for the past fourteen years and author of several books on Roman Catholicism, including the best-selling Not By Faith Alone: A Biblical Study of the Catholic Doctrine of Justification (Queenship, 1997).

Robert, can you give us some background on how you became Roman Catholic?

I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church even before Vatican II, as a matter of fact, and so I know the Roman Catholic faith. At age 19, I decided to leave the Catholic church because I felt it was teaching the Bible, that it was steeped in ritual, that you know, the whole nine yards that a lot of people have left complained about. And for the next 18 years I was a full-fledged card-carrying Protestant. Then I was in and out of it, and I don’t know, maybe three or four Protestant denominations at that time—Presbyterian, Baptist, Independent, Fundamentalist... so I got pretty good knowledge of Protestant theology. I’m a graduate of George Washington University and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, so I learned from the best. Norman Shepherd created quite a stir at Westminster in 1980-1981 when I was a student there, and his emphasis was that works justify. I don’t think they ironed it out quite the way they wanted to, even back then, and you see now, what exactly he meant by that, so there was a lot of controversy. But it did stick in my mind. Then when I was 37, back in 1993, I came back to the Catholic church and have been back ever since.

Do Roman Catholics teach salvation by works? That’s often one of the things we hear on the street, in evangelical circles at least. What do you say to that?

I would preface it by saying this. It’s like the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” If you answer yes, you’re going to convict yourself; if you answer no, you’re going to convict yourself. So, it’s a question you have to treat gingerly, especially in a theological arena where things can be misunderstood easily. On the one hand, I would say no, Catholic theology does not teach that one is justified by works if we understand by the word “works” that we are doing something outside the grace of God. We cannot give God our works and say, “God, you owe me salvation because of these works I have done.” The Council of Trent condemned that idea in its very first canon. It said that anybody who thinks that they can work their way to God either by the law or any of your good works, whatever they are, that’s anathema. On the other hand, the Catholic church teaches that works are salvific, that they do justify, but when they use “works” in that sense, they are talking about works that are done under the auspices of God’s grace—that is, someone who has already entered into God’s grace by faith, and God can now look at those works a lot differently than when the person was not under God’s grace. When the person was not under God’s grace, the Law, which God would use as a standard to judge those works would condemn him for any work that he did, because it would never meet up to the standards of God’s righteousness. But once he’s in the “system of grace,” as I call it in my book, then God looks at him in a very different way and thus those works he does for God, God can look at those works, and bless those works, and give a reward for those works, which we call salvation. He in no way owes the man anything; he is not legally obligated to pay him anything for those works; God just does it out of his benevolence. And so in that sense, works do justify.

And so in that sense, works do justify.

What is the classic formulation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification today?

If you say “classic,” then that would be from the Tridentine doctrine, and that was the last dogmatic council we had on justification. Vatican II and its aftermath doesn’t claim to have any dogmatic statement on justification. All it does is reiterate what the Council of Trent said, and
The Catholic church also believes that if you do not do the works, that is, you sin, then you can lose your justification. thereby was justified at that point in time, that means he had been justified prior to that and lost his justification, and now because he's repented of his sins (murder and adultery), he has regained his justification. So, in your example, the sin at one o'clock would be David's sins of adultery and murder, and then as he repents, he gets his justification restored to him.

What is the state of the debate these days in Roman Catholic circles in interpreting justification in the Greek, dikaiosune, and the Latin, justificare? I'm thinking here of Joseph Fitzmyer, who says that clearly this is a legal, forensic term in the Greek, and the Latin, justificare, “to make righteous” is actually a misunderstanding and mistranslation of the Greek “to declare righteous.” Where is the debate now in biblical scholarship in Catholic circles?

We cover that in Appendix 2 of the book, starting on page 615. We deal with Fitzmyer's assertion. Basically, Fitzmyer doesn't speak for the Catholic Church because there's been no official statement from the Catholic Church despite opinions from what we would call liberal theologians in the Catholic Church, and Fitzmyer would be one of them. Raymond Brown would be another, and there is a whole cadre of these individuals.

Is it your view, then, that the word always means “to make upright” rather than “to declare upright”? Yes, we can prove that. We do it by a proof of, say, James 2, when James is quoting Genesis 15:6 where it says that Abraham believed and God justified him. He’s quoting the same passage that St. Paul is quoting in Romans 4:3, so that means that James and Paul have to have the same understanding of the Greek word dikaiosune, because they're quoting from the same passage. Genesis 15:6. And here's where the Protestants try to change the meaning of dikaiosune—or dikaios in James 2—because they say it means “demonstrated to be righteous” as opposed to “declaring to be righteous.” So they have a dichotomy in their own thinking on the definitions of these words. And we go through it meticulously in chapter two of the book to show that it is impossible to arrive at that position where you make a dichotomy between “demonstrated” righteousness and “declared” righteousness on the one hand, and we also show in the book that the preponderant use of dikaios in the Greek is not a declared righteousness—and the same would be true for the Greek word logizomai which is used in the King James Bible, for example, when it translates as “imputation.” We show that the Greek word logizomai preponderantly means in the Greek that there is a reality to the thing that someone is viewing; it's not a fiction. It's not something that we label, not a label that we put on something, even though we know that the label is not saying that this thing is a reality of the label. We show that the Greek word logizomai actually means in the Greek that the label means what it is signifying. We go through all the uses of logizomai in the New Testament to show that.

