

Bernard of Clairvaux and Christ Alone

Main Point: Bernard understood that we are saved by the merit of Christ alone.

Q: Why were the middle ages so dark?

A: Because of the mingling of the categories of Law and Gospel.

1. Definition of those categories

- a. **“...the doctrine contained in the law and gospel is necessary to lead us to a knowledge of Christ and his benefits: *for the law is our schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ, constraining us to fly to him, and showing us what that righteousness is, which he has wrought out, and now offers unto us. But the gospel, professedly, treats of the person, office, and benefits of Christ.*”¹**
- b. Law: “The law prescribes and enjoins what is to be done, and forbids what ought to be avoided”
- c. Gospel “whilst the gospel announces the free remission of sin, through and for the sake of Christ.”
- d. Ursinus: The Law and the Gospel differ in “the promises which they make to man. The law promises life upon the condition of perfect obedience; the gospel, [promises life] on the condition of faith in Christ and the commencement of new obedience.”
- e. Point: The Law cannot give you life, it only condemns because our works never measure up (Rom 2:19-20). The Gospel freely gives life through faith in Christ alone (Rom 3:28).
- f. Faith = Salvation and works

2. Examples of confusion

- a. Galatian controversy: faith + food laws = salvation [Gal 2]
 - i. The doctrines of the Law and Gospel were mixed. To be saved one must receive the grace of God in the Gospel and then complete one’s own salvation by obeying the Law.
- b. Roman Catholic View: faith + works done in cooperation with grace = salvation
 - i. Atto of Vercelli: “Let us have confidence that, although we are sinners, we can be reconciled through his grace—if only we produce fruits worthy of repentance and hold a firm faith to the end.”²
 - ii. Here, Atto mixes Law and Gospel by implying that we can be reconciled on a condition: “if only we produce fruits worthy of repentance”. The error here is that he places bearing fruit before reconciliation. Christians do not bear fruit for God so that we may be reconciled. No, we bear fruit for God because we are reconciled. Atto, though very subtly, leaves the door open to a Jesus + understanding of salvation. He does not clearly distinguish the Law and the Gospel.

¹Zacharias Ursinus, *Heidelberg Catechism*, “Prolegomena”. Emphasis mine. Accessed from: <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/ursinus/Commentary%20on%20the%20Heidelberg%20Catechism-%20Zacharias%20Ursinus.pdf>

²Atto of Vercelli, *Expositio Epistolarum S. Pauli*, “Epistola Ad Hebraeos”. Accessed from: <https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/PLD/navigate/595/2/15>

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1. Augustine: "Only in union with Christ can the fruit of good works blossom. As he writes elsewhere, "A wheel does not run nicely in order that it may be round, but because it is round."³
- iii. Thomas and those following him: faith + love = final salvation (justification by love)
 1. This is a confusion of justification with sanctification. We bear the fruit of love because we have been completely justified before God and enjoy peace with him through the merit of Christ alone. Placing love with Christ on the left side of the equation confuses the work of justification, which is unilaterally accomplished and freely given, with sanctification which flows from justification.⁴
 2. "Since love is the summary of the law, justification by love is equivalent to justification by the law."⁵
- c. General error: faith + *anything* = salvation
 - i. The *anything* implies that there is some degree of obedience to the Law that must be kept before we can truly be saved. This is a mingling of Law and Gospel and, according to Paul, is a false gospel (Gal 1:6-9).
3. What does the Scripture say?
 - a. Galatians
 - i. By works of the law no one will be justified (Gal 2:15-21). Consider the weightiness of verse 21.
 - ii. Paul's fiery rhetoric in Gal 3:1-6.
 - iii. All who rely on works of the law are under a curse (Gal 3:10-14).
4. What is the effect on the Believer?
 - a. Discouragement—despondency
 - i. Calvin: "The thought is ever and anon recurring to me, that I am in danger of insulting the mercy of God by labouring with so much anxiety to maintain it, as if it were doubtful or obscure. Such, however, is our malignity in refusing to concede to God what belongs to him until most strongly urged, that I am obliged to insist at greater length. But as Scripture is clear enough on this subject, I shall contend in its words rather than my own."⁶ See 1 John 4:19; Galatians 5:22-23.
 - b. Lack of assurance
 - c. Christ is robbed of glory; this false teaching says that he is not enough.
 - i. Lord willing, we'll expand on this later.

³Augustine of Hippo cited in Michael Horton, *Justification, Volume 1*, "O Sweet Exchange", (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018).

⁴Horton, "The Reformers and the Great Exchange".

⁵Horton, "The Reformers and the Great Exchange".

⁶John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 357.

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Were there any people who kept these categories straight? Bernard of Clairvaux did.

Q: Who was Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 AD)⁷

1. Early life

- a. Born on the outskirts of Dijon, Burgundy (now France).
- b. He was born to devout parents—Tescelin and Alethé—who nurtured him in the faith. His mother was particularly impactful on his life; “some speculate only second to what Monica had done for Augustine of Hippo”.
- c. His mother died when he was 17 and he began a process which has been described as his “long path to complete conversion.”
- d. He sought the counsel of the abbot of Cîteaux, Stephen Harding, and decided to enter his monastery.
- e. At this point, we get a preview of Bernard’s masterful skill of persuasion. Bernard was “so taken with the order, he persuaded not only his brothers but some 25 others to join him at Cîteaux in 1112.”
- f. Here, he began practicing extreme ascetic disciplines—strict fasting, sleep deprivation, etc—“which severely impaired his health—he was plagued by anemia, migraines, gastritis, hypertension, and an atrophied sense of taste his whole life.”

