

**Reformed Congregational Fellowship  
2007 Conference  
Savoy Declaration, Chapter 11: On Justification**

**That We Might Love: Exploring Martin Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* and the Role of Justification by Faith in the Work of the Church**

Jeremy Jackson observes that the Reformation is often considered to have been taken up with the reform of doctrine. He suggests, however, that it involved spiritual revival as much as it did doctrinal correction. In truth, there cannot be one without the other. "The reason for this false distinction is our habitual failure to plumb the meaning of Jesus teaching that the truth can never not be done . . . truth, or doctrine, is right living, and right living is living according to the Truth . . . There is no revival without painful reexamination of the Truth, without a preparedness to obey the Truth. And there is no true Reformation unless accompanied by the reviving work of the Spirit of Truth within us."<sup>1</sup> This is an important observation and one that is embodied in the central protagonist of the Reformation, Martin Luther.

Luther's struggle to adhere to the prevailing doctrines and practices of the church of the late Middle Ages led to deep, relentless self-examination. The end of his wrestling came with the famed "tower experience" in which he, "meditating day and night" on the opening sentences of the Apostle Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, began "to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith." The new understanding was profoundly liberating to the troubled Luther: "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."<sup>2</sup> But this understanding did not remain a private realization. His steady application of the implications of what had been revealed to him proved to be the coalescing force that rent the already fraying fabric of the Church of Rome. And, his *Freedom of a Christian*, published in November of 1520, both an exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith as well as a proclamation of why and how the church can freely and joyfully serve God and our neighbor in love, demonstrates that, indeed, the Reformation was as much a revival of spirit as it was a reformation of doctrine.

As alluded to above, the currents of change, which resulted in the Reformation, did not begin with Luther. The seeds of change (or, weeds of change if one is inclined to look upon the Reformation as something which destroyed the cohesiveness of the church) began earlier. Roland Bainton, in a popular history of the Reformation notes, "The

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy C. Jackson, *No Other Foundation: The Church Through Twenty Centuries*, (Westchester, Illinois, Cornerstone Books: 1980) 129

<sup>2</sup> "Preface to the Latin Writings" found in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, John Dillenberger, ed., (New York: Anchor Books, 1962) 11. Exactly when and where this understanding came to Luther is a matter of much debate, but that it was a dramatic turning in his understanding is evident by the apparent warmth of his recollection.

fifteenth century brought new currents in the intellectual and religious spheres. The great theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas disintegrated coincidentally with the decline of the papacy.” Later nominalist scholastics such as William of Okham “lost faith in the intelligibility of reality because they relinquished the metaphysical entities. For them reality was held to consist of unrelated particulars.” This rejection of unseen universals that were understood to be discoverable through the application of reason aided by grace implied that “Church and state are not antecedent entities but simply contractual associations.” The result is that, “the church then becomes a voluntary society, the state a compact . . . Here is the philosophy of individualism undercutting the great unities well in advance of the Reformation.”<sup>3</sup>

The individualism promoted by the particularity of nominalism also had an impact on theories of salvation. Prior to this, “most theologians had taught that Christ saves humanity by uniting it with divinity or changing humanity’s relationship with God.” Now, however, nominalism “asserted that there is no such thing as ‘humanity,’ merely a great many particular individuals.” This left the individual to seek after the grace that God had provided in Christ. But, apparently not quite wanting to give up a universally available grace offered in Christ, the nominalist assured that “the pilgrim who does whatever he can to dispose himself for grace always receives grace.” While this is an attempt to still make the merit of Christ the basis of salvation, it teaches “our efforts contribute to our salvation.” Gabriel Biel taught that Christ’s passion is the “*principle* merit on account of which grace is infused, the kingdom opened, and glory granted,” yet it is “never the *sole and complete* meritorious cause.” If the individual does not add “merits to those of Christ, the merits of Christ will not only be insufficient, but nonexistent.”<sup>4</sup> Luther himself was trained in nominalist theology. From it he learned that “with the help of grace, we earn our own salvation through our works.” However, “Luther found he could not do it.” For, “in the presence of God, none of his works seemed worthy.”<sup>5</sup>

