

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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MARTIN LUTHER AND THE HEART OF THE REFORMATION

Martin Luther, the catalyst used by God to bring about the Protestant Reformation, called the doctrine of justification by faith alone *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae* (the article of a standing or falling church). “If the church loses this doctrine,” Luther went on to say, “we lose everything . . .” The church may continue and may even prosper numerically and financially, but not theologically and spiritually if this doctrine is lost (or neglected and ignored as it seems to be the case within the ranks of evangelicalism). The heart of the Gospel in the eyes of Luther and the Reformers was God’s gracious gift of righteousness and justification. “Here,” declares J. I. Packer, “was the sum and substance of that *sola fide-sola gratia-solo Christo-sola Scriptura-soli Deo gloria* which was the sustained theme of their proclamation, polemics, praises and prayers. And to their minds (note well!) proclamation, polemics, praise and prayer belonged together, just as did the five Latin slogans linked above as epitomizing their message. Justification by faith, by grace, by Christ, through Scripture, to the glory of God was to them a single topic, just as a fugue with several voices is a single piece.¹

- I. **JUSTIFICATION. The Latin is *iustificatio*.** Everything hinges on how this term is defined. The Roman Catholic Church contended that it meant “to make righteous.” This was an actual gift (*donum*) of righteousness infused (*iustitia infusa*) in the sinner by grace (mediated by the sacraments). This was denied by the Reformers because the Bible never used the word in that fashion. The word “to justify” (Gk. *didaioō*) **never** means “to make righteous” but “to declare righteous. This declaration is based on the *imputation* (Gk. *logizomai* translated into Latin with the word *imputation*, both terms mean “to reckon, to pronounce or declare”) of the merits of Christ’s death to the elect. Their debts to God, having been fully discharged by Christ’s satisfaction² on the cross, they are *declared* righteous before God. Justification is thus seen as the opposite of condemnation and is a legal term taken from the law courts. To be condemned is to be declared guilty (cf. Deuteronomy 25:1; Proverbs 17:15; Romans 8:33-34). To be justified is to be declared righteous (cf. Romans 2:13; 3:4).³

- II. **BY. The preposition used to translate this in the Greek testament is *dia*.** It expressed the concept of instrumentality. A very important thing to note about this preposition is that the New Testament writers **never** use *dia* in the accusative case (translated “because of” in the sense of efficient cause) when speaking of faith and justification. Rather, they consistently use the genitive case, the case of means or instrument (translated with words like “by means of” or “through”). The Westminster Confession of Faith has captured this well: “Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.”⁴

III. **FAITH. The Latin word is *fides*.** The Reformer understood faith (*Fides Salvifica*) to have three important aspects.

- A. *Notitia*, knowledge, in reference to the actual content of the gospel and the promises of God.
- B. *Assensus*, assent, by which the intellect acknowledges the truth of *notitia*, apart from any personal trust or saving appropriate of the knowledge.
- C. *Fiducia*, trust (*apprensio fiducialis*). The faithful apprehension which appropriates savingly, by an act of the will, the true knowledge of the promises of God in Christ. This is Calvin's favorite word for saving faith. "Saving faith, therefore, cannot be merely intellectual; it must also be volitional."⁵

The late R. C. Sproul makes this helpful observation regarding these terms: "These elements include aspects that are *necessary conditions* for justification, which in isolation from *fiducia* do not meet the level of *su condition*. That is, though *notitia* and *assensus* are *necessary* for salvation, they are not enough to gain salvation. To get to the problem of unity we must look not only at questions of assent and trust (*assensus* and *fiducia*), but at the first element, *notitia*. *Notitia* or, as it is sometimes described, *notae*, refers to the content of faith, the data understood and affirmed by the mind. This simply means that saving faith has content. In believing, there must be something that we believe. Faith does not exist in a vacuum, or perhaps more accurately as a vacuum. A vacuous faith is an oxymoron. The *notitia* contains the essential truths of the Christian faith, such as the existence, nature, and character of God, the person and work of Christ, and the nature of the gospel. With respect to the latter, before we can believe the gospel we must have some idea of its content. Before we can have unity in the gospel, we must agree to what the gospel is. The same may be true about God and Christ. For example, if a person "believes" in Christ in the sense that he affirms that Christ was merely a great human teacher of ethics who died as a moral example of the virtuous man, whose virtue is to be imitated by his followers but who offered no atonement, and who stayed dead without resurrection and ascension, is this "faith" in Jesus saving faith? Here the *notitia* of such faith falls short of biblical faith and leaves us with a gospel that is not the biblical gospel. How one understands the person and work of Christ is critical to unity of faith and unity in the gospel. If we differ among ourselves at essential points regarding these matters, we have not achieved the unity of faith of which the Scriptures speak. As we have seen, Evangelicals and Mormons do not share a unity of faith because they differ radically concerning the person of Christ."⁶

CONCLUSION: Justification by faith means that our confidence must not be in our efforts or even our best intentions. To refuse to cast off all confidence in our works and to rest only in Christ and His merits is an insult to the grace of God. It says in effect "the cross is not **that** important." To the Reformers, it was everything, as Packer observes, "This justification was to them not a theological speculation but a religious reality, apprehended through prayer by revelation from God via the Bible. It was a gift given as part of God's total work of love in saving us, a work which leads us to know God and ourselves as both really are -- something the unbelieving world does not know. And to declare and defend God's justification publicly as the only way of life for any man was at once an act of confessing their faith, of glorifying their God by proclaiming His wonderful work and by urging others to approach him in penitent and hopeful trust just as they did themselves."⁷ Better still, listen to Luther's own words, "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, *the justice of God*, because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that *the just shall live by his faith*. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to

have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the *justice of God* had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven. . . . If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ J. I. Packer, "Sola Fide: The Reformed Doctrine of Justification" in *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology. A Festschrift for John J. Gerstner*. Ed. R. C. Sproul (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 11-12.

² *Imputatio Satisfactionis Christi* is the objective basis of justification by grace through faith. Christ's payment for sin is imputed to the faithful, who could not of themselves make the payment; the unrighteous are counted righteous on the grounds of their faith. cf. The extended discussion by Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Baker, 1985), p. 149.

³ cf. the article on *dikaioō* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* II, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Oerhard Friedrich (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 174-191 and L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 269-298. Chapter XIII.

⁴ Muller, op. cit. p. 116.

⁵ Calvin declares, "Now, the knowledge of God's goodness will not be held very important unless it makes us rely on that goodness. Consequently, understanding mixed with doubt is to be excluded, as it is not in firm agreement, but in conflict, with itself. Yet far indeed is the mind of man, blind and darkened as it is, from penetrating and attaining even to perception of the will of God! And the heart, too, wavering as it is in perpetual hesitation, is far from resting secure in that conviction! Therefore our mind must be otherwise illumined and our heart strengthened, that the Word of God may obtain full faith among us. Now we shall possess a right of definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit, *Institutes* Bk. III, Ch. II, Sec. 7.

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Baker, 1999), p. 27.

⁷ Packer, op. cit., p. 12.

⁸ As cited in Roland Bainton, *Here I stand* (Abington, 1960), p. 65.