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The Impact of Justification by Faith on Luther's Preaching

Tyler McQuilkin

Martin Luther was a 16th Century monk living in Germany. He joined the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt when he was just twenty-two years old. During his early years as a monk, Luther constantly lived in fear of death and the possibility of hell.¹ This worry of salvation drove him to the monastery, where he lived in constant fear because of his recognition of his sinful nature and the belief that God would severely judge him.²

It was not until Luther was thirty-two years old that he made his life-changing discovery. Luther was lecturing on Romans when he discovered the small passage in the first chapter that said, "the righteous will live by faith."³ This discovery changed Luther's theology for the remainder of his life. Not only was this discovery influential in his own personal life and fear of salvation, but it also led him to take this passage and teach the doctrine of "justification by faith" to his followers. This doctrine leads to the question: How was "justification by faith" used by Luther in his preaching to influence his listeners' understanding of their own lives? This is what will be examined as we look at the life of Luther and his methods of preaching.

Luther's Early Life

The young Martin Luther was raised in a peasant family with strict parents. Luther often refers to his parents with bitter words because of the punishments he suffered from them. He also had similar experiences at school. Luther was often disciplined for not learning the lessons of the day, so the adults at home and school were both hard on him.⁴ Luther clearly had a difficult

¹ Justo Gonzalez. *The Story of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 22.

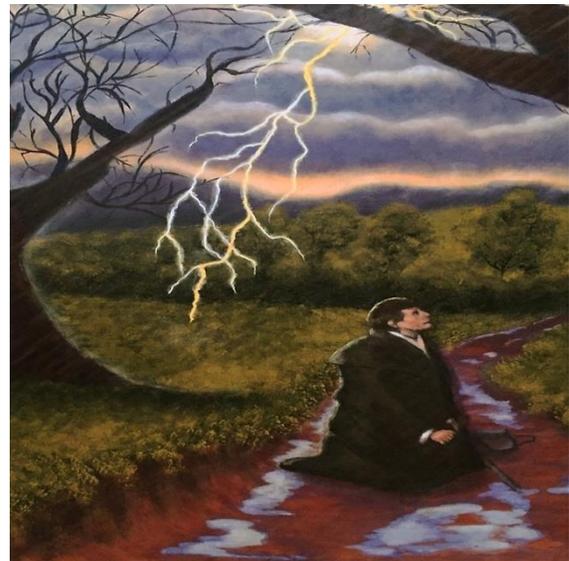
² Gonzalez, 23

³ Gonzalez, 25

⁴ Gonzalez, 21

upbringing, which influenced his decision to enter the monastery and also left a mark on the rest of his life as a theologian and reformer.

Later on, Luther's father wanted him to go into law, but Luther did not share this vocation. A leading contributor to entering the monastery was due to a vow he made in a lightning storm. When he was about twenty years old, Luther found himself in a storm near Erfurt. In his fear of death, he made a promise to St. Anne to become a monk if he survived the storm.⁵ Although he was a promising



law student and “his intelligence betokened a promising career,” he decided to enter the monastery.⁶

During his time in the monastery Luther lived in constant fear of death. He “had an overpowering sense of his own sinfulness,” which led to this fear of death and hell.⁷ Because of this fear, Luther would tirelessly spend time thinking about his life so he could account for every sin he committed. His understanding of sin was a “condition” of his nature, which put him in a state of complete despair.⁸

Since confession was not the answer for Luther, he began his search for salvation through different means. Mysticism was his first alternative. The main belief of the mystics was “to love

⁵ Richard Marius. *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. (London: Harvard University Press), 1999, 22.

⁶ Marius, 43

⁷ Gonzalez, 23

⁸ Gonzalez, 23

God, and that all the rest would follow as a result.”⁹ This was not the answer for Luther, however, because he could not manage to love a God that called for an account of one’s sins.¹⁰ He was encouraged to try being a pastor and teacher. Luther took this advice and went to the University of Wittenberg to teach Scripture.¹¹

It was during his time as a teacher that Luther made the discovery that would change his life and lay the groundwork for reformation. When teaching and reading the Epistle to the Romans, Luther began to read Romans 1:17 in a new light. He thought deeply on the words, “the righteous will live by faith.”¹² Luther wrote that this discovery helped him begin “to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith.”¹³ Luther understood theology with a canon embedded within the actual canon. This simply puts Christ at the center of the canon, which then allowed Luther to read Scripture through the revelation of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Martin Luther’s life changed from sad and fearful to lively and joyful with one simple discovery. Prior to this discovery, Luther was constantly aware of his sin and the reality of hell. Once he meditated on Romans 1:17, he understood his life in an entirely new way. The fear that once controlled him left, and he was able to enjoy the presence of Christ in his life. As he came to understand his faith and righteousness in Christ, his theology shifted to a Christological lens, which changed the way he viewed the Church and the way he taught.