Another important influence in the late Middle Ages was that of mysticism. Rufus M. Jones defines this phenomenon as a “type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and immediate consciousness of the Divine Presence.”<sup>6</sup> This, too, would have the effect of undermining the structures and authority of the church through which a relationship with God had traditionally been mediated, though this would not have been the intent of most of the mystics of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952) 15-6

<sup>4</sup> William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press) 1983, 167-8. Italics are as found in the quote in Placher.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 182

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Bengt Hagglund, *The Background of Luther’s Doctrine of Justification in Late Medieval Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) vi

Middle Ages. Much could be included here regarding theories of righteousness, union with God, and “deification” of the human as they deny themselves and that “which in uncreated, incomprehensible to all creatures, comes to dwell in the soul”<sup>7</sup> that were part of this diverse movement, but as to mysticism’s influence on the church of the Middle Ages it may be the “exemplary lives” of the adherents to the various strains of mysticism that “made many wonder whether this was not an alternative way of being a Christian.”<sup>8</sup> In particular, Justo L. Gonzalez suggests that, “Perhaps the most significant result of the mystical movement . . . was the founding of the Brethren of the Common Life.” This was a group who “instead of spending their time in seclusion or occupying ecclesiastical posts, they made learning and teaching their own form of ministry.” Among their efforts was the creation of schools that offered to the laity the “best learning of the time.” Through such labors, the laity was “given greater participation and insight into the nature of Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

Phenomena such as nominalism and mysticism, as well as other social and political forces at work in the late Middle Ages, set the stage for the entrance of Martin Luther. It was a unique confluence of various streams in which “new currents of life and thought had arisen, all of them potentially explosive” and “many of these forces were given new form and power through Luther’s reformation insights.” In this regard, “Luther the man and the time were matched in a manner seldom seen in history.”<sup>10</sup> That being said, it is noted by John Dillenberger that, “Fundamentally, the significance of Luther must be seen in the religious understanding which he forged.” This understanding “came not through the new cultural forces but through the insight which Luther won in the struggle to understand Scripture.” This is particularly so if we are to grasp how he came to his understanding of justification by faith. Bengt Hagglund observes, “Every attempt to derive his new discovery . . . in some way from the theological sources used by him is vain if we overlook the decisive thing, Luther’s independent occupation with another source, namely, with Holy Scriptures, and his striving for the right understanding of them.”<sup>11</sup>

It may prove helpful to outline the successive stages in Luther’s understanding of the gospel. For this I am going to borrow heavily from Dillenberger’s introduction to the collection of Luther’s writings that he edited. The first was Luther’s doubting the view promulgated by the church as to “how someone might stand in holiness before a righteous and demanding God”: “The problem which plagued Luther before he entered

---

<sup>7</sup> Hagglund, 10

<sup>8</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought, Volume III, From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975) 19

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 19

<sup>10</sup> Dillenberger, xii.

<sup>11</sup> Hagglund, 1

the monastery . . . tormented him no less when a monk.” But to appreciate Luther’s dilemma, Dillenberger offers us insight into the thought and practices of the medieval church: “Fundamental to its understanding was the belief in . . . grace as an objective reality given in the celebration of the sacraments.” A variety of sacraments were available that covered the sins of a person’s life, from birth to death, and through them “objective” grace was dispensed. And for a soul to “receive such riches, only one condition was to be met, namely, to confess one’s sins, exhibiting thereby a minimal worthiness for the reception of grace.”<sup>12</sup>

On first look this would seem a reasonable solution for the problem of a sinner being able to stand before a righteous God. For someone with Luther’s acute sense of unworthiness, however, this way out provided little relief. “Could one be sure that one confessed all one’s sins?” This worked in Luther a seriousness of confession unparalleled in his fellow monks. Many there were who attempted to assure him that he need not worry about such minor offenses as he was want to confess. But for Luther, someone who thought the “declared views of the Church had to be taken seriously or consciously modified,” such advice did not persuade.<sup>13</sup>

