

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 Pt. 2

The argument had started over the abuses of rascals like Tetzel and others who were selling indulgences to pay for the building of St. Peter's Basilica. But there was something underneath it, something else driving it. I want to emphasize this point, because unless you see the underlying hand of God in the providence of the events, unless you see the purity of the gospel as having been really at stake, you will miss the glory of the thing. You will see, instead, something less, something without substance, something, that modern historians in a quest for unity are willing to overlook. In fact, one recent newspaper article from the Star Telegram ran a lengthy story on how the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the Roman Catholic Church had recently come to the agreement that the caustic language and divisive categories actually no longer apply. They argue that there is nothing of substance to still divide us. But is that so?

In his book, Faith Alone, R.C. Sproul argues that there were really two underlying causes of the Reformation. He distinguishes the two causes as the formal and the material causes of the Reformation. Let me illustrate what I mean. If I came to church this morning, and you could tell I was exhausted, you might say, "You look awful this morning." I could answer, "Yes, I know. I didn't get any sleep at all last night." That would be the formal cause of why I am exhausted. But if you ask, "Why did you not sleep last night?" I might answer, "Because, my neighbor's dog barked all night long." That would be the material cause of my exhaustion.

Sproul argues that the formal cause of the Reformation was the issue of authority. That is, what was the final authority for the church? Was it the combination of the Pope, the magisterium, and the councils or was it the Bible. I think Sproul is exactly right.

Next, he argues that the material cause of the Reformation was the doctrine of justification. Is a sinner justified through faith on account of Christ by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us, or is it necessary to maintain our justification by the combination of works of love and penance for our sins? Is

justification a singular act in time graciously based upon the atoning work of Christ? Or is justification a process based partly on the work of Christ and partly upon our own works of righteousness? Brothers and sisters, do you see the importance of the question? We will look at that both this week and next, but first let's turn to Luther and examine together this issue of authority.

When Luther nailed the Ninety-five Thesis to the door in Wittenburg, what he wanted was reform not a Reformation. He wanted the church to put aside the foul corruption's that had pervaded the church and to return to the purity of the gospel. Though he had made his own breakthrough as to how sinful man is justified before a holy God, he had no intention of separating from the catholic church. Listen to the attitude he expresses in a letter to the Pope.

Most blessed father, in all the controversies of the past three years I have ever been mindful of you, and although your adulators driven me to appeal to a council in defiance of the futile decrees of your predecessors, Pius and Julius, I have never suffered myself because of their stupid tyranny to hold your Beatitude in despite. To be sure, I have spoken sharply against impious doctrine, but did not Christ call his adversaries a generation of vipers, blind guides, and hypocrites? And did not Paul refer to his opponents as dogs, concision, and sons of the Devil? Who could have been more biting than the prophets? I contend with no one about life, but only concerning the Word of Truth. I look upon you less as Leo the Lion than as Daniel in the lion's den of Babylon. You may have three or four learned and excellent cardinals, but what are they among so many? The Roman curia deserves not you but Satan himself. But do not think, when I scathe this seat of Pestilence I am inveighing against your person.

(The Freedom of a Christian, Martin Luther)

But that deference became more and more strained as time went on. There were a series of debates, between Cajetan and Luther at Augsburg in 1518 AD, between Eck and Luther at Leipzig in 1519 AD, and at last there was the papal bull, or condemnation of Luther by the Pope, himself. The bull started out with the infamous words Exsurge Domine.

Arise, O Lord, and judge your own cause. Remember your reproaches to those who are filled with foolishness all through the day. Listen to our prayers, for foxes have arisen seeking to destroy the vineyard whose winepress you alone have trod. When you were about to ascend to your Father, you committed the care, rule, and administration of the vineyard, an image of the triumphant church, to Peter, as the head and your vicar and his successors. The wild boar from the forest seeks to destroy it and every wild beast feeds upon it...

Wise in their own eyes, according to the ancient practice of heretics, they interpret these same Scriptures otherwise than the Holy Spirit demands, inspired only by their own sense of ambition, and for the sake of popular acclaim, as the Apostle declares. In fact, they twist and adulterate the Scriptures. As a result, according to Jerome, "It is no longer the Gospel of Christ, but a man's, or what is worse, the devil's."...