2. Founder of Clairvaux Abbey

- a. After three years, Bernard was sent out with twelve other monks to found a new abbey. This would be called Clairvaux Abbey and would eventually become so synonymous with Bernard that it became attached to his name.
- b. Bernard did not like the decadence of many Abbeys and cathedrals of his day and preferred a simple aesthetic.
 - i. “O vanity of vanities.... Every part of the church shines, but the poor man is hungry. The church walls are clothed in gold, while the children of the church remain naked.... What is gold doing in the holy place? To speak plainly, greed is the root of all evil, ... for the sight of these sumptuous and amazing vanities encourages man to give rather than to pray. So riches attract riches, money attracts money.... The more the abundance of riches, the more willingly men give” (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*).⁸
- c. This monastery was a powerhouse and eventually was responsible for planting more than 500 monasteries across Europe.
- d. He knew that outward good works mattered for nothing if one’s heart was prideful. He said, “There are people who go clad in tunics and have nothing to do with furs, who nevertheless are lacking in humility. Surely humility in furs is better than pride in tunics.”

⁷Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Bernard of Clairvaux,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 203. Quotations and information in this section are drawn heavily from this source.

⁸Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 447.

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3. World Monk—hype man for second crusade

- a. As the monasteries (Cistercian) planted by Clairvaux increased in number and popularity, Bernard grew in popularity as well—though it doesn't appear that he was thrilled by this.
- b. Bernard had warm relationships with other groups of monks who were part of other orders—he even wrote the Rule for the new order of the Knight's Templar! "An order of men who took monastic vows and swore to defend the Holy Land militarily."
- c. Bernard was asked by pope Eugenius to promote the second crusade of the Holy Land. He was highly effective in rallying people behind what he believed to be the cause of Christ. However, because of terrible leadership, the crusade was a massive failure. Bernard's reputation suffered as a result.

4. Defender of the orthodoxy contra Abelard

- a. Around the time of Bernard's rise in popularity, there was an influential albeit controversial theologian in Paris named Abelard.
- b. Abelard, anticipated French philosophers of the Renaissance when he stated that "It is by doubting that we come to inquire and by inquiring that we reach truth..." In other words, he didn't believe that truth—eternal, unfailing, infallible truth—could be had in the Scripture.
- c. Abelard also "suggested that Christ died not to pay a penalty but merely to demonstrate God's love..."
- d. Bernard was appalled and wrote to the pope denouncing Abelard's heretical views. In this letter Bernard wrote, "I was made a sinner by deriving my being from Adam; I am made just by being washed in the blood of Christ and not by Christ's 'words and example.'" To this we say, amen!
- e. Abelard kept pressing Bernard to a debate and finally Bernard consented. When all the officials were gathered to hear the men make their cases, Bernard opened up with such Biblical truth and persuasion that Abelard did not even make a reply. He submitted to the officials' decision and was made to retire to a monastery for the rest of his life.⁹

5. Reluctant Influencer

- a. This W only gave Bernard more fame in Europe. He was sought often by all manner of officials from across the continent. Even to his old age, his counsel was highly esteemed. That said, this was not the life that he truly desired. You might say that Bernard was a reluctant influencer.

6. Lover of God

- a. Theologically, Bernard is most known for his commentaries on the Scripture and theological writings.
- b. Bernard knew God and loved him. Consider this quote from him, "You wish me to tell you why and how God should be loved. My answer is that God himself is the reason he is to be loved." Bernard knew the sweetness of God. For him, the prize

⁹Gillian R Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux (Great Medieval Thinkers)*, (Oxford University Press, 2000). Cited from Wikipedia.

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of the Christian life was not clout, popularity, a whole pile of good works, or the planting of heaps of monasteries—the prize was knowing God.

- c. Bernard understood that God loved him first. “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).

Q: Did Bernard confuse Law and Gospel?

A: No, Bernard taught that sinners are saved through faith by the merit of Christ alone.

1. Let's hear Bernard in his own words:

- a. **“And, indeed, where have the infirm [sin-sick rebels] firm security and safe rest, but in the wounds of the Saviour? Hold it then the more securely, the more powerful he is to save. The world frowns, the body presses, the devil lays snares: I fall not, because I am founded on a firm rock. I have sinned a grievous sin: conscience is troubled, but it shall not be overwhelmed, for I will remember the wounds of the Lord.”** He afterwards concludes, “My merit, therefore, is the compassion of the Lord; plainly I am not devoid of merit so long as he is not devoid of commiseration. But if the mercies of the Lord are many, equally many are my merits. **Shall I sing of my own righteousness? O Lord, I will make mention of thy righteousness alone. That righteousness is mine also, being made mine by God,**” (Bernard, Sermon. 61, in Cantic.)¹⁰
- b. “Man’s whole merit is to place his whole hope in him who makes the whole man safe,” (in Psalm. Qui Habitat. Sermon. 15.)¹¹

2. Major Influence upon the Reformers

- a. “John Calvin considered him to be the major witness to truth between Gregory the Great and the 1500s.”¹²
- b. Bernard taught Luther, Calvin, Vermigli, and others that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. It is:
 - i. Faith (alone) = Salvation + works
 - ii. And this is the case because the Law reveals our spiritual deadness; it cannot give us life. We are saved by the merit of Jesus Christ alone which we receive by faith alone.
 - iii. We do not work for our salvation, “Faith merely ‘grasps the victory of Christ’.”¹³
 - 1. I cannot lift the chains of the Law off me, only Christ can. I cannot lift a finger to free myself, I must rely upon Christ alone to save me.

3. Why is this important?

- a. The glory of God—is Christ sufficient?
- b. Salvation
- c. Your peace and joy

¹⁰Cited in Calvin and Beveridge, 337-338.

¹¹Cited in Calvin and Beveridge, 337-338.

¹²Galli and Olsen, 202.

¹³Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, in LW 26:166–68.