There was a second problem that this view of grace and its reception posed. Even if someone had met the requirements was there any guarantee that the “expected and demanded internal transformation of a man [had] really taken place?” According to the prevailing view it was believed that man “anchored . . . in God’s grace could effect a total contrition, that is, both confess his sins and maintain a proper relation to God . . . it was believed that one could love God with a good deal of the spontaneity with which God loves us.” Again, Luther was not convinced. As a result, “neither in his conduct nor his attitude did Luther find ground for hope.”<sup>14</sup>

Two “significant shifts” in Luther’s thinking led to a second stage in the development of his Gospel understanding. The change is evident in the first series of lectures that he offered on the Psalms. No longer is the righteousness of God viewed as a “demanding justice” that an individual is enabled to stand before based on a combination of good works attended by sacramentally mediated grace. The righteousness of God is “no longer encountered in terms of a transaction in which satisfaction is made to God. Now the righteousness of God is considered “primarily the grace which transforms and makes a man righteous.” Included in this stage is an understanding that “human activity no longer has any part in the ultimate determination of man’s destiny. Grace alone enables man to stand before the righteousness of God.” Even so, this view asserts that God imparts grace to the sinner in order that the sinner might be righteous. And while the sinner cannot

---

<sup>12</sup> Dillenberger, xv-xvi.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

work his way into God's presence he has had grace imparted to him and is being made righteous.<sup>15</sup>

The third stage, however, is Luther's "full-blown Reformation conception." While there are similarities to the previous understanding there is a distinct development of thought. The "crucial difference is that the emphasis is no longer on God's grace in *enabling* man to be righteous. God's grace, which is *His* righteousness, is shown in His treating man as righteous whatever the state of his life." The need was still for man to be righteous to stand before God but now it was an "imputed" righteousness. "A man now stands before God in the light of His grace alone, and that righteousness of life and man's activity, so important in other contexts, are irrelevant here." Done away with "was any idea that man's relation to a righteous God depended on works and the infusion of actual righteousness. In its place stood grace alone."<sup>16</sup>

Luther's "great contribution centers in the recovery of the Biblical meaning of the righteousness of God." And by the end of 1520, the same year in which he wrote *The Freedom of a Christian*, "on the eve of the Imperial Diet of Worms, Luther's newly won theological views had been fully expressed and the implications drawn for the life of the church. From here on, the emergence of a Reformation church was inevitable."<sup>17</sup>

Dillenberger concludes,

"He had not tried to justify himself before God simply on the basis of his deeds. He had tried to do so by that combination of trusting and living in accord with the sacramental system which allegedly guaranteed that a man could be righteous before God. His new discovery ended his religious attempt to justify himself before God in terms of the prescribed combination of sacraments and works. For this reason, Luther declared that even if the path of works were possible, he would not want to have to depend on a broken reed, namely oneself . . . For Luther, the joy and freedom of a Christian was that in faith he did not need to look to self but only to God for his destiny"<sup>18</sup>

That joy and freedom is evident in the language of *The Freedom of a Christian*.

The *Freedom of a Christian* is a relatively short work, yet its influence has been significant. In Luther's own estimation it is a work that "contains the whole of Christian

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, xix, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, xviii, xxiii.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, xxxvi.

life in brief form.”<sup>19</sup> After an open letter to Leo X in which there are many expressions of his desire for peace (all the while offering insults and disparaging comments about the Holy See), the treatise begins with two seemingly contradictory theses:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Luther acknowledges that they appear to be contradictory and yet “if . . . they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully.” He asserts that these two statements represent those made by the apostle Paul: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all” (1 Corinthians 9:19) and, “owe no one anything except to love one another” (Romans 13:8). Luther goes on to say, “Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved.” So, too, Christ, though he was Lord of all was “born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4), and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, ‘in the form of God’ and ‘of a servant’” (Philippians 2:6-7). 53

