

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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GALATIANS: THE CORNERSTONE OF THE REFORMATION

Few books have had a more profound influence on Western civilization than has Paul's epistle to the Galatians. This little book (it can easily be read from beginning to end in less than twenty minutes) became the battle cry of the Protestant Reformation against Roman Catholicism's distortion of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. The epistle of Galatians was Martin Luther's favorite. He called it "my own Epistle to which I have plighted my troth. It is my Katie vonBora."¹ The keynote in Paul's epistle to the Galatians is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Reformers saw this as the issue in their debate with Rome. How important is this doctrine? Luther called justification by faith alone "the article of a standing or falling church" and added "if we lose this doctrine, we lose everything."² John Calvin declared to Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto that the doctrine of justification by faith alone to be "the first and keenest subject of controversy between us."³ Is this *theological* issue still relevant for today? I am afraid that in the minds of many Christians this debate is passé.⁴ But how can any doctrine that concerns our salvation – how can we be just before God – ever become outdated?⁵ Robert Traill (1642-1716), who wrote about controversies in his own day, gives an excellent summary of the key issues surrounding the doctrine of justification: "The subject of the controversy is the justifying grace of God in Jesus Christ. Owned it is by both sides: and both fear it is abused, either by turning it into wantonness, hence the noise of Antinomianism, or by corrupting it with the mixture of works, hence the fears on the other side, of Arminianism." Traill identifies the two sides of the spectrum, on the one hand, antinomianism, and on the other, Arminianism, Neonomianism, or legalism. The doctrine of justification was neither supposed to be a license to sin, something the apostle Paul countered in his own missionary journeys (Rom. 6:1-2), nor was it supposed to be a new starting point that wiped the slate clean with Jesus as a new Moses giving a new law where salvation was based upon a combination of God's grace and one's good works, which again was something that Paul faced (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16)."⁶

- I. **THE ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE: NO OTHER GOSPEL.** The Judaizers who invaded the Galatian Church also affirmed that salvation was to be found in Jesus Christ alone. But on what basis or condition was this salvation to be secured? This *was* and *is* the crucial question. The Judaizers *added* another gospel, which turns out to be no gospel at all. The adding of *anything* (circumcision, baptism, sacraments, etc.) nullifies the grace of God and has a despotic effect on one's Christian life. It also merits Paul's *anathema* (stated twice, verse 8 and verse 9). Matthew Harmon explains "As for anyone who does preach a contrary gospel, Paul writes *a curse be on him!* The severity of departing from the gospel is reinforced by Paul's use of the word *anathema*. While this word was used in Greco-Roman literature with a variety of senses, there is little doubt that the LXX provided the backdrop for his use of it here. Of the twenty-six occurrences of *anathema* in the LXX, twenty-two of them translate a form of the root *haydem*. Although this root can refer to something devoted to the service of the Lord (Lev. 27:28), it most often refers to *a ban for utter destruction, the compulsory dedication of something which impedes or resists God's work, which is considered to be accursed before God*. The paradigmatic example is Joshua 7, where Achan took some of what was set apart, and the Lord's anger burned against the Israelites (7:1). As a result,

God's anger burned against the Israelites, and they were defeated in their next battle (7:2-5). When Joshua asks the Lord why they were defeated (7:6-9), God explains that the Israelites have broken the covenant by keeping for themselves objects set apart for destruction (7:10-15). Once Achan is revealed as the guilty party, he and his entire family are burned and stoned (7:16-26). As noted in the previous verse, Paul may have this very event in mind as he thinks of the false teachers troubling the Galatians. Like Achan before them, the false teachers were endangering God's covenant people by departing from the one true gospel."⁷

II. **THE ARGUMENT OF THE REFORMATION: SOLA FIDE.** Roman Catholicism sets forth a doctrine of salvation that is sacerdotal (received through the sacraments). The seven sacraments of Rome do not merely signify grace but actually confer grace *ex opera operato*. In Catholicism, justification is not by faith alone; on the contrary, the official position of Rome as set forth in the Council of Trent in 1547 declares in its Canons concerning justification, Canon 9: *If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone (sola fide), meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.*" Leonardo DeChirico summarizes the matter: "The Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation reacted negatively to the Reformers' account of justification and came out with an alternative view. At the Council of Trent (1545-63) Rome continued to use the word *justification* but filled it with a completely different meaning. For Trent justification was a process rather than an act of God; a process initiated by the sacrament of baptism where the righteousness of God was thought to be infused; a process nurtured by the religious works of the faithful and sustained by the sacramental system of the church; a process needing to include a time of purification in purgatory, before perhaps being enacted on judgment day. Rome reframed justification in terms of a combination of God's initiative and the efforts of human beings. Grace and works joined together, resulting in a continuing journey of justification, ultimately dependent on human works and sacraments. This confused and confusing teaching has been misleading people ever since."⁸

