

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.

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The interview follows in PDF format.