Justification by Faith

⁹ Gonzalez, 23

¹⁰ Gonzalez, 24

¹¹ Gonzalez, 24

¹²Hans-Martin Barth. *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2013, 463.

¹³ Barth, 463

¹⁴ Barth, 464

Faith is central to Luther's theology. His discovery of Romans 1:17 led to a major shift in his life. As said before, Luther was constantly recounting his sins and confessing, hoping that he had not forgotten to confess any before his death, or else his salvation would undoubtedly be in question.

One of the changes in his life was the new understanding of faith. Rather than viewing faith as a "work" that is done to earn salvation, Luther understood faith as a relationship with God.¹⁵ Seeing faith as a relationship took away Luther's guilt of sin and fear of hell. His new view on faith said: "True faith with arms outstretched joyfully embraces the Son of God given for it and says: 'He is my beloved and I am his.'"¹⁶

Not only is faith a relationship rather than a work, but it also "justifies the sinner."¹⁷ This directly links to faith being a relationship with Christ. Although people are sinners, they are still "regarded by God as 'fully and perfectly righteous.'"¹⁸ This perfection in righteousness comes because people are sinners under the Law, but the Gospel makes them righteous.

Justification by faith can be tracked from the Old Testament, to Paul, and then to Luther, which shows the long history of this doctrine. Paul wrote about this righteousness in response to the Old Testament understanding of righteousness. The prophet Isaiah wrote about God's promise of a new way of life, and this new life was found in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Luther was able to understand the doctrine of "justification by faith" through the writings of Isaiah and Paul. Although the law was given by God, obeying the law by works does not save, but having faith in Christ does. And

¹⁵ Barth, 172

¹⁶ Barth, 173

¹⁷ Barth, 179

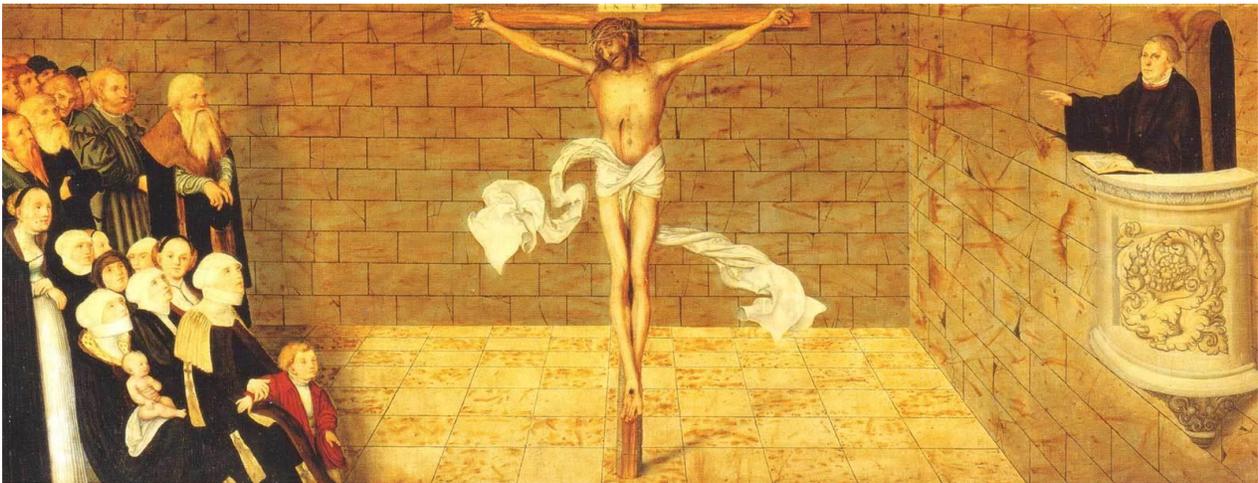
¹⁸ Barth, 179

¹⁹ Steven Paulson. *Luther for Armchair Theologians*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press,) 2004, 48.

this faith is “perfect passivity,” according to Luther. This simply means “being put to death as a sinner and raised as a saint.”²⁰ Now we can examine how Luther’s theology and preaching were influenced by his new life as a raised saint.