So dikaios and that word group never means “to declare righteous”? No, there's no passage we can point to that says definitively that the only meaning that can be applied here is “declared righteous.” There's no passage we have found in the New Testament that teaches that.
He saw the faith in Abraham, and it's that reason that Abraham was justified. He wasn't justified based on some alien righteousness.

So it's always a “making” righteous? Always. Yes.

As in Romans 3:4, when God is said to be “justified” when he speaks? Well, when we're talking about a soteriological context, then we're talking about that. We're not talking about passages that apply the word dikaiosynē to God himself.

OK, so the word itself, then, is more elastic than “to make righteous.” Yes, but it's not elastic in its soteriological sense. That's what I would say.

That would be a dogmatic claim, though, not a linguistic claim, right? No, that would be both.

[laughter]

What do Roman Catholics do with a verse such as Romans 4:4-5, “Now to the one who does not work, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due, and to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” What would be the typical response to that in your circles? Well, I think I already explained this at the beginning of the interview, which was when Paul is talking about works in this context, he's talking about works that we do outside of the grace of God, and you can tell that by the word “debt” that he uses in Romans 4:4. He said if we try to work, then we're putting God in debt. And what he means by that is, it's like you working at a job and you say, "God, I put in my forty hours, so even though I don't like you or care for you, I did work for you, so you owe me something." Paul says you can't come to God on that basis. You can't come to God saying, "You owe me. Here's my list of works; you have to pay me for what I did." Paul says in order to be saved, in order to be justified, you have to have a relationship with God. And faith is that relationship. Faith is the one thing that God can see within us where we know that we really want to know God for who he is, not for what he's going to give us. And that's why Paul is faulting the Jews here, because they got into a system where they were just working and said that God owed them salvation. And God says, "I don't owe you anything. I want you to believe in me. I want you to believe in who I am." And that's why he uses the example of Abraham, because in verses 18-22 of that chapter he goes through what Abraham went through, an excruciating ordeal with God. God pulled every ounce of faith out of him because God wanted him to believe in God for who he was, and so, again, Catholicism really is not any different from what I think you believe here. Most Protestant commentators understand Paul's works here as trying to obligate God to pay them with salvation for the work that they do. Catholicism, as I said, in canon one of the Council of Trent condemned that idea as well.

But there is the expectation that God will reward our works, right? There's still the idea of merit in Catholic faith and practice? Well, you have to be careful with the word “merit” here, because if we're talking about merit in a legal sense, we would say no, there is no merit in the legal sense. If we want to use it in the gracious sense, we would say yes, of course, and in that sense we merit something with God, same as Hebrews 6:10 I think, which says, "God is not unjust when he looks at your works. He will faithfully reward you for your works." And it's interesting that Paul—and I think Paul wrote Hebrews, so I'll say Paul—is using the word "unjust" there. He is saying God is not unjust. He will reward you. So in that sense, there is merit, but it is a gracious merit.

I recall our interchange on the question of justification as a “legal fiction” from within a Protestant framework. Do you still see justification as it is interpreted by Reformation theology as a “legal fiction”? Well, it depends on who you read on this topic. I've got a list of probably a dozen Protestant scholars in my book that I go through in chapter five, dealing with this idea of forensic justification. What does it mean? I'm not really quite sure they do know what it means, because on the one hand, you'll have a guy like Sproul saying, "Yeah, well, it's not a legal fiction because it's a real fiction," and I even get confused reading some of this stuff. They try to put a reality on the fiction. And somebody else will say, "No, no, it's not a reality. It is a legal fiction." So you get quite a variance on this topic here. I would say this, though: To make a demarcation between the Catholic and Protestant view—and this goes back to my treatment of the word ἰδιοκτησία. It's very important, this word, because a lot of Protestants are under the impression that this word only means something that you have a mental picture of in your mind but in reality does not exist outside your mind, and that's not the way the New Testament uses the word.

Nor the way the reformers used it. I don't know. I wouldn't be too sure about that.
I am pretty sure about that. OK, let me ask you a question, then. Are you saying you don’t believe in legal fiction?

No, it’s not a legal fiction because the righteousness that God demands in the law is fully present in Jesus Christ. He has fully satisfied all of the conditions of the covenant of law, so...

OK, I see what you’re saying. Where we would differ is this: We would go to Romans 4 again, and I would point out this same passage in Romans 4:18–25, and there it says, “Abraham was fully persuaded that God was able to do this,” and it says in verse 22, “Therefore he was justified, because of that.” In other words, it’s something that God saw in Abraham. He saw the faith in Abraham, and it’s that reason that Abraham was justified. He wasn’t justified based on some alien righteousness. It doesn’t say that in the passage; it says that God justified Abraham based on Abraham’s faith, and that’s a real faith. It’s not a legal fiction. And that’s the difference, I think, between the Catholic and the Protestant view.

