

Luther On Justification By Faith

1. Martin Luther (1483-1546) had been brought up with the idea that some human effort, some initial turning of the will towards God, was necessary, in order for a person to merit sanctifying grace. Aware of his own sinful nature, he feared divine judgement but in his studies of Romans he came to a new understanding of God's righteousness. God's righteousness was not a standard by which God judges human beings but the gift given to sinful human beings by God through Jesus Christ. This doctrine of justification soon became the centre of Luther's theology. He argued that this gift from God of righteous was something attributed to human beings rather than something the person achieved themselves. Christ's righteousness is not a feature of the human soul itself. Rather it is something that God reckons or imputes to us. By trusting in God's grace alone, we are justified. It is faith in response to the divine word of forgiveness. Faith itself is never a "work", since at its heart is a rejection of one's own works. Justification is God's declaration of the sinner's innocence, even while sin in actuality remains part of the person's life in this life. According to Luther, good works have a legitimate place only as a free response to justification; they are never the ground or precondition of justification. God declares the sinner to be "not guilty" because Christ has taken his place, living a perfect life according to God's law and suffering for his sins. Justification is in no way dependent upon the thoughts, words, and deeds of those justified through faith alone in Christ. The new obedience that the justified sinner renders to God through sanctification follows justification as a consequence, but is not part of justification.

(Partly adapted from "An Introduction to Christian Theology" edited by Plantinga, Thompson and Lundberg.)

2. The word "justification" can have the meaning of pronouncing a guilty person acquitted. It can also be understood to imply making or becoming actually righteous.

At some point in 1515 Luther's theology underwent a seismic shift. His understanding of the phrase "the righteousness of God" changed radically and led to his doctrine of "justification by faith alone".

The change was from regarding precondition for justification as a human work, something the sinner had to perform, before they could be justified. But he knew this was not humanly possible and so saw God's righteousness as a punishing righteousness. On lecturing on Romans he came to believe God's righteousness refers to a righteousness that God gives to the sinner. God himself meets the precondition. So God is not a harsh judge who rewards individuals according to their merits, but a merciful and gracious God who bestows righteousness upon sinners as a gift. For Luther, faith is not merely believing something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and relying upon it. This does not mean that the sinner is justified because he or she believes, on account of that faith. This would be to reduce faith to a human work. As far as Luther was concerned, he thought that God provides everything necessary for

justification, so that all the sinner needs to do is to receive it. God is active, and humans are passive, in justification. It is justification by grace through faith. God does everything necessary for salvation. The righteousness of God is not a righteousness which judges whether or not we have met the precondition for justification, but the righteousness which is given to us so we may meet that precondition. (Adapted from "Christian Theology – An Introduction" by Alister McGrath.

3. Luther was born in 1483 and as a friar in Wittenberg he frequently went to confession and fulfilled the imposed penances. He struggled with his personal salvation and became convinced that the church had lost sight of the central doctrine of justification by faith. In his day it was believed that the path of salvation involved the effecting through care and nurture, by means of things such as the sacraments of the church, work and penance, the grace of God that had been infused into a person's soul. This was the means by which the unrighteous could become righteous. The medieval view was that justifying grace was a supernatural quality infused into the human soul. It was believed that this grace came into a person at baptism. However, Luther argued that justification didn't mean "to make righteous" but rather "to regard as righteous, to count as righteous, to declare as righteous". It is a righteousness that God gives freely by his grace to people who don't have righteousness of their own. He believed that Christians receive such righteousness entirely from outside themselves. Luther emphasised justification by faith alone. However, he did not mean that our justification is created by our faith. It is not our faith that causes God to love us. Rather our justification is because of the Cross. It is historic. It has already happened. It is external to us. However it becomes mine by faith. Faith is the thing that grabs our righteousness - believing in Christ. It is God who takes the initiative in justification. The righteousness is given to the sinner, it is not the sinners own righteousness. In 1520 he argued that the number of sacraments should be reduced from seven to two.

Example Of A Final Summary

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Christ's righteousness is not a feature of the human soul itself. Rather it is something that God reckons or imputes to us. By trusting in God's grace alone, we are justified. It is faith in response to the divine word of forgiveness.

So God is not a harsh judge who rewards individuals according to their merits, but a merciful and gracious God who bestows righteousness upon sinners as a gift.

Therefore, it is not our faith that causes God to love us. Rather our justification is because of the Cross. It is historic. It has already happened. It is external to us. However it becomes mine by faith. Faith is the thing that grabs our righteousness - believing in Christ. It is God who takes the initiative in justification. The righteousness is given to the sinner, it is not the sinners own righteousness.

Here are three more resources- this time about the Council of Trent (Theme 2D).

1. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was brought about by the continuing success of the Protestant Movement. There needed to be a reply to Luther and in particular his teaching on justification. There were delays in setting up the Council. This was mostly due to the war between Charles V and Francis I. Eventually it met in 1545 and then again in 1551 and 1562. The Council affirmed that a person is inwardly justified by sanctifying grace and thus capable of good works only after his cooperation with divine assistance. They argued that there had to be something within individuals which could allow God to justify them. In this same session, the Protestant position on the number of sacraments was rejected, and the Council decreed there were seven conferring grace. Although the Council did not provide a way of reconciling with Protestantism, it did provide the foundation for a revitalization of Catholicism.

(Adapted from The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church edited by J. Douglas)

2. In the General Council of Trent the Catholic Church stated in canon XII that "If any one shall say that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy pardoning sins for Christ's sake, or that it is that confidence alone by which we are justified...let him be accursed".

Canon XIV on justification stated that "If any one saith, that man is truly absolved from his sins and justified, because that he assuredly believed himself absolved and justified; or, that no one is truly justified but he who believes himself justified; and that, by this faith alone, absolution and justification are effected; let him be anathema (excommunicated)."

Such Canons as these illustrated that the Council could find no way to reconcile Protestantism with Catholicism. "Faith alone" is foundational to Protestantism, and distinguishes it from other Christian denominations. However, Luther meant that though the Christian life was began through faith and faith alone, good works followed justification but did not cause that justification in the first place.

3. After a number of abortive attempts, the Council of Trent was convened in 1542 by Pope Paul III. The choice of venue meant that it was within the territories of the German Emperor but near enough to Rome to ensure papal control of the Council. The Council of Trent met in three phases : 1545-47, 1551-52, 1562-63. The work of the council was twofold – the definition of Roman Catholic doctrine in opposition to Protestantism and the introduction of disciplinary reforms within the Roman Catholic Church. There was a wide range of definitions of doctrine including Scripture and tradition, original sin, justification, the sacraments and purgatory.

In 1564 Pope Pius IV confirmed all the decrees of the council. He also published in that year a "Profession of Tridentine Faith". This summarised many of the anti-Protestant decisions and

Protestant converts to Rome were required to give assent to it. Trent dominated the Roman Catholic Church for about 400 years.