But before he deals with these two concepts he addresses the “twofold nature” of a human being, the “spiritual” (i.e., inner man) and the bodily (i.e., “flesh, carnal, outward, or old man”). Because of this “diversity of nature” the Scriptures assert “contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men in the same man contradict each other.” His concern will be to demonstrate how a “righteous, free, and pious Christian, that is, a spiritual, new and inner man, becomes what he is?” He asserts that no “external thing” has any influence “in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude.” That is to say, the trappings of Christianity, externally accomplished, do not aid the freedom and righteousness of a soul. Evil men can, and in fact, do all the religious practices available to a person and yet in the inner man are not righteous. In truth, there have been many who have not had access to any of these religious externalities who have, nevertheless, proven to be godly people. The “righteousness and freedom of the soul require something far different since [such] things . . . could be done by any wicked person.” Conversely, putting off such things will also not accomplish the desired goal. Only one thing, says Luther, “is necessary for Christian life, righteousness and freedom. That one thing is the most holy word of God, the gospel of Christ,” and cites John 11:25; John 8:36 and Matthew 4:4.<sup>20</sup> His conclusion, then, is that we should, “consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do

---

<sup>19</sup> The text comes from the Dillenberger volume already cited. Throughout the use of the treatise page numbers will be cited within the body of the paper.

<sup>20</sup> “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.’” John 11:25; “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.” John 8:36; “But He answered and said, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”’” Matthew 4:4.

without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul.” 53-4

This affirmation, that it is the Word of God alone that offers help for the soul, raises the question, “What then is the Word of God.?” It is the message of, “the gospel of God concerning his son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies.” Therefore, “to preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God” (he cites Romans 10:9).<sup>21</sup> His conclusion is, “the Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.” 55

The instrument of justification, then, is the Word of God, the message of the gospel. Faith in Christ, engendered by the preaching of the Gospel, is what justifies. When one begins to have faith, due to the hearing of the gospel, one sees one’s sinfulness and yet that one becomes convinced at the same time that the individual to make him or her self righteous can do nothing. In this, the individual sees how much Christ is needed for the person is “justified by the merits of another, namely, of Christ alone.” 56

Because faith can only rule in the inner man (“if you . . . believe in your heart”), and it is faith alone that justifies, then all externals, no matter how pious, are demonstrated to be unable to justify. Similarly, it is *unbelief* that shows a man to be a “damnable servant of sin,” and not outer works. Because this is so, then Christians must give their time and energy to strengthening their faith and through faith to grow in the knowledge of Christ. “No other work makes a Christian.” Therefore, “true faith in Christ is a treasure beyond comparison which brings with it complete salvation.” 56

#### THE FIRST BENEFIT OF FAITH

Luther then anticipates the question, “If faith alone is what justifies why are so many ceremonies and laws prescribed in Scripture?” In answer, he offers his explanation of the use of the law and the division of Scriptures into “commandments and promises,” by which he quite clearly consigns the commandments to the Old Testament and the promises to the New Testament.

The commandments show us what we must do but do not give us the power to do them. The law produces evidence that we are sinners. It reveals to us what constitutes righteous behavior but in its light we are forced to acknowledge our powerlessness to accomplish

---

<sup>21</sup> “That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

the demands of the law and to look elsewhere. “In order not to covet and to fulfill the commandment, a man is compelled to despair of himself, to seek help, which he does not find in himself, elsewhere and from someone else.” But while despairing of his inability to fulfill the law, having been disabused of any notion that he might do what the law demands of him, the promises of God come to his aid. The desired righteousness sought through the law, and which is proven impossible to obtain through that means, is “accomplished quickly and easily through faith.” For, “God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing.” This discloses that all belongs to God alone, “both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands, he alone fulfills.” 58

Through faith in the promises of God the soul is justified. But Luther does not view this justification something that is abstract, realized only in theological formulations. He suggests that the Word of God, embraced by faith, actually changes the soul. He appears to say as much when he states that a soul that “clings to [the promises] with a firm faith will be so closely united with them and altogether absorbed by them that it will not only share in all their power but will be saturated and intoxicated by them.” Having been so inundated there is a healing of sorts for the soul: “if a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual touch . . . communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word?” This faith, absorbed in the promises of God, is all that the Christian needs to be justified. This assertion lays the foundation for the Christian’s liberty. For, “if he had no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law . . . This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man’s righteousness and salvation . . . This the first power of faith” 58-59

As is evident throughout the treatise, Luther seems to be speaking from experience. Language such as “intoxicating” and “altogether absorbed” appears to be descriptive of what he himself has known. In fact, in the very opening of the treatise he observes, “Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith.” 52 It is clear, therefore, that Luther understands a soul justified by faith alone to be not some theoretical, theological concept. It is that which liberates the soul, realized as much experientially by the Christian as it is intellectually. By his own confession, the peace and joy engendered by this newfound understanding was something that truly freed him from the angst that previously attended all of his monastic disciplines. As such, it has a profound psychological effect on him.