But then the faith in Roman Catholic understanding, correct me if I’m wrong, faith is not justifying until it is formed by love, so what you’re saying is that acceptance or justification of Abraham was based on what God saw in him, not only in terms of faith, but also in terms of charity and good works.

Well yes, you have to treat the whole ball of wax. When we’re talking about baptism, and I think that’s probably the better angle to cover this thing, the Council of Trent says that at baptism, hope, faith, and love are infused into the sinner, and at that point in time, he has all three of those virtues. So it’s not by faith alone that he’s justified; it’s by hope, faith, and love—at the moment of baptism. When you get to a case like Abraham, where you don’t have baptism involved, you have to look at different phases of his life and then you have to join them all together and make a conclusion as to what the Scripture is teaching in the soteriological sense.

Robert, how do you comfort someone in your parish who says, “I feel God’s displeasure. I keep committing the same old sins...I go to Mass regularly, I confess my sins, but I continue to struggle with lust, pride, hate, sloth...” How do you comfort someone like that, or if not comfort, what do you say?

Well, first of all, we would take him back to the theological basis for his complaint, and it’s the same one that Paul had in Romans 7: “I love Jesus, but I find myself lusting.” Saint Jerome said the same thing. He’s there translating the Bible in his cave and he says, “I can’t stop thinking of dancing women.”

I often have the same problem when I’m writing.

[laughter]

I just keep pictures of my wife right in front of me so I don’t have that problem sitting in front of my computer. I’ve got four pictures of her staring at me. That’s how I would comfort him.

[laughter]

How about the question of assurance? How about if someone came to you and said, “I am confident that I am not only now in a state of grace, but I am God’s elect child, I have all of my sins completely forgiven—past, present, and future—and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to me, therefore I know that I will be saved hereafter. I know I am one of God’s elect and I am completely forgiven.” What would you say to that person?

I would say you can be as sure as David was before he committed adultery and murder. David had to come to a point of repentance. He was a great man of God—he slew Goliath, he became the king. He passed up the seven brothers, he was a little shepherd boy out there but Samuel chose him, because God said, “I look into the heart of man, and he’s the only one of all these brothers that I’m pleased with.” So if there’s anyone who thought he was a man of God, it was David. And yet he sinned—terribly. And he had to be justified again. So that’s what I would tell him. That’s the example I would give him from Scripture.

So as long as I am making use of, as you called it, the system of grace, I don’t know what will be true of me tomorrow necessarily, but I can be reasonably sure that I am right now in a state of grace. If I walk out of the confessional and I’ve confessed my sins and I go the next day and receive the eucharist, well, there’s no sin in my life that I can look at and say, “This is condemnable. I’m going to hell.” Yes, I can say I’m a saved Christian. I’m born again and I’m on my way to heaven—that day.

How do you know, and how would an average layperson know that he or she has not committed a damnable sin? What would be a non-damnable sin?

Well, again, two answers to that. One is to go back to David again. David committed murder and adultery. Scripture itself teaches us that that was a sin whereby he lost his justification and needed to repent to gain his justification. So there’s an indication right there. If there’s any doubt as to what a mortal sin is—and that’s what David did—it was a mortal sin, “mortal” being death, in other words, that he was going to suffer the second death as it were for those sins, unless he repented. If there’s any doubt about what a mortal sin is, then the person goes to the Church and learns from the Church, because the church is the one who has answers to these ques-
tions. He doesn’t have to reinvent the wheel himself every day of his life and say, “Gee, I wonder if I committed a mortal sin here.” The Church teaches him because the Church has been there, and that’s why God gave us the Church—to give us answers to those questions.

Where did the Church get those answers?
From the apostles. And from the apostles, it was passed down through the Scripture and the tradition, and it was transmitted through the fathers until we have our knowledge today.

So eating meat on Fridays was a mortal sin?
Well, no more than not eating meat that was offered to idols was in Acts 15, when the church said that the Christian should not do that. If anyone transgressed that law that the church laid down, they would be in sin, and they would be condemned for it. The same as Ananias and Sapphira were condemned for not giving money to the church when they said they were. They dropped dead and were judged right there on the spot. So, you know, these things the church did judge at that time, and it continues to do so.

Robert, do you believe with Trent that Protestants who do believe in justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone should be considered anathema?
The Council of Trent says, “Anyone who says, anyone who says”—and you have to look at the verbiage it uses—“anyone who says this, let him be anathema.” But what the Council of Trent means by this is that someone who deliberately says that I know the truth but I am going to go against the truth because I believe what I want to believe, that person is anathema. So the Catholic Church has a lot of leeway for anybody outside the Catholic Church, because the Catholic Church knows through two thousand years of experience that people believe certain things because they’ve been taught that as a child, or because they’re ignorant, or because of many other reasons. There are a lot of other contingencies why someone would believe something different from the Catholic Church. So if that answers your question... what I mean to say is, I think there is a lot of leeway as to who would be condemned and who would not be condemned.

Well, Robert, thank you for taking the time to explain some of these motifs and doctrines for us. My pleasure.

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