

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



**How Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history**

The Work of Christ Luther: Wild Boar in the Vineyard

We have seen now for several weeks the importance of the church hanging on to the two crucial anchors of the gospel. They are:

1. Who was Christ?
2. What did He accomplish on behalf of sinners?

We have examined how the issues affected the church in its formative years and last week we sprang forward 700 years to see how these two tethers tying the church to the Scripture were championed under Anselm. This week we are springing ahead another 400 years to the turn of the century in the early 1500's.

I cannot even begin to approximate for you the multiple strains of providence that were coming together at the close of the 15th century. Less than fifty years before the first book, the great Gutenberg Bible, had been printed in Mainz. Less than ten years before, Columbus had discovered the new world. The bubonic plague had been ravaging Europe, and now there seemed to be a brief respite. Just a few years into the sixteenth century, 1512 AD, the ever frugal Pope Julius had forced the reluctant Michelangelo to finish the exquisite Sistine Chapel. That same year, a young monk by the name of Martin Luther had been appointed as one of the professors at Wittenberg University.

Just two years before, the young Luther had made a pilgrimage to Rome. He had seen the relics and the corruption. He had been mocked by the Italian priests as

he slowly recited mass. "Passa, passa", they whispered to him. "Get a move on", they scornfully urged him to hurry it up. Italian monks could, it seems, say six or seven masses, to Luther's one. But Luther was reflective; he considered the saying of the mass as the solemn, bloodless repeating of the sacrifice of his Savior. He was very seriously minded. He had even made a penitential traverse of the Sancta Scala, the legendary staircase that all good, repentant pilgrims climbed on their hands and knees. As they traversed the steps, they would bow their heads, pray a Pater Noster, and kiss each step along the way. After Luther had ascended the steps, he rose on bloody and scraped knees and boldly exclaimed not as he later would, "The just shall live by faith" but rather "Who knows whether it is so?"

He wanted to be good monk. He worked at being a good monk. When he returned to Wittenberg, he continued his rigorous, ascetic lifestyle. He was committed to obtaining perfection, the same perfection he had sought on the steps of the legendary Sancta Scala, but he found no peace. The more he strove for perfection, the more he repented, the more discouraged he became. Luther was spending five or six hours a day in confession for his sin. Yet, in dark nights alone in his cell he was tormented by doubts concerning his salvation. He was wearing down and he was wearing down his confessors in the process. They accused him of being hysterical and they accused him of spiritual pride. Do your best they argued. In that, they were simply arguing the medieval maxim, "God will not deny his grace to him that does his best" which was sort of the medieval equivalent of "God helps those who help themselves". But that was, of course, the problem for Luther. How do you know when you've done your best?

It did not help his self-confidence that he had been asked to teach Bible at Wittenberg. Luther had never read the Bible. He had read parts, of course, and he had memorized passages that were often repeated in the mass. But he had never read the Bible for himself and now partly as a result of spiritual depression and partly as the result of his assignment, he committed himself for the first time to both learn and exposit the Scripture. He was twenty-nine years old. Luther

had been assigned the Psalms and he had been assigned the Epistle to the Romans. It did not take long for him to run into trouble. He ran up against, the term "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17. He understood, as any good Augustinian monk from the middle ages would have, that the "righteousness of God" was the righteousness which God demanded and not the righteousness that God gave. He tormented him further. How could he meet the standard of righteousness that God required? And then Luther had his breakthrough. Listen to his explanation.

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 justice of God and the statement that faith." Then I grasped that the justice of by which through grace and sheer mercy faith. There upon I felt myself to be re] 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...

It may be that Luther came to this conclusion on his own. Others feel that Luther simply came to the same understanding that countless others held but failed to reflect in their writings. But one thing is clear even from Luther's own writings, he never intended to separate from the Catholic church. What was it that drove him away?