#### THE SECOND BENEFIT OF FAITH

A “further function” of faith is that it “honors him in whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy.” Such honor we bestow on people when we live and act as though they are people that can be trusted.

We are free to walk with them because we know that our trust will not be violated. If this is the case for human relations, it most certainly will be the case in our trusting God. Luther writes, “The very highest worship of God is this, that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. When this is done, the soul consents to his will . . . and allows itself to be treated according to God’s good pleasure,” trusting that God will “dispose and provide all things well.” On the other hand, the person that seeks to work for his salvation implies that he does not trust what God has promised in his Word, through the preaching of the gospel, namely, that we are justified by faith. Faith, therefore, is an expression of trust in the truthfulness of God, but if one abandons faith and seeks righteousness by works they make God out to be a liar. This is why Luther stresses that faith alone honors God for with it we declare him to be fully trustworthy. 59

But growing out of this faith is an additional benefit. As we honor God by believing his promises and so declare him to be trustworthy and truthful, he “in turn glorifies our righteousness.” In this case our righteousness consists in having done that which is righteous, giving God the honor due him: “it is true and just that God is truthful and just, and to consider and confess him to be so is the same as being truthful and just.” He cites 1 Samuel 2:30, “Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed” in support of this understanding. In this way, Luther understands that our faith is accounted to us as righteousness. Abraham’s faith in God was “‘reckoned to him as righteousness’ because by it he gave glory most perfectly to God, and that for the same reason our faith shall be reckoned to us as righteousness if we believe.” With this last assertion, has he turned faith into a work? Are our expressions of trust in the trustworthiness of God the basis upon which God reckons us to be righteous? It need not be considered in this way. Rather it appears that Luther sees faith as a righteous expression on the part of the believer as it implies that the one who trusts God declares him to be trustworthy. Surely, this is a righteous thing and one that God has said that he will honor and is therefore accounted as righteous. 60

The second “power of faith”, therefore, could be understood as a power that creates a warmth of relationship between the believer and God. Trust and admiration are gratefully and freely expressed on the part of the believer and God looks upon that expression, that “work” if you will, and declares it to be a righteous thing. As the work emanates from faith it is an expression of the inner man, and not an external, impotent act that could be imitated by a hypocrite.

#### THE THIRD BENEFIT OF FAITH

The third great benefit of faith is that it unties the soul to Christ “as a bride is untied with her bridegroom.” By faith the believer becomes as one flesh with Christ in a way analogous to the bride becoming one flesh with her husband. He alludes to Ephesians 5:31-32 in support of his assertion. If this is true, Luther observes, then everything they have, they have in common, “the good as well as the evil.” As a result, in this union the

benefit that comes to the believer is great for such a marriage can only prove to be infinitely more perfect than any marriage between a man and a woman.

I have take the liberty of including an extended quote from this part of the treatise as I consider it to express the liveliness of his writing and the genuine joy in his discovery:

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31-32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage — indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage — it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?

Here we have a most pleasing vision not only of communion but of a blessed struggle and victory and salvation and redemption. Christ is God and man in one person. He has neither sinned nor died, and is not condemned, and he cannot sin, die, or be condemned; his righteousness, life, and salvation are unconquerable, eternal, omnipotent. By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men, his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell. Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom. So he takes to himself a glorious bride, “without spot or wrinkle, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word” [Cf. Eph. 5:26-27] of life, that is, by faith in the Word of life, righteousness, and salvation. In this way he marries

her in faith, steadfast love, and in mercies, righteousness, and justice, as (Hosea 2:19-20) says. 60-1

In this vivid description we see that for Luther the righteousness that comes by faith is something lively, experiential. It brings true relief to the soul that's aware of its sin, as surely Luther's was. This is something to note. Luther *was* a tormented man as regards his sin. He felt more keenly than most (certainly more keenly than do I) the depth of his depravity. This was impressed upon him by the knowledge of a holy God. In the light of God's righteousness and holiness, Who was Martin? What hope did he have?<sup>22</sup> But to discover that through faith and faith alone, through trusting in the trustworthiness of God, he might have what he could not gain no matter how hard he tried, was a genuine, animating, and passionate force in his life.