Let all this holy Church of God, I say, arise, and with the blessed apostles intercede with almighty God to purge the errors of His sheep, to banish all heresies from the lands of the faithful, and be pleased to maintain the peace and unity of His holy Church.

But how did the debate over indulgences disintegrate into such actions. Ultimately, the disintegration occurred as an issue of authority. Luther had been arguing based on his biblical understanding of the doctrine of justification that indulgences, indeed the sacrament of penance itself was not only unnecessary but wrong. At Augsburg, he had been commanded by Cajetan to retract his errors and submit to the absolute authority of the Pope. "Revoco, revoco! Recant, recant!" commanded Cajetan. But Luther said later he just could not say the words. Instead, he argued that that he must obey God rather than man; that he had Scripture on his side; that even Peter, who they declared to be the first Pope, was once reproved by Paul for his misconduct.

A year later Luther was summoned to Leipzig and commanded to recant. This time the charge was laid that Luther was refusing to obey not only the Pope but the Church councils. He was condemned with the heresy of John Hus. Eck asked Luther whether he repudiated the teaching of Hus, and Luther had to confess to the amazement of everyone present that Hus had held some Scriptural truths. This was a turning point because Hus had been condemned and burnt by the Council of Constance a century before. What Luther was saying was that not only was the Pope fallible, but Church Councils were fallible as well when they parted from the teaching of Scripture. Luther, by saying that the Council of Constance had erred in its execution of Hus, was saying that the Roman church had murdered an innocent man. What he was arguing was the authority of Scripture, what the Catholics heard, indeed what the peasants heard, was that there was no authority higher than the individual. From that day on, Luther was branded with the charge of being Hus all over again. It did not help when he later wrote about his being condemned for saying that certain articles of John Hus were most Christian, true, and evangelical:

I was wrong. I retract the statement that certain articles of John Hus are evangelical. I say now, "Not some but all the articles John Hus were condemned by Antichrist and his apostles in the synagogue of Satan." And to your face, most holy Vicar of God I say freely that all the condemned articles of John Hus are evangelical and Christian, and you are downright impious and diabolical.

Luther had learned much from studying Erasmus' newly published Greek New Testament. From it he learned three important things. That the Latin vulgate, the Bible of medieval catholicism, had mistranslated the Greek word in Matthew 4:17 for "repentance" as "to do penance", it had mistranslated the "the mystery of marriage" as "the sacrament of marriage", and that its translation of the Greek word, "dikaiousune" as "justificare" had changed the sense of the word from "declare righteous" to "make righteous". In his book, Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther blasts the Roman church for creating sacraments where none

were ordained. He threw out everything but baptism and the Lord's Supper. Marriage was no longer to be considered a sacrament of the church. It was a holy institution ordained by God, but was not a divine sacrament. Since the biblical idea of repentance had to do with the changing of the mind instead of doing penance, Luther said throw out the sacrament. I hope you can see how the Catholic church could never allow that to happen. If salvation was dependent upon the sinner recovering or maintaining his state of justification, penance could never be discarded. Otherwise, there was no hope for anyone who had sinned after their baptism.

Luther had come to see the justification as the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. Luther loved to use the phrase, "the alien righteousness of Christ". Listen to how he describes it.

There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds.

The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, as it is written in I Cor. 1 [:30]: "Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." In John 11 [:25-26], Christ himself states: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me ... shall never die." Later he adds in John 14 [:6], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did." just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride's and she all that is his, for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh [Gen. 2:24]-so Christ and the church are one spirit [Eph. 5:29-32].

(Two Kinds of Righteousness, Martin Luther)

It was a legal, or forensic declaration. We are declared righteous "*per fidem propter Christum*". That is we are declared to be righteous through faith on account of Christ. We were declared to be righteous, this in spite of the fact that we still remained sinful. Luther would phrase it, *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinful.