The thing that drove Luther into the public limelight was a dispute with the church over the practice of selling indulgences. An indulgence was a written certification stating that you possessed forgiveness for a particular sin. They could be obtained several different ways. The most common way to obtain an indulgence was by the act of fulfilling some act of penance and there were lots of different ways to accomplish acts of penance. Sometimes the obtaining of an indulgence could be obtained by make a long an arduous pilgrimage. For

example, a person could obtain an indulgence if he were to make a long, difficult trip to a holy shrine. Traveling in the middle ages was not considered to be fun like it is today. It was dangerous, and it was expensive. But the church insisted that such actions were necessary and they maintained an enormous stash of relics to motivate the masses to both righteous living and loyalty to Mother Church. Unfortunately, sometimes genuine relics were hard to obtain and sometimes holy shrines were difficult to access. Many scholars think that the whole history of the Crusades should be studied from the aspect that the Church was anxious to regain its holy shrines in Jerusalem in order to provide access for penitential pilgrimages.

In Luther's day, however, the Holy Land had been lost to the advancing armies of Islam. Entire nations had been devastated by the plague. Rising nationalism had also made travel more difficult outside of those areas controlled by the Pope. So the church Roman church became intensely creative. Relics were found or produced or created according to the need of the time. In that sense, Rome had entered the world and mindset of the amusement park industry. Cities competed with each other for pilgrims and they did so an extraordinary array of religious relics. Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, was a simple pious man devoted his life to making Wittenberg the Rome of Germany by collecting a vast assortment of relics. Listen to the way Roland Bainton describes the collection in Wittenberg.

The collection had as its nucleus a genuine thorn from the crown of Christ, certified to have pierced the Saviour's brow. Frederick so built up the collection from this inherited treasure that the catalogue illustrated by Lucas Cranach in 1509 listed 5,005 particles, to which were attached indulgences calculated to reduce purgatory by 1,443 years. The collection included one tooth of St. Jerome, of St. Chrysostom four pieces, of St. Bernard six, and of St. Augustine four; of Our Lady four hairs, three pieces of her cloak, four from her girdle, and seven from the veil sprinkled with the blood of Christ. The relics of Christ included one piece from his swaddling clothes, thirteen from his crib, one wisp of straw, one piece of the gold brought by the Wise Men and three of the myrrh, one strand of Jesus' beard, one of the nails driven into his hands, one piece of bread eaten at the Last Supper, one piece of the stone on which Jesus stood to ascend into heaven, and one twig of Moses' burning bush. By 1520 the collection had mounted to 19,013 holy bones. Those who viewed these relics on the designated

day and made the stipulated contributions might receive from the pope indulgences for the reduction of purgatory, either for themselves or others, to the extent of 1,902,202 years and 270 days. These were the treasures made available on the day of All Saints.

Now it should be pointed out that there was some measure of embarrassment regarding the size of the Wittenberg treasury, for it was small, indeed it was minuscule in comparison to the treasury at Rome. Nevertheless, it was important. It provided the opportunity for the poorer masses to obtain release from the tortures of purgatory either for themselves or for their loved ones and it provided for the city and the university, well, money. It was an important means for financing the church and the ministries of the church. The selling of indulgences associated with relics provided revenue for building churches, cathedrals, hospitals, housing for the poor, and the like. It was the ancient equivalent of bingo and virtually every city had its own depository of relics. Failure to provide a venue for local contrition and hence local contribution meant inevitably that those expendable dollars went elsewhere. That is why in 1517 AD, when the infamous John Tetzel was scouring the country selling indulgences of an even more diabolical nature, that Prince Frederick would not even allow him in the province, but more about Tetzel later.

The question should be asked, at this point, why the selling of indulgences worked. I mean, what was the underlying theological tenet that caused desperate sinners to lose all sense of proportion and sound judgment. It had to do primarily with their understanding of grace, and consequently with their understanding of justification. Whereas, Augustine had understood “grace” as God’s kindness toward sinners, a shift had occurred in the Middle Ages that transformed the idea of God’s kindness into something substantive. Grace then was a thing, something material you possessed. Obviously, it was something you could lose. I particularly like the way Horton says it, when he refers to the Middle Age concept of grace as something akin to water in a bathtub. Listen to this:

