

Sabbath School Today
With the 1888 Message Dynamic

The Gospel in Galatians
Lesson 4. Justification by Faith Alone

Five hundred years ago, in 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther shook the European theological world by making the claim that righteousness was by faith alone. After intense study of the Books of Galatians and Romans, he claimed that righteousness was not dispensed through the church or administered by priests or popes but was the *product* of faith. This fall, Christian organizations around the world are commemorating Luther's theological upheaval, including Roman Catholicism.

Luther's view on faith as the *means* of salvation has become the uniting theme between Protestantism and Catholicism as evidenced in a 1994 ecumenical document, known as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," signed by leading Evangelical and Roman Catholic scholars in the United States. The Roman Catholic Church began its celebration of the Reformation a year ago when Pope Frances traveled to Sweden, where he joined leaders of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund for an ecumenical prayer service on October 31 and November 1, 2016.

When Luther made his stupendous claim that salvation was by "faith alone" it sparked not only the Protestant Reformation, but also the Roman Catholic Counter-reformation and the eighteen-year-long Council of Trent. At that time, how a person received justification and became righteous was the fundamental theological dividing line. Rome condemned "sola fide" and proclaimed anathema upon all who accepted it as truth. That ban has never officially been lifted by Rome. The theological trend since 1994 in reaching hands across the gulf to unite with Rome on this one point is in reality overturning the Protestant Reformation, just as Rome planned from the beginning.

The vital point that Martin Luther missed in his declaration of "sola fide" is that humans make no contribution to the salvation process. Our "faith" and our "works of faith" have no merit and produce no righteousness. If I am saved through my faith *in* Jesus, then all the focus is on me and my ability to maintain that "faith" long enough to get into heaven. Focusing on me and what I can do through "obedience to the law" to *help* Jesus get me through the Pearly Gates is a subtle denial of the plain Biblical teaching that in me is no good thing (see Rom. 7:18).

Ellet J. Waggoner saw this clearly: "The Pharisees are not extinct; there are many in these days who expect to gain righteousness by their own deeds. They trust in themselves that they are righteous." However, the "convicted sinner tries again and again to obtain righteousness from the law, but it resists all his advances. It cannot be bribed by any amount of penance or professedly good deeds." It is absolutely true that "deeds done by a sinful person have no effect whatever to make him righteous, but, on

the contrary, coming from an evil heart, they are evil, and so add to the sum of his sinfulness.” [1]

“Since the gospel is contrary to human nature, we become doers of the law not by doing but by believing. If we *worked* for righteousness, we would be exercising only our own sinful human nature, and so would get no nearer to righteousness, but farther from it. But by *believing* the ‘exceeding great and precious promises,’ we become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4), and then all our works are wrought in God.” [2]

Neither Luther, nor Calvin, nor Arminius ever caught so much as a glimpse of the concept of true legal justification. For all these reformers, great as their work was in beginning to restore truth from the Bible and to remove the paganism that had crept into the church during the millennium prior to the Reformation, they never comprehended the full depth of Christ’s sacrifice or the true meaning of faith. The Reformer and thus the Evangelical view of salvation is egocentric because it begins with man’s need for eternal security.

Therefore, in the Evangelical view justification is the *reward* of a person’s faith. It teaches that faith is “trust” in the sense of grasping for an assurance of personal security from an angry God who must be appeased through repentance and penance before He will bestow grace and salvation. This explanation of justification as a judicial act of accounting in the record books of heaven, wherein the unrighteous man, still unrighteous, is declared righteous while he continues indulging in sinful motivation, denies the message of Daniel 8:14 and Revelation 14:12, and is responsible for the long delay of Christ’s second coming.

Such a view of God is a gross distortion of His holy character of *agape*—His self-sacrificing, other-centered love that motivated the Godhead to declare the everlasting covenant that would send the Son to save the world from sin. That “sending” was from the foundation of the world; Christ is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). “As soon as there was sin, there was a Saviour. Christ knew what He would have to suffer, yet He became man’s substitute. As soon as Adam sinned, the Son of God presented Himself as surety for the human race, with just as much power to avert the doom pronounced upon the guilty as when He died upon the cross of Calvary.” [3] This is justification as God intends it to be preached, and a true heart-appreciation of this fact will break the hard-hearted sinner’s resistance to God’s wooing. “Faith does not make facts. It only lays hold of them.” [4]

Salvation by faith alone is an absolute Biblical truth, but concessions to relativism and postmodernism’s humanistic (man-centered) view are undermining what the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians about the vital truth of justification and righteousness by faith. Our memory text this week inadvertently points out this shift in thinking. Quoting the English Standard Version, it says: “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” If you are familiar with the King James Version you might have noticed the change of a single word. It’s a subtle change, and many persons feel that it is an insignificant difference.

In the King James Bible the text reads: “and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.” The change of one little two-letter word makes a profound difference in meaning. The author of our *Quarterly* illuminated the difference in his book, *Galatians, A Fiery Response to a Struggling Church*.

“For Paul faith is not just an abstract concept—it is inseparably connected to Jesus. In fact, the Greek phrase translated twice as ‘faith in Jesus Christ’ in Galatians 2:16 is far richer than any rendering can really encompass (see Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 3:22; Eph. 3:12; Phil 3:9). In the Greek the phrase literally means ‘the faith of Jesus’ or ