

Issues on Soteriology and Atonement

A Response to Benjamin Douglass

This is a response to comments Benjamin Douglass recently put on his website.

Mr. Douglass: Dear all, I was Sungenis' Vice President for about two years, so I know his theological views fairly well. There is nothing unorthodox in the views on justification as expressed in *Not By Faith Alone*. This is clear from the endorsements it received from the entire community of Catholic apologists. Sungenis' exegesis of St. Paul's phrase "works of the law" is controversial. He argues that it refers to any works performed on a principle of debt and obligation, whereas other Catholics will argue that it refers to works of the Torah. However, both opinions are within the pale.

R. Sungenis: It seems that Mr. Douglass' attempt here is to make it appear as if:

(1) I am in the minority of Catholics who hold the view that "works of law" refers to any work one performs by his own merit to attain justification, and

(2) that there are a large number of "other Catholics" who take an opposite view, namely, that "works of law" refer to "works of Torah."

As to #2, there is only one Catholic apologist who originated and teaches that "works of law" refers to "works of Torah," and that is James Akin from *Catholic Answers*. Be that as it may, even Mr. Akin's "works of Torah" agrees with my thesis that "works of law" refers to any work someone does by his own merit to gain justification, since the "Torah" is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, and thus includes everything concerning "works of law" that is in the Pentateuch. One will discover that the works described in the Pentateuch include ceremonial works, civil works and moral works. Hence, any kind of work is covered under the phrase "works of Torah."

As to #1, I am not in the minority, since the view that "works of law" refers to any work someone does by his own merit to gain justification has been the traditional view of the Catholic Church for almost two millennia, (at least until some modern Protestant and Catholic scholars began to invent a new definition). The working theme I presented in *Not By Faith Alone* is precisely what the Council of Trent says in its first canon: "If anyone shall say that man can be justified before God by his own works which are done either by his own natural powers, or through the teaching of the Law, and without divine grace through Christ Jesus: let him be anathema."

Augustine says the same: "...he at the same time, nevertheless, would have it to be clearly understood that the law, by which he says no man is justified, lies not merely in those sacramental [ceremonial] institutions which contained promissory figures, but also in those works by which whosoever has done them lives holily, and amongst which occurs this prohibition: 'Thou shalt not covet'" (*The Spirit and the Letter*).

So does Aquinas: "I answer that he is speaking here about keeping the commandments of the Law insofar as the Law consists of ceremonial precepts and moral precepts" (*Commentary on Galatians* 3:10-12).

The 1994 Catholic Catechism takes the same view of works and merit as I do in *Not By Faith Alone*: "The term 'merit' refers in general to the recompense owed....With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man....The merit of man before God...arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of grace" (Para. 2006-2008).

If Mr. Douglass, as he claims, knows my “theological views fairly well,” then he would also know that I quote extensively from Augustine, Aquinas, the Council of Trent and the 1994 Catholic Catechism to back up the view I present about “works of law” in *Not By Faith Alone*.

Moreover, of all the people who endorsed *Not By Faith Alone* (including Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz, Fr. Peter Stravinskias, Dr. William Marshner, Dr. Ronald Tecelli, Dr. Art Sippo, Dr. Scott Hahn, Dr. Robert Fasstigi, Karl Keating, Dr. Ken Howell, Dr. Thomas Howard, Dr. John Saward, Dr. Philip Blosser, Fr. George Rutler, and Protestant Samuel Hutchens, Ph.D. (Protestant), Senior Editor of *Touchstone Magazine*), not one of them stated in their endorsements that my treatment of “works of the law” was “controversial.”

Even when Scott Hahn and I were discussing the issue prior to the publication of my book, he accepted my thesis when he wrote the Foreword to *Not By Faith Alone*, and seven years later he gave more public acceptance of the thesis when he published his own commentary on Romans and added the view of “works of law” that I espouse in *Not By Faith Alone* (Ignatius Study Bible, Romans, 2003, p. 21).

So if Mr. Douglass wants to claim that such a view is “controversial,” I suggest he take up the argument with Augustine, Aquinas, Trent, the Catechism, the Ignatius Study Bible and the archdiocese of Baltimore that gave an imprimatur to *Not By Faith Alone*.

Mr. Douglass: Others of his theological opinions, on the other hand, are well out of the mainstream. (1) Sungenis argues that God’s eternity consists in Him existing for an infinity of time: God has existed for an infinite time in the past and will exist for an infinite time in the future. Sungenis denies the mainstream view that God exists outside of time and that all moments are present to Him. I have never seen any theological authority endorse the Sungenis view.

R. Sungenis: First, unlike the doctrine of Justification, the discussion of whether God exists “outside of time,” is: (a) not a cardinal doctrine of the Catholic Church, and (b) has hardly even been addressed by the magisterium, much less dogmatized. So there has been no “theological authority” to judge the matter despite Mr. Douglass’ attempt to make it appear as if there is.

Second, I have never said in my writings or lectures that the view that God exists in an “infinity of time” was: (a) the only view I entertained, or (b) that all other views were wrong. I merely presented it as one possible solution of how to understand the complex nature of God and creation. The reason I have done so is that I see many people using the phrase “outside of time” to describe God’s existence but they do not define what that phrase means. If time is defined as movement and change, we might be able to say that God is “outside of time” because, in his essence, he does not move or change. (But even then we will have problems, because during one epoch Christ was pure divine spirit; at another time he was a God-Man, and he will remain a God-Man for the rest of time. In that sense there was a change in the Second Person of the Trinity, and thus God is not “outside of time” in that sense). But if we define time as the duration of existence (as opposed to change and movement), then God is not “outside of time” but is part of time, only the time is infinite.

Likewise, some people say, “all moments are present to God,” but they don’t define what they mean or explain how a moment that has passed could be as real as a moment experienced in the present. If the phrase “all moments are present to God” merely means that God is cognizant of all moments of the past without distinction, then I have no objections. But to say that all moments of time exist at the same time is an absurdity. Until this is clarified the view will have its problems. I am trying to help people think out the problems and hopefully arrive at solutions. Since the Catholic Church has not dogmatized any view on this matter, I have the right to offer a view that helps answer the theological problem, and I should be able to do so without someone like Mr. Douglass making it sound as if I am some kind of extremist or radical theologian.

Mr. Douglass: (2) Sungenis believes that God the Father absolutely required Jesus to suffer exactly as much as He suffered. Only this could suffice for the redemption of the human race. This contradicts the

mainstream view, held by St. Thomas Aquinas and, as far as I can tell, all approved dogmatic theologians after him, that only one drop of Jesus' blood would have sufficed. This is because just one of Jesus' theandric acts, performed with infinite charity, is infinitely meritorious and therefore sufficient to counterbalance all the malice of every sin man ever committed.

R. Sungenis: First, let me clarify what I actually teach. I teach that God the Father required the DEATH of Jesus. Whatever suffering Jesus endured prior to his death has little effect on the fact that he was required to DIE in order to secure the Atonement. So, Mr. Douglass has started out on the wrong foot, because he didn't state the exact truth of what I have taught.

The reason I say that Christ was required to die is because Scripture, Tradition and the Catholic magisterium have said so rather emphatically. Does Mr. Douglass deny that Christ's death was required? If so, then I'm afraid that HE is the one with orthodoxy problem. All one need do is read Matthew 16:21-23 where Jesus tells Peter that he must suffer and die and rise from the dead, and Peter rebukes Jesus for saying so, which in turn leads Jesus to say, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but mans." Why is it satanic not to require the death of Christ for the Atonement? Because if there is no death, there is no resurrection. If there is no resurrection, there is no salvation, and as Paul says, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless, and you are still in your sins...let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:14, 32). Consequently, the idea that Christ need only supply one drop of blood for the Atonement may potentially be one of the most insidious heterodox ideas ever to stumble into the Church.

Second, I don't know anywhere that Aquinas says that Christ's death wasn't required for the Atonement. If Mr. Douglass can show us where Aquinas specifically says so, then I'll reconsider my view of Aquinas on this subject. I know plenty of places, however, where Aquinas says that in order to properly appease the wrath of God it was necessary for Christ to offer his propitiatory death on the cross. You can read about that in my book *Not By Bread Alone*, pages 41, 42, 45-48.

Third, the reason I don't buy into the "only one drop of blood would have sufficed" theory is precisely because: (a) Scripture doesn't teach it, (b) there is no consensus in the Fathers on it, and (c) the Catholic Magisterium has never endorsed it. The reason why none of those three authorities have taught it or endorsed it is simply because one drop of blood would not have precipitated the death of Jesus.

Fourth, Mr. Douglass says, "as far as I can tell, all approved dogmatic theologians after him" have held to the "one drop" atonement theory. Who are these "dogmatic theologians"? Mr. Douglass doesn't reveal their identity. But since he has raised this issue for the express purpose of giving his readers the impression that I am unorthodox in my views on the Atonement, then Mr. Douglass is required to show us where the Catholic Church has officially taught that one drop of blood would have been sufficient.

Fifth, Mr. Douglass' view is a bit contradictory. Not only has he denied that the death of Christ was required for the Atonement, but he has also told us that one drop of blood was not merely sufficient, but at least some suffering was REQUIRED, for without at least one drop of blood or some suffering from Christ, according to his theory, there would be no atonement. But why couldn't Christ's mere existence suffice for the Atonement? Isn't Christ perfect in every way? What is it about suffering that secures and atonement? Evidently, Mr. Douglass' theory of the Atonement is missing something. What he is missing is that God sets the benchmark on what will appease his wrath, and that benchmark is never said to be one drop of blood. It is nothing less than the death of Christ that will suffice, which is precisely the reason that when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane seeking for another way to atone for sins, he received no answer from the Father, since death was the only atonement the Father would accept.

Sixth, perhaps to explain his own theory of the atonement, Mr. Douglass should tell us what "infinite charity" is, or what "infinitely meritorious" means. From Mr. Douglass' previous remarks in which he claimed God is not in an "infinity of time," I was under the impression he believed there was no infinity with God, that is, that he was "outside of time" and we don't measure his existence or attributes by saying they are "infinite." If so, then why is Mr. Douglass giving us infinite-conditioned phrases to express God's actions and their sufficiency?

Mr. Douglass: (3) Sungenis believes that God has real emotions. This is the closest Sungenis comes to outright heresy, when he says things like the Jews were so wicked, God couldn't stand them any longer and so rejected them. If he meant this in a poetic, metaphorical sense, then it wouldn't be heresy. On the other hand, if Sungenis intends to affirm that God was actually incapable of tolerating the Jews for any longer, he would in fact be teaching heresy.

R. Sungenis: First, the Catholic magisterium has never defined or even addressed whether God has emotions. The only time a Catholic could be in "outright heresy" is if he contradicts a defined dogma of the Catholic magisterium.

Second, the very book in which I introduced the concept that the emotive expressions ascribed to God in the Bible are not anthropopathic but are genuine, was *Not By Faith Alone* (pages 12-15). But not only was *Not By Faith Alone* endorsed by all the top apologists in the country, it also received an imprimatur and nihil obstat from the archdiocese of Baltimore. Evidently, neither the censor librorum nor the bishop thought my views on divine emotion were "close to outright heresy." So why is Mr. Douglass, who has no ecclesiastical credentials, going beyond what no one of ecclesiastical rank has rejected, much less called heresy?

Third, by mixing the Jews with this issue, Mr. Douglass seems to be implying that I am singling out the Jews. If so, he is wrong. I have also said the same things about mankind in general. For example, I have used Genesis 6:5-6 as an example of how God could not tolerate the human race any longer and therefore decided to destroy them all in the Great Flood. The language of the Bible portrays God's decision as quite emotive, and I take it at face value:

"And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'"

Fourth, since the Catholic Church has never said God could not have emotions, then I am well within the pale of proposing that he might, as long as I do not infringe on any other defined dogma about God. As such, what I have argued is the following:

Since we attribute real intelligence and will to God, why do we not attribute real emotion to God? Are not intelligence and will also human characteristics that could be as tainted as human emotion? Since they are tainted, then why are we not just as reticent to speak of God having intelligence and will? The reason is simple: we feel safe in attributing intelligence and will to God because we know that God's intelligence and will are perfect and not tainted by any sin. As long as there is no deficiency in God's intelligence and will, we have no problem assigning those human descriptions to him and regarding them as real attributes. So why don't we do the same with emotion? Are not human beings (who are made in the image of God) a combination of intelligence, will and emotion? Yes, all the theology and psychology books tell us so. Hence, there shouldn't be any problem describing God as having emotion, as long as the emotion we assign to him is as perfect and untainted by sin as the intelligence and will we assign to God.

The reason people are sometimes reticent to describe God as having emotion is because they often picture emotion as a weakness, such as when someone irrationally loses his temper. Granted, those emotions are quite human and God does not have that kind of emotion. But human intelligence and will are also flawed, yet we have no problem saying that God has intelligence and will. We do so because we make the proper distinction between divine intelligence/will as opposed to human intelligence/will. And we can do the same with emotion. There is a vast difference between divine emotion and human emotion. God's emotions are as perfect as his intelligence and will, without the slightest sin or fault.

Fifth, emotion is not something we should disdain. Emotions are present in all higher-order creatures. Scripture portrays God as having emotions (Zeph 3:17). Angels have emotion (Lk 15:10). Jesus has emotion (Jn 11:35). Christians have emotion (2Jn 1:12). Certain higher order animals have rudiments of

emotion (dog, cat, ape, monkey, etc). It is only the lower forms of creatures that do not have emotions (paramecium, viruses, bacteria, etc). Emotions are important because they not only give deep expression to life itself, but they also help us care about other beings, divine and human. We have compassion, pity and sorrow for the plight of another person because we have emotions so that we can feel their suffering. God also portrays himself as having these emotive traits. We read numerous times in Scripture about God's compassion and pity on the destitute. Does God have real compassion or is he just playacting? Since there is no reason to deny him real emotions as long as we understand them correctly, then we should not be afraid of attributing them to God. We also read about his anger against man's rebellion. And sometimes the anger of God is portrayed as an inner disposition without any punishment or retribution following (Ex 4:14-17).

Sixth, the Fathers of the Church, as we would expect, were divided on the issue. Some said God had emotions, some said no. Obviously, there was no consensus. Unfortunately, the ones who denied God emotion did so because they failed to distinguish human emotion from divine emotion. In light of that, and because the Catholic magisterium has not even addressed the issue, much less declared a dogmatic stand on it, I have the right as a Catholic to offer a view that may help bring us to a closer understanding of God to the betterment of our Christian lives, and I should be able to do so without people such as Mr. Douglass waving the word "heresy" simply because I don't measure up to his theological viewpoint.

Mr. Douglass: (4) Sungenis denies the conversion of the Jews at the end of time. That the Jews will convert has been the consistent teaching of Catholic exegetes since the patristic era, and our Holy Father himself, while Cardinal Ratzinger, has affirmed it.

R. Sungenis: First, I do not "deny the conversion of the Jews at the end of time." What I have said is that it may or may not happen, and, in fact, I pray that it will happen. There is nothing I would like to see more than the Jews convert to Christ. But since the Catholic magisterium has taken no dogmatic stand on it one way or the other, I have the right to offer an alternative view. I do so based on the flaws in biblical exegesis I have seen from those who think that it is a fact of the future that the Jews will convert to Christianity. I've been studying the Bible intensely for 35 years, and I simply find nothing in Holy Writ that guarantees a conversion of the Jews. If I'm missing something, I would be more than willing to have someone prove it to me, but so far I have only received doctrinaire assertions from people who are predisposed to such viewpoints because of their political alliances.

Irrespective of the exegetical problems, if Mr. Douglass thinks that it is an undeniable doctrinal fact that the Jews will convert to Christianity at the end of time, then I challenge him to show us one official teaching from the Catholic Church that says so. (NB: Para. 674 of the Catechism does not teach there will be a mass conversion of Jews; rather, it merely strings together quotes from Romans 11 without giving a definitive interpretation. It could support my interpretation or an opposite interpretation). If he cannot provide such a teaching, then all he has are opinions, and thus he has no right to tell me that I cannot offer an alternative view, and he also has no right to make it appear to his readers as if I'm going against Church teaching in positing an alternative view.

Moreover, Mr. Douglass' attempt to support his case by name-dropping Cardinal Ratzinger really has no place in this debate. Cardinal Ratzinger, when he was a cardinal, had many opinions on many subjects, some good, some not so good, as even he has admitted. In fact, Cardinal Ratzinger once said: "I wish I had a hundred Raymond Browns," yet Mr. Douglass (as well as myself), have castigated Raymond Brown as an unorthodox teacher of Holy Scripture. Mr. Douglass conducted a biblical inerrancy conference in August 2007 of which Raymond Brown was one of the chief targets, as he has been every year in the same conference.

As for the other "Catholic exegetes" who teach that the Jews will be converted, the sad fact is, not a one of them has ever given a detailed exegesis of the one passage they purport teaches such a conversion, Romans 11:25-27. If Mr. Douglass can produce such a detailed exegesis from any "Catholic exegete since the patristic era," which deals with all the original Greek, the context of Romans 11, the quotes extracted from the Old Testament in Rom 11:26-27, all the individual words and phrases used in Rom 11:25-27, and all the other passages in the Bible that bear on this question, I will be glad to consider it.

The only thing I have seen from Mr. Douglass' list of "exegetes" is mere assertions with no detailed exegesis. Until that time, I have the right to point out the flaws of the view connected with it and offer the Catholic populace an alternative view, and I should be able to do so without Mr. Douglass implying that I am unorthodox.

Finally, if the four above issues are the only ones that disturb Mr. Douglass, then it seems even in his theological world my orthodox batting average is very high, since there are hundreds of issues upon which Mr. Douglass and I agree whole heartedly and few with which we disagree, and this fact was the very reason he came on board with me at CAI a couple of years ago. To my knowledge, except for some issues about the Jews, we have not parted company on any of those prior theological agreements.

Interestingly enough, for the very things that some others (e.g., Mark Shea) question my Catholic orthodoxy, namely, my belief in geocentrism, the fact is, geocentrism is Mr. Douglass' preferred cosmology, since he has stated on more than one occasion that he also believes in geocentrism, and, in fact, I was instrumental in converting him to that position after he read my work on the subject while he was my Vice-President at CAI. But I would defend Mr. Douglass against anyone who would accuse him of unorthodoxy because of his beliefs in geocentrism. He has the right to hold an alternate cosmology because the Catholic magisterium has never officially endorsed heliocentrism or denied geocentrism. It has, in fact, condemned heliocentrism and endorsed geocentrism.

God be with you all.

Robert Sungenis