Luther’s Preaching

Luther’s preaching is saturated with his view of “justification by faith” and conforming to Christ as the giver of righteousness. Major themes for Luther’s sermons address humanity’s sin and worldly righteousness, and contrasts these ideas with the righteousness given by God to those with faith. This theme will be examined further by looking into Luther’s sermons throughout his



life.

Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, Ps. 19:1 (1516)

In this sermon, Luther reads out of the Psalms, but the discovery of “justification by faith” made the year before has largely impacted his message. Luther teaches on the work of God in the world and compares these to the works of men. The glory of God is revealed in Scripture, and this

²⁰ Paulson, 52

revelation thus “reveals human shame” and “discloses the idleness and sin of men.”²¹ Luther goes on to say that man takes the good gifts of God—glory, grace, mercy, salvation, etc.—and pollutes them into sin—like anger, indignation, cruelty, damnation, etc.²²

God’s works are initially good, but humanity takes them and turns them into sin. The actual works of God are “nothing else but...righteousness, peace, mercy, truth, patience, kindness, joy, and health.” When these works are done, they are acting in accordance with the nature of God.²³ These are altered to be evil works because of man, so there is a need for God to intervene on man’s behalf. This intervention is a work performed by God that is “alien and contrary to himself.” And this work comes when he allows the “pride of men” to show them their sinful, unrighteous, and lost nature.²⁴ In this act, God is then able to change man and bring him to righteousness.

The alien work of God is the “suffering *of* Christ and suffering *in* Christ.”²⁵ Luther uses Romans 4, which says, “Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification.” In his death and resurrection, man is able to imitate “the image of the Son ²⁶of God.” In this imitation, the gospel is preparing man for righteousness. Christ has justified man because the gospel says, “repent,” and this word, according to Luther, “declares all to be sinners.”²⁷ Although all are sinners, those who put their faith in Christ can be saved through his death and resurrection.

The gospel is “alien” to man because it teaches those that view themselves as righteous to be unrighteous in God’s eyes.²⁸ Luther says humans are constantly working to justify themselves

²¹Martin Luther. Sermon, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” *Luther’s Works: Sermons I*, Translated by John W. Doberstein. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, 18.

²² Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 18.

²³ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 18

²⁴ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 19

²⁵ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 19

²⁶ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 19

²⁷ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 21

²⁸ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 22

because they do not put their faith in Christ. But, once one admits that “one is sick,” they can see Christ in full. He ends the sermon saying, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ.”²⁹

In this sermon, Luther clearly begins by attacking the sinfulness of man. By showing what man does to pollute God’s good gifts, he allows the listener to recognize their sin and repent. Luther does not leave it there, however, because Christ works in human beings so they can come to righteousness. Christ’s death and resurrection was God’s “alien” work that allowed for “justification in the Spirit, and the vivification of the new man.”³⁰ This early sermon of Luther’s shows how faith saves, rather than man’s good works saving.

Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering (1530)

The message of this sermon differs from the message of the one above, but there are common themes that can be found between the two that link them together. Luther begins this sermon by telling his listeners that Christ’s suffering was solely for man, and that man needs Christ and his resurrection.³¹ He then says that his critics have said he only teaches and preaches on “faith alone,” which shows “justification by faith” had been a major theme of Luther’s preaching over the fifteen years between this sermon and the sermon on St. Thomas’ Day. Since his critics said he left out important doctrines like the cross and suffering, Luther addressed these doctrines in this sermon.³²

Although Luther did not have “faith alone” as the main message of this sermon, it is clearly used as a key element. Christ suffered and died for man, and man should also be “conformed to

²⁹ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,” 23

³⁰ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day,”zdrhjqq 18

³¹ Martin Luther. Sermon, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” *Luther’s Works: Sermons I*, Translated by John W. Doberstein. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, 18.

³² Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,”198

him.”³³ Luther believed in the inevitability of suffering in the Christian life. This suffering comes because people have imitated Christ and his suffering on the cross, and suffering for Christ’s sake is an act of faith.³⁴ Suffering works as an act of faith because in man’s suffering they are making the decision to suffer for Christ. The alternative option is to avoid suffering, which is saying that you “deny Christ.”³⁵

As a result of suffering, the one who has suffered receives a “great, immeasurable gift” that they can take part in. The greatness of this gift is so powerful, humanity will look at its suffering as “but a small loss” because the amount they suffered is nothing in comparison to Christ’s great gift.³⁶ Here Luther is teaching of the ultimate gift those with faith will receive if their faith is true.