Additionally, the presence of God-trusting faith has a reciprocal effect for Luther. He asserts that by faith we fulfill the first commandment, "to have no other Gods", and that "he who fulfills the first commandment has no difficulty in fulfilling all the rest." That is to say, that the soul that is full of faith proceeds then to fulfill the commandments; what is an imputed righteousness results in an experimental righteousness. In a statement that has a tinge of the paradoxical as did his opening theses, he states, "The commandments must be fulfilled before any works can be done, and the works proceed from the fulfillment of the commandments." 62

In order to "examine more profoundly that grace which our inner man has in Christ" he introduces his teaching on the kingship and priesthood of all believers and by this begins to more clearly resolve the paradox posed by his opening theses. Both the kingship and priesthood of the believer are derived from our being united to Christ by faith. Christ's own kingship and priesthood he "imparts to and shares with everyone who believes in him according to the law [by] which the wife owns whatever belongs to the husband." Since Christ is Lord of all we, too, partake of that rule. This exalted position results in our ruling over all things "without exception, so that nothing can do us any harm." In fact, all things must serve the believer in "obtaining salvation." This is not a rule that is exercised by "physical power," however. Earthly power is reserved for kings and princes. Rather, it is a "spiritual dominion" in which "there is nothing so good and nothing so evil, but that it shall work for the good of me, if only I believe." Since faith is all the believer needs then the believer needs "nothing except faith exercising the power of its own liberty." Similarly, we share in Christ's priesthood. As priests we are able to approach the throne

---

<sup>22</sup> R. C. Sproul in his popular *The Holiness of God* attributes Luther's keen awareness of his impotence in this regard, at least in part, to his training as a lawyer before he became a priest: "Luther's legal mind was haunted by the question, How can an unjust person survive in the presence of a just God? . . . The genius of Luther ran up against a legal dilemma that he could not solve. There seemed to be no solution possible. The question that nagged him day and night was how a just God could accept an unjust man. He knew that his eternal destiny rode on the answer." R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1998) 125, 131.

of grace “in the spirit of faith” and pray for one another and teach one another “divine things.” This is the work of priests and it is our work by reason of our union with Christ. 62-4

This is the “lofty dignity” of the Christian. By virtue of his “royal power” he rules over death, life, and sin and “through his priestly glory” is all-powerful “with God because he does the things which God asks and desires.” From this, Luther, concludes “anyone can clearly see how a Christian is free from all things and over all things so that he needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone abundantly confers all these things.” 64-5

It is this message that needs to be preached, Luther proclaims, for it is faith in Christ that needs to be engendered. The hearer needs to know and believe that Christ is Christ, and that he is Christ for “you and me” with all of the privileges that that bestows. In another passage that expresses the real, heartfelt response that Luther often voices in the light of these things, he paints a picture of love for Christ and confidence in the face of anything that may come our way:

What man is there whose heart, upon hearing these things, will not rejoice to its depth, and when receiving such comfort will not grow tender so that he will love Christ as he never could by means of any law or works? Who would have the power to harm or frighten such a heart? If the knowledge of sin or the fear of death should break in upon it, it is ready to hope in the Lord. It does not grow afraid when it hears tidings of evil. It is not disturbed when it sees its enemies. This is so because it believes that the righteousness of Christ is its own and that its sin is not its own, but Christ’s, and that all sin is swallowed up by the righteousness of Christ . . . So the heart learns to scoff at death and sin and to say with the Apostle, ‘O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?’ . . . Death is swallowed up not only in the victory of Christ but also by our victory, because through faith his victory has become ours and in that faith we are conquerors. 66

When Luther speaks in this manner about the response of the soul that has grasped the implications of the gospel and the liberty it affords the soul, it would be wrong of us to see in this some mere coming to terms or personal reconciliation of something in his own soul to which he gives greater significance than it can bear. He is not merely reflecting some personal journey that has found an end in the gospel, and, in the end, serves only him. The response he portrays is one that all Christians, all sinners, would have in the light of the gospel and the freedom it brings. Luther’s is strong, potent with praise and thanksgiving. That he feels this more strongly than most is not due to a psychological imbalance (as some have suggested) but to a full embrace of his own sinfulness, a sinfulness that he shares with all men.

These benefits that come by faith, Luther asserts, affect the inner man for, as was said before, externals can do nothing to produce the needed inner righteousness. However, there is yet a place for works. Though our eternal hope is secured, the Christian “yet remains in this mortal life on earth.’ In this life he must learn to control himself as well as have dealings with other human beings. “Here the works begin” says Luther, and here “is the place to assert” the second of his theses, “namely, that a Christian is the servant of all and made subject to all.” 67

The Christian must be subjected to the Holy Spirit and take care to maintain those “reasonable” disciplines that will help him gain control over his body so that it might conform more and more “to the inner man and faith and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man.” The inner man “who is by faith created in the image of God,” is “both joyful and happy because of Christ in whom so many benefits are conferred upon him.” Therefore it is his life’s work to “serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained.” As a result, external ceremonies and disciplines are used to the extent that they are needed to suppress the lust and desires that war in his sinful flesh but the Christian is not to believe that such works will justify him. These spiritual disciplines should be undertaken to aid the inner man’s growth in righteousness for the state of the inner man is important, “a good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit” (Matthew 7:18). 67

But a Christian is not only to do such outward works for himself. He has an obligation to maintain control of himself for ‘he lives also for all men on earth.” In truth, he lives “only for others and not for himself.” Yet, because he does not need outwards works that are expressed to his neighbor for his own justification “he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor.” He has been freed by his having been justified by faith to love his neighbor and not look upon them in a way that seeks his own gain, namely, an earned righteousness. “This is a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love (Galatians 5:6), that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of faith.” 73-4

Here are Luther’s paradoxical theses resolved. By reason of his justification by faith he is free from the law and works and free from fear of condemnation or circumstances in life. He is secure in the knowledge that all that is necessary for his justification has been accomplished by Christ and is his by reason of the faith that unites him to his Savior. Truly, “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.” Additionally, the liberty afforded him through a justification that has freed him from accumulating works motivated by selfish gain has released him to love his neighbor as his neighbor should be loved. Each human being places an obligation upon the Christian to live his life well and

be prepared to meet the need of those around him. In this, “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Justification by faith, uncovered, realized, through the ardent study of the Scriptures, set Luther free from the torments of a medieval religious system undertaken with zealous scrupulosity. The relief and joy that was birthed with this discovery was mingled with a confidence that was bolstered by the knowledge that he had received such inestimable promises despite his utter unworthiness. The liberty that he expounds as a gracious benefit of the gospel he preached was not a theoretical conclusion. This was something that animated his life. That he expressed the fruit of justification by faith as love toward God and love toward neighbor reveals, that though the doctrine brought great personal resolution, it was not a personal conclusion. It caused him to look outward when for so many years he had been looking inward. He discovered that the answer to his unnerving dilemma: How can an unrighteous man stand before a holy and righteous God?, lay not in himself but in Christ.

It is hard to envision such a response to the gospel taking place in most of our churches. It may be due to the “gospel” we preach. If the heart of the message is not a righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith we cannot hope for the vibrancy of response that we see in Luther’s treatise. As we pray for revival in our churches, cities, and towns, perhaps our prayer should be that God would smite us with the same sense of unworthiness that plagued Luther. It might drive us, as it did him, to meditate day and night to find relief. And, when found, the relief offered by a gracious God might awaken within us the same unbounded praise that found voice in this treatise. It may be that all of our ministries, worship, and spiritual exercises would be freshly animated by love. We would look up to God with adoring faces and reach out to our neighbors with arms of charity.