

THE SOLA'S OF THE REFORMATION

iii. Faith Alone

John 1:1-13, Romans 1:16,17

Martin Luther was convinced that faith is the key that opens the human heart to the heart of God. Faith is the key which enables us to understand the great Reformation truth 'Justification By Faith' or more precisely 'Justification by Grace through Faith'. Luther was convinced that we would only understand faith in the light of the character of God and the reality of a battle for the hearts and minds of humanity.

Luther, slowly and painfully, saw that the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17 does not simply refer to his justice requiring judgement, rather a new status granted by grace. In Luther's world there was a division between spiritual people like monks and nuns and secular people in the market place and everyday world. If you really wanted to be spiritual you took the monk's cowl or the nun's habit and devoted yourself to God in a monastery. However, Luther's 'monkery' did not satisfy his soul. As part of the Augustinian order Luther was encouraged by his spiritual director to read the works of Augustine to address some of his doubts and an over sensitive conscience. Augustine spoke of a 'restless heart' that would only find rest in God.

Even though Augustine spoke of grace in a powerful way, his understanding of justification was that of a process in which penance played a part in an act of contrition. One's standing before God was dependant on a process in which you played a part. But for Luther this was no satisfaction for his soul. He was never convinced that he had been contrite enough, confessed his sins enough or been obedient enough. Justification as a synergistic process was an illusive ideal. However, upon reading Paul more closely, Luther came to realize that justification was not a transformative process, rather a declaration of a new standing and status before God. This set his heart free from a restless attempt to placate God. The way in which we appropriate this free gift of justification is when we come with empty hands and receive it as a gift. This outraged certain people. However, Luther countered this argument with his wonderful dictum 'Simul justus et peccator' – 'at the same time righteous and sinner'. It was this paradox – righteous in the eyes of God because of Christ, sinful in his own human nature, which set Luther's restless heart at rest.

We will never truly grasp Luther's understanding of justification unless we grasp his 'theology of the cross' which developed over some five years from 1515 to 1520. Luther speaks of the 'veiled glory' of God and the apparent absence of God at the cross. But paradoxically God was achieving the greatest victory, a veiled victory if you will, of defeating death, Satan and sin through the weakness of his Son. When Luther linked justification by faith to an understanding of the cross, grace though free, cost God everything.

So, let us attempt to link this to Scripture. John's gospel has bookends. It begins with those who believe in Christ given the "right to become children of God" (John 1:12) and ends with "... by believing in him [Jesus] you may live in his name" (John 20:30). Luther simply echoes the words of Christ. Faith is never simply mental assent to truth. It is relational. It involves trust and repentance. Repentance is not something added to faith, it is encapsulated in God's gift to us enabling us to change. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector illustrates this well (Luke 18:9-14). Both go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee congratulates himself, trusting in his own righteousness, whilst the tax collector knows that he is a sinner and appeals

to God's mercy. Jesus poses the implied question "Who went home justified before God?" Not the Pharisee. As I Howard Marshall put it "Jesus' lesson is precisely that the attitude of the heart is ultimately what matters. Justification depends on the mercy of God to the pertinent rather than upon works which might be thought to earn God's favour".

In John 6:28 people ask Jesus "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus' response is astounding: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent". The perceived wisdom of the day required one to do something to earn a right relationship with God. Jesus says no. Faith alone, trust in God alone, is required, "Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty".

Luther had exhausted himself by trying to earn God's favour by being a good monk. When he realized that the gift of salvation is not the result of human effort, but simply raising empty hands to receive a gift beyond measure, his heart was at last at rest. Attempting to understand God through human eyes leads to frustration and confusion. The gift of grace appropriated by faith changes our status and standing before God. No longer does God see us as sinners deserving judgement. Our judgement has been borne at the cross. We are in the words of Luther 'righteous and sinful at the same time', righteous in the eyes of God because of what Christ has done for us, i.e. an alien righteousness, whilst still sinful in our human nature. Looking away from ourselves we look to God to receive the gift of righteousness, being right with him through faith. Thanks be to God!

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