The Reformers found another problem with the medieval notion of even those Sacraments instituted by our Lord. In Rome, one brought a worthy disposition or habitus to the Sacraments, and obstacles could prevent the effective flow of grace into the soul. Where the Scriptures portray grace as God's unmerited favor toward us, medieval theology had taught that grace was a spiritual and moral quality within the believer. Like water filling a bathtub, grace could leak out of the soul due to venial sins and be entirely lost by committing a mortal sin. Thus, Rome's Sacraments (especially penance) served to merit new infused grace. In contrast, Calvin says that Christ's Sacraments are instituted so that "believers, poor and deprived of all goods, should bring nothing to it but begging" (Institutes 4.14.26). The Sacrament's "force and truth" do not depend on "the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary" (ibid). So for Calvin, as for Luther, "sacramenta conferunt gratiam" (Sacraments confer grace). They are not rewards for the strong, but mercies for the weak.¹

So there you have it, the reason for indulgences and their success was that the medieval church has changed its doctrine concerning grace. At justification, a sinner was filled with a moral quality, something substantive called "grace". He was fully justified, but that justification was not permanent. Hence, whenever a saint committed sin he fell from his state of justification. To reacquire his state of perfect justification something had to be done. The seriousness of the needed action to reacquire his state of justification was entirely dependent upon the nature of the sin he had committed. Thus it became necessary to distinguish between greater sins and lesser sins. More serious sins were deemed as "mortal sins" in that the state of justification was entirely lost. Less offensive sins were deemed "venial sins". The state of justification was damaged. Some of the justifying grace had leaked out.

But what was a sinner to do? The answer was provided in the sacrament of penance. If a sinner could regain that moral quality or substance, he could regain his state of justification. It is not unlike what you see sometimes in the evangelical act of rededication. Anyway, a sinner could regain his state of perfect justification by contrition, a deep godly sorrow for his sin. He might also have to do penance, some physical act that demonstrated his genuine contrition. Lastly, if his sin was more severe, he could apply for grace through the Treasury of Merit laid up by saints that had gone before. You see the church had acquired a treasury of merit based on the lives of the holiest of saints, who had provided

through acts of supererogation more merit before God than they needed for themselves. This extra grace was available through the church for sinners and even the departed loved ones of sinners who had gone before, yet who had not been in a state of perfect justification. Listen to the objection that Calvin would use later.

The second exception which we take relates to the remission of sins. Our opponents, not being able to deny that men, during their whole lives, walk haltingly, and oftentimes even fall, are obliged, whether they will or not, to confess that all need pardon, in order to supply their want of righteousness. But then they have imaginary satisfactions, by means of which those who have sinned purchase back the favour of God. In this class, they place first contrition, and next works, which they term works of supererogation, and penances, which God inflicts on sinners. But, as they are still sensible that these compensations fall far short of the just measure required, they call in the aid of a new species of satisfaction from another quarter, namely, from the benefit of the keys. And they say, that by the keys the treasury of the Church is unlocked, and what is wanting to ourselves supplied out of the merits of Christ and the saints. We, on the contrary, maintain that the sins of men are forgiven freely, and we acknowledge no other satisfaction than that which Christ accomplished, when, by the sacrifice of his death, he expiated our sins. Therefore, we preach that it is the purchase of Christ alone which reconciles us to God, and that no compensations are taken into account, because our heavenly Father, contented with the sole expiation of Christ, requires none from us...We, therefore, strenuously, yet truly, maintain that their idea of meriting reconciliation with God by satisfactions, and buying off the penalties due to his justice, is execrable blasphemy, in as much as it destroys the doctrine which Isaiah delivers concerning Christ—that "the chastisement of our peace was upon Him," (Isaiah liii. 5.)

So it was in this world that Luther made his breakthrough and came to his understanding that the righteousness of God Paul mentions in Romans was, in fact, the righteousness which God provided in the atoning work of Christ. Luther had started to take exception to the idea of penance as early as 1515 AD, and in particular he had come to loath the notion of purchasing indulgences to pay for past sins. He had already received a measure of criticism as early as 1516 AD for preaching against such practices. And then along came Tetzl.