You can see I expect why Pope Leo could do nothing else but excommunicate Luther. He wanted Luther to be brought to Rome for trial and certain execution, but Luther had already appealed to Caesar for a public trial at Leipzig. And Luther's case had already become so public that there was a concern about the reaction of the people. So Leo issued the Papal Bull and excommunicated him based upon his writings. Leo promptly burned the document in a public exhibition of his rebelliousness. This was more than the Emperor could stomach. So he commanded Luther to appear before a secular council to answer the charges of heresy. It was to be held at the city of Worms, in Germany. Luther was certain he would be burned at the stake. He writes to one friend:

You ask me what I shall do if I am called by the emperor. I will go even if I am too sick to stand on my feet. If Caesar calls me, God calls me. If violence is used, as well it may be, I commend my cause to God. He lives and reigns who saved the three youths from the fiery furnace of the king of Babylon, and if He will not save me, my head is worth nothing compared with Christ. This is no time to think of safety. I must take care that the gospel is not brought into contempt by our fear to confess and seal our teaching with our blood.

To Melancthon he urges:

If I do not return, and my enemies murder me, I conjure thee, dear brother, to persevere in teaching the truth. Do my work during my absence: you can do it better than I. If you remain, I can well be spared. In thee the Lord has a more learned champion.

Luther comforted his timid friends with the words: "Though Hus was burned, the truth was not burned, and Christ still lives." He wrote that he would go to Worms in spite of all the gates of hell and the evil spirits in the air. The day after he wrote one friend the famous words:

I shall go to Worms, though there were as many devils there as tiles on the roofs.

And he arrived at Worms, full of apprehension and yet excited at the possibility of defending the gospel. I can relate the story from heart, but I can not do it as well as the historian Phillip Schaff. Let me read to you his account.

On the day after his arrival, in the afternoon at four o'clock, Luther was led by the imperial guards to the hall of the Diet in the bishop's palace where the Emperor and his brother resided. He was admitted at about six o'clock. There he stood, a poor monk of rustic manners, yet a genuine hero and confessor, with the fire of genius and enthusiasm flashing from his eyes and the expression of intense earnestness and thoughtfulness on his face, before a brilliant assembly such as he had never seen: the young Emperor, six Princes, the Pope's legates, archbishops, bishops, dukes, princes, counts, deputies of the imperial cities, ambassadors of foreign courts, and a numerous array of dignitaries of every rank; in one word, a fair representation of the highest powers in Church and State. Several thousand spectators were collected in and around the building and in the streets, anxiously waiting for the issue.

Eck, as the official of the Archbishop, put to him, in the name of the Emperor, simply two questions in Latin and German, - first, whether he acknowledged the books laid before him on a bench (about twenty-five in number) to be his own; and, next, whether he would retract them. Luther's advocate, who stood beside him, demanded that the titles of those books be read. This was done. Among them were some inoffensive and purely devotional books as an exposition of the Lord's Prayer and of the Psalms.

Luther was apparently overawed by the August assembly, nervously excited, unprepared for a summary condemnation without an examination, and spoke in a low, almost inaudible tone. Many thought that he was about to collapse. He acknowledged in both languages the authorship of the books; but as to the more momentous question of recantation he humbly requested further time for consideration, since it involved the salvation of the soul, and the truth of the word of God, which was higher than any thing else in heaven or on earth. We must respect him all the more for this reasonable request, which proceeded not from want of courage, but from a profound sense of responsibility.

The Emperor, after a brief consultation, granted him "out of his clemency" a respite of one day.

One catholic observer reported on the same day to Rome, that the heretical "fool" entered laughing, and left despondent; that even among his sympathizers some regarded him now as a fool, others as one possessed by the Devil; while many looked upon him as a saint full of the Holy Spirit; but in any case, he had lost much of his reputation.

The shrewd Italian judged too hastily. On the same evening Luther recollected himself, and wrote to a friend: I shall not retract one iota, so Christ help me."

The next day, Thursday, the 18th of April, Luther appeared a second and last time before the Diet. It was the greatest day in his life. He never appeared more heroic and sublime. He never represented a principle of more vital and general importance to Christendom.

He was again kept waiting two hours outside the hall, among a dense crowd, but appeared more cheerful and confident than the day before. He had fortified himself by prayer and meditation, and was ready to risk life itself to his honest conviction of divine truth. The torches were lighted when he was admitted.

Dr. Eck, speaking again in Latin and German, reproached him for asking delay, and put the second question in this modified form: "Wilt you defend all the books which you acknowledge to be yours, or recant some part?"

