

The

# Doctrine of Justification by Faith

**T**he doctrine of justification by faith is the central doctrine of Holy Scripture. All the sacred truths of God's Word converge at this point. The supreme purpose of Christ's incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection was that lost sinners might be justified by grace through faith. In short, the doctrine of justification by faith in the crucified and risen Christ is the entire Gospel. Wherever it is believed, there exists the Church of Christ, the communion of saints. Wherever it is not believed, there can be no Christian Church, since those who deny the doctrine of justification by faith deny the entire Christian religion.

Luther writes, 'The faith that we obtain the forgiveness of sins solely for Christ's sake by faith has been the faith of the Fathers and prophets and all saints from the beginning of the world; and it has been the doctrine and teaching of Christ and the apostles, who were commissioned to spread it in all the world. And it is to this day, and will be to the end, the unanimous understanding and voice of the whole Christian Church, which always in one mind and with one accord has confessed and fought for this article, that only in the name of the Lord Jesus forgiveness of sins is obtained and received. And in this faith they have been justified before God and saved.' (SL XII:49f.)

As soon as a contrite sinner believes the Gospel he is justified, or declared righteous before God (Rom 3:23,24). His filthy garments of sin are removed (Rom 4:6-8), and he is robed with the perfect righteousness of Christ (Rom 4:3,5; Gal 3:6,27). He is no longer under wrath, but is at peace with God (Rom 5:1). He no longer has his 'understanding darkened' (Eph 4:18), but now has 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16). In testimony to this, Luther writes,

'From my own experience I must confess that I was vitally convinced that the Pope is the antichrist only after I realised, on the one hand, what the doctrine of justification is and how much it means to the Church, and, on the other hand, that the real essence of the Papacy consists in denying and cursing the doctrine of justification and in binding men's consciences to itself by its show of piety and its claim to be the only saving Church.' (F Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol II, p 555).

Without the doctrine of justification by faith, there can be no true understanding of the Scriptures.

Luther writes,

'Where this knowledge of Christ has disappeared, the sun has lost its light, and there is utter darkness. No article is any longer understood, and one cannot any longer defend himself against any error or false doctrine of the devil... You may teach and confess all articles, as the Papists do, but there is no earnest conviction or true understanding of them. It is like groping about in the darkness; it is like a blind man hearing of colours which he has never seen.' (SL VIII:629-630).

Luther again writes, 'Satan caught me off guard several times when I had lost sight of this chief article, and he so tortured me with passages of Holy Writ that heaven and earth became too small for me. I felt as if human works and laws were the right thing and as if there was nothing wrong about the Papacy. In short, he made me feel as if nobody had ever erred but this Luther alone and as if my best works, my doctrine, preaching, and books, were accursed. Even the abominable Mahomet nearly became a prophet in my sight and the Turks and Jews very saints' (SL V:1171).

When defining justification by faith, we must bear in mind that it is based upon the justification of the whole world, secured by Christ's death on the Cross and offered to all men in the Gospel (Acts 10:43). And it is a sincere and earnest offer, as God desires the salvation of all men (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Justification is by God's grace alone, apart from good works. Luther writes,

'The true knowledge of Christ, or faith, does not dispute whether you have done good works unto righteousness or evil works unto condemnation, but simply concludes after this sort: If you have done good works, you are not therefore justified; or if you have done evil works, you are not therefore condemned' (SL IX:619).

'Whoever seeks righteousness outside faith in Christ, either by works, merits, satisfactions, afflictions, or by the Law of God, rejects the grace of God and despises the death of Christ, regardless of what he may protest with his mouth to the contrary' (SL IX:249,251).

Justification is received by faith through God's appointed means of grace. God has obtained salvation for all men, but He offers and conveys it to men only by means of the Word of God and the Sacraments.

All who deny this truth cannot teach the doctrine of justification by faith correctly, and must necessarily teach work-righteousness. Luther writes,

‘Here also we need to give heed that we take the right way and not make the mistake which certain heretics have made in times past and many erroneous minds who think that God ought to do something special with them. They imagine that God will deal separately with each one by some special internal light and mysterious revelation... We are to know that God has ordained that no one shall come to the knowledge of Christ, nor obtain the forgiveness of sins acquired by Him, nor receive the Holy Ghost without the use of external and public means. God has placed this treasure in the oral word and ministry.’ (SL XI:1735f.)

The correct teaching of justification by faith causes the believer to be sure of his salvation (1 John 5:13). This is because justification is based upon God’s gracious disposition in Christ Jesus, which is outside of man, though revealed and offered to him in the Gospel. Justification is an actual legal verdict, by which God declares the sinner who believes in Christ to be righteous. It stands upon the Word of One who cannot lie (Titus 1:1). Luther writes,

‘This is the reason why our doctrine is most sure and certain, because it carries us out of ourselves, that we should not lean on our own strength, our own conscience, our own feeling, our own person, and our own works; but onto that which is outside us, that is to say, the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive us’ (SL IX:509). ‘You must be certain that your sins are truly and certainly forgiven you through the external Word; for Baptism and the Word will not lie to you.’ (SL XIII:2438).

In this article, we have looked at the wonderful doctrine of justification by faith. To be ‘justified’ means ‘to be declared righteous in the sight of God’. It is God’s own legal and binding verdict that stands outside of us, based solely upon the suffering and death of Christ. It is received ‘by faith’ as opposed to being merited by works. And it is by faith in the Word of the Gospel, ‘how that Christ died for our sins’ (1 Cor 15:1-3). Justification is the heart and centre of Christian truth. In fact, no one may rightfully call himself a Christian without holding to this doctrine. Justification is effective the moment a sinner receives the Gospel by faith when offered through the means of grace. It alone is the doctrine that illuminates all other doctrines of the Scriptures. And, it is our ground of boasting, comfort, and security, knowing that all rests upon the work and Word of Another, even that of our dear Lord Jesus Christ.

—S. Wood.