CONCLUSION: Paul was no ivory tower theologian (neither were the Reformers). His doctrinal concerns were never simply intellectual. Paul's theology was an essential part of his practical Christianity. "He wrestled out his theology on his feet."⁹ Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers were like Paul. They understood the issues that were at stake. "Return to the Catholic Church." This summons to return to mother church was addressed to Geneva in a letter written by Jacopo Sadoleto in the year 1539. Sadoleto was a cardinal who carried no little clout, an experienced theologian, a seasoned polemicist, and a representative of Rome. The timing of his letter to that small locale called Geneva was strategic: John Calvin had been exiled, no longer Geneva's pastor. And no longer under his direct influence – and the influence of the zealous William Farel – Geneva was ripe for a call back to the mother church. According to Sadoleto, the stakes were high: to depart from the Catholic Church could only end in everlasting death, but to return to the Catholic Church promised the reward of eternal life. Sadoleto could be very persuasive. Reformers like Calvin were schismatics, leading the Genevans away from the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church into endless dissension. To depart from mother church was sacrilegious, Sadoleto warned. The choice, then, was easy: either follow the Catholic Church and its fifteen hundred years of faithfulness to God or follow the *innovations* of the past two and a half decades, led by innovators like Calvin, whom the Genevans expelled. According to the cardinal from Carpentras, the exiled pastor of Geneva has misled the Genevans, failing to teach them the ways of the ancient church, leading them astray into innumerable *novelties*. Sadoleto's opinion was not merely his own but was shared by many in the papacy. The Reformers were heretics, introducing new doctrines into the church. For that reason, they were not catholic, but their modernizations betrayed the church universal. To make matters worse, they created discord when the Catholic Church stood for concord. *Truth is always one*, Sadoleto reminded the Genevans, but *falsehood is varied and multiform*. Although Calvin was no longer pastor of the Genevans, he was asked to respond to Sadoleto. His reply was a life preserver cast on the seas of a vulnerable Reformed Church, sustaining the Genevans under heavy and successive waves of pressure that called out, *Return to*

Rome, return to Rome, return to Rome.” Return home. Yet Calvin’s reply was also revealing: Sadoletto’s summons forced the Reformer to explain the true intentions behind his program of reform. Sadoletto’s bidding galvanized Calvin to answer the charge of novelty, a charge also lobbed at Luther in the early 1520s (see chapters 8-9). Was Sadoletto right that the Reformers – and all those who followed them – were leading Christians out of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church? Calvin made this telling observation in his reply to Sadoletto, *that you have too indolent a theology, as is almost always the case with those who have never had experiences in serious struggles of conscience.*”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Katie was Luther’s wife. This remark is found in the introduction to Luther’s *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, ed. P. S. Watson, first published in 1535 (rpt. James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1953), p. 5. The impact of Luther’s commentary is best seen in the opinion of John Bunyan, author of *the Pilgrim’s Progress*, who wrote: “I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians, excepting the Holy Bible, before all books that I have ever seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience.” *The Works of John Bunyan* I (rpt. Baker, 1977), p. 22.

² “It is also,” wrote Luther, “the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consisteth. Most necessary it is therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.” Op. cit. p. 101.

³ *John Calvin & Jacopo Sadoletto: A Reformation Debate*, ed. J. C. Olin (rpt. Baker, 1976), p. 66.

⁴ In the Spring of 1993, the document entitled “Evangelical and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” was unveiled. To the surprise of many, the accord carried the signatures of such highly-respected Evangelicals as Chuck Colson, Os Guinness, and J. I. Packer. The doctrine of justification by faith alone was conspicuously absent from the list of central truths that are supposed to bind Christians today. I will address this document in future installments in this series. It is printed in its entirety in the appendix of K. A. Fournier, *A House United? Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A Winning Alliance For the 21st Century* (Navpress, 1994). Chuck Colson’s defense of this document is distressing, cf. his article “Why Catholics Are Our Allies,” *Christianity Today*, Nov. 14, 1994, p. 136. Colson writes: “In becoming Christians, we all embrace a body of central truths such as Creation, the Fall, Substitutionary Atonement, and the infallibility of Scripture. But once inside the house [of faith], we find our fellowship within particular traditions.” Given this perspective, the doctrine of justification by faith alone simply turns out to be an item of *one* particular tradition which other *legitimate* theological traditions can reject and still be considered Christian. Some of the Evangelicals (like Packer and Guinness) have defended their signing of the accord by saying that their agreement touches only social and moral issues (like abortion). The document, however, is implicitly theological and seeks to give the impression that the differences between Catholics and Evangelicals are, in the final analysis, merely secondary in nature. I share John MacArthur’s view, who writes: “I must confess that I find all such explanations unsatisfying because both the public perception of the accord and the language of the document itself send no signal that evangelicals now accept Roman Catholicism as authentic Christianity. That grants an undeserved legitimacy to Roman Catholic doctrine.” *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Crossway, 1994), p. 130.

⁵ The historical setting of the epistle might seem to argue that it would be difficult to find any significant relevance for today. After all, Paul was contending with Judaizers who were seeking to impose circumcision on Gentile Christians. Even though the historical situation has changed Paul’s presentation of this timeless theological truth – justification by faith alone – has not, and the Gospel of grace has always had to contend with works-righteousness, merit-mongers.

⁶ As cited in J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding The Classic Reformed Doctrine* (P&R, 2008), p. 6.

⁷ M. S. Harmon, *Galatians: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Lexham Academic, 2021), p. 45.

⁸ Leonardo DeChirico, *Same Words, Different Worlds: Do Roman Catholics and Evangelicals Believe the Same Gospel?* (IVP, 2021), p. 46.

⁹ Donald Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 5.

¹⁰ Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation As Renewed: Retrieving The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church* (Zondervan Academic, 2023), p. 1.