This concept of suffering could call to question the idea of works or merits, but Luther also addresses this. Earlier on in Luther’s life he viewed salvation as his own efforts that would grant him that salvation. With this understanding of salvation, Luther believed he had to account for every sin he committed. Once he came to the understanding of righteousness by faith alone, he knew there was no work that could grant salvation. Those with faith suffer because “it is highly necessary that we suffer.”³⁷ Since suffering is an action that the follower does, it appears to be a work toward salvation. In this sermon, Luther teaches of the importance of ensuring “we do not make our suffering meritorious before God.”³⁸ This statement shows exactly where Luther stands. Salvation is still determined by faith, not by works, so Luther remains consistent in his understanding of works and their relationship to the follower.

³³ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” 198

³⁴ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” 199

³⁵ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” 199

³⁶ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” 200

³⁷ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” 207

³⁸ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering,” 205

Luther addresses Christian suffering in this sermon. Although it does not directly state that those with faith are justified, the reader can come to this conclusion based on the language used by Luther. The key example that is used throughout this sermon is the suffering followers goes through. Because of their faith in Christ, they are destined to suffer for Christ. When suffering arises, they have the choice to suffer or to deny their faith in Christ. Those that do suffer are also proclaiming their true faith. In this act of faith, they are justified and saved.

The Last Sermon, Wittenberg (1546)

This last sermon was given just a month before the reformer's death. Luther begins with Paul, who taught on the law, sin, faith, and how Christ's followers "are to be justified before God."³⁹ Over thirty years after Luther's life-changing discovery, he was still centralizing his sermons around the importance of faith.

In Romans, Paul teaches "the fruits of faith" so that his readers could be true Christians.⁴⁰ Luther uses the entire book of Romans to tell of the works Christians should do. Once again, this may appear to be a sermon on salvation by works, but this would be a misunderstanding of Luther. Romans first teaches on faith. Then, the book turns and teaches how that faith should influence life. Since people have faith, it "is necessary that we look to and really devote ourselves to the glorious calling and gifts."⁴¹ Simply put, with faith comes a certain lifestyle reflecting that faith. The works of this lifestyle do not save, but they are a result of a faith that does save.

When someone has begun to live out this faith in righteousness, Paul gives a warning so they do not think of themselves "more highly than you ought to think."⁴² Luther translates this by

³⁹ Martin Luther. Sermon, "The Last Sermon, Wittenberg," *Luther's Works: Sermons I*, Translated by John W. Doberstein. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, 18.

⁴⁰ Luther, "The Last Sermon, Wittenberg," 372

⁴¹ Luther, "The Last Sermon, Wittenberg," 373

⁴² Luther, "The Last Sermon, Wittenberg," 377

saying man still has his sin, so he should not look at himself with too much pride. It is easy to “think you have been blessed above others with splendid gifts,” but Luther tells his listeners to go “only as far as accords with faith and is like faith.”⁴³ This is just another response Luther has made to performing good works. These works are done in faith, and only remain good when faith is at the center. Once faith is lost, the works are no longer good.

In one of his final sermons, Luther remained consistent with his message of “justification by faith.” This sermon shows what a faithful follower of Christ looks like in practice. Luther addresses works, but continues to say faith is what saves, and works come as a result of faith. Over the course of his life Luther kept this message at the center of his preaching.

Conclusion

Looking over Luther’s life, it is simple to see the change that occurred and changed his entire life. Prior to his teaching on Romans and his discovery of “justification by faith,” Luther was in constant fear of God and his own salvation. His focus on what he had to do in order to gain salvation. After his discovery, Luther focused all of his teachings around this short verse from Romans. An examination of Luther’s sermons clearly demonstrates that the reformer was tying this concept of “faith alone” into all of his lessons, regardless of the Scripture passages being used as the key text. The reason for this is because Luther observed the change that took place in life due to this concept, and wanted his followers to come to similar changes in their own lives.

In the modern world, it is easy for people to get caught up in their own individual works. Our consumer culture has taught humanity there is always something out there. Since people live in this cultural context, living with “faith alone” is a difficult idea to grasp. Faith does not always mean happiness, and society tells people they can consume happiness whenever they want. Since

⁴³ Luther, “The Last Sermon, Wittenberg,” 378

the world is in a consumer context, people continue to seek the next item that will bring them happiness. Ironically, people continue to search because all they have are finite goods to make them happy.

The Church is not exempt. It has also been impacted by consumerism. In order to achieve happiness, people would do well to consider Luther's ideas and live with faith and trust in Jesus Christ and his resurrection. Christ is the true means to happiness, and faith is how one comes to be in communion with him.