The new pope, Pope Leo, had undertaken the massive project of finishing St. Peter's Basilica. It was an enormous undertaking, something on the scale today of say a lunar landing. Unfortunately, Leo was not a frugal man. He had

squandered the money Julius had left in the treasury, so he was financially strapped. Leo offered, as others had before him, the office of bishop for a price. The arrangement was simple. Pay Leo for the office of bishop, collect from the people of your region money for indulgences to recover your investment and then split all future revenue with Rome. The man who purchased the office at Mainz sought out indulgence vendors and when he latched onto Tetzal, he got the best.

Tetzal transformed the indulgence into something new, something even more diabolical than it had been before. He offered indulgences and escape from purgatory not only for past sins or for the sins of your parents and loved ones. He offered indulgences for sins you hadn't even committed yet, a sort of pay before you play program. He was reported to have even used a jingle to help hawk his product.

As soon as a coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.

To which some of the more astute peasants created their own tune.

When a coin goes into the pitcher,
The pope just gets richer and richer.

But Tetzal was unaffected. He would stoop to the baser emotions. He preyed on fear and ignorance. Listen to segments from one of his sermons.

You, however, do not give up great treasures; indeed you give not even a moderate alms. They gave their bodies to be martyred, but you delight in living well and joyfully. You priest, nobleman, merchant, wife, virgin, you married people, young person, old man, enter into your church which is for you, as I have said, St. Peter's, and visit the most holy Cross. It has been placed there for you, and it always cries and calls for you. Are you perhaps ashamed to visit the Cross with a candle and yet not ashamed to visit a tavern? Are you ashamed to go to the apostolic confessors, but not ashamed to go to a dance? Behold, you are on the raging sea of the world in storm and danger, not knowing if you will safely reach the harbor of salvation. Do you not know that everything which man has hangs on a thin thread and that all of life is but a struggle on earth?

You should know that all who confess and in penance put alms into the coffer according to the counsel of the confessor, will obtain complete remission of all

their sins. Why are you then standing there? Run for the salvation of your souls! Be as careful and concerned for the salvation of your souls as you are for your temporal goods, which you seek both day and night. Seek the Lord while he may be found and while he is near.

Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents and others who say, 'Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain. From this you could redeem us with a small alms and yet you do not want to do so.' Open your ears as the father says to the son and the mother to the daughter . . ., 'We have created you, fed you, cared for you, and left you our temporal goods. Why then are you so cruel and harsh that you do not want to save us, though it only takes a little? You let us lie in flames so that we only slowly come to the promised glory.' You may have letters which let you have, once in life and in the hour of death ... full remission of the punishment which belongs to sin. Oh, those of you with vows, you usurers, robbers, murderers, and criminals - Now is the time to hear the voice of God. He does not want the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live. Convert yourselves...

It was against this man that Luther posted his 95 Thesis on the door at Wittenberg. Not because he wanted to separate from the Roman Church, (You only have to read the 95 Thesis and see his lingering respect for Leo to know that) but because he had come to an understanding of what genuine grace meant, what justification entailed. He had not yet worked out his greatest contributions, but he was sure that the penitential system and the whole idea of indulgences was wrong. When he posted the 95 Thesis, it was an invitation to the ecclesiastical community to discuss the problems inherent in the indulgence system. He wanted reform not because he wanted to shake the Roman church, but because he had come to see the beauty of the gospel. As I said, the posting of the 95 Thesis had been an invitation to simply discuss the abuses of the church. They had been written in Latin, but in a matter of months they had made their way into German and into the hands of the German people. They ignited a firestorm of rage and indignation and they sparked the Reformation. Luther could not have known, he could not have dreamed that within a decade he would be cast out from the church and God would use his simple objection to greed and avarice to recover the gospel. Nor he could he have known that in a few years, he would be all alone, the primary target of the rage and mockery of

the entire Roman church. He started out change an abuse and transformed the world through the recovery of the biblical gospel. But more about that next week.

¹ Mysteries of God the Means of Grace, An article from Modern Reformation Magazine

² Calvin, The Necessity of Reforming the Church