Luther answered in a well-considered, premeditated speech, with modesty and firmness, and a voice that could be heard all over the hall. After apologizing for his ignorance of courtly manners, having been brought up in monastic simplicity, he divided his books into three classes: (1) Books which simply set forth evangelical truths, professed-alike by friend and foe: these he could not retract. (2) Books against the corruption and abuses of the papacy which vexed and martyred the conscience, and devoured the property of the German nation: these he could not retract without cloaking wickedness and tyranny. (3) Books against his popish opponents: in these he confessed to have been more violent than was proper, but even these he could not retract without giving aid and comfort to his enemies, who would triumph and make things worse. In defense of his books he could only say in the words of Christ: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the

evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?" If his opponents could convict him of error by prophetic and evangelical Scriptures, he would revoke his books, and be the first to commit them to the flames.

He was requested to repeat his speech in Latin. This he did with equal firmness and with eyes upraised to heaven. Eck, in the name of the Emperor, sharply reproved him for evading the question; it was useless, he said, to dispute with him about views which were not new, but had been already taught by Hus, Wyclif, and other heretics, and had been condemned for sufficient reasons by the Council of Constance before the Pope, the Emperor, and the assembled fathers. He demanded a round and direct answer, without "horns."

This brought on the crisis.

Luther replied, he would give an answer "with neither horns nor teeth." From the inmost depths of his conscience educated by the study of the word of God, he made in both languages that memorable declaration which marks an epoch in the history of religious liberty:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience."

Dr. Eck exchanged a few more words with Luther, protesting against his assertion that Councils may err and have erred. Luther repeated his assertion, and pledged himself to prove it. Thus pressed and threatened, amidst the excitement and confusion of the audience, he uttered in German, at least in substance, that concluding sentence which has impressed itself most on the memory of men:

"Here I stand. I can no other. God help me! Amen."

The Emperor would hear no more, and abruptly broke up the session of the Diet at eight o'clock, amid general commotion.

On reaching his lodgings, Luther threw up his arms, and joyfully exclaimed, "I am through, I am through." In the presence of others, he said, "If I had a thousand heads, I would rather have them all cut off one by one than make one recantation."

It is a wonderful story and Schaff goes on to add one other historical note that I particularly like.

When Luther left the Bishop's palace greatly exhausted, the old Duke Erik of Brunswick sent him a silver tankard of Eimbeck beer, after having first drunk of it himself to remove suspicion. Luther said, "As Duke Erik has remembered me

today, may the Lord Jesus remember him in his last agony." The Duke thought of it on his deathbed, and found comfort in the words of the gospel: "Whosoever shall give unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, in the name of a disciple, he shall in no wise lose his reward."

So what are we to make of the role Luther played in the Reformation and the recovery of the gospel. Without question it is wonderful, almost too wonderful for words. If ever there was a reluctant hero, it was Luther. He was not the best preacher, or by his own admission the best theologian. He was prone to bursts of profanity and sarcasm. He was always plain spoken. Indeed, sometimes he spoke when he should have held his peace but never in the history of the world had there been a man so utterly in love with the gospel. I wonder if it was because Luther had a genuine understanding of the depth of his own sin. Today, we gloss over sin not from bad motives but out of compassion. But Luther knew no such gentility. He wrestled with his sin and the bleakness of what the mystics called "the dark night of the soul". What he discovered was that the gospel was outside of himself. He had been looking for some mystical ladder to appropriate God's smile and found God condescending to save him in the blood and sweat of the cross. That's why he could say:

When I am told that God became man, I can follow the idea. but I just do not understand what it means. For what man, if left to his natural promptings, if he were God, would humble himself to lie in the feedbox of a donkey or to hang upon a cross? God laid upon him the iniquities of us all.

This is that infinite mercy of God which the slender capacity of man's heart cannot comprehend and much less utter - that unfathomable depth and burning zeal of God's love toward us. And truly the magnitude of God's mercy engenders in us not only a hardness to believe but also credulity itself. For I hear not only that the omnipotent God, the creator and maker of all things, is good and merciful but also that the Supreme Majesty was so concerned for me, a lost sinner, a son of wrath and of everlasting death, that he spared not his own Son but delivered him to the most ignominious death, that, hanging between two thieves, he might be made a curse and sin for me, a cursed sinner, that I might be made just, blessed, a son and heir of God. Who can sufficiently declare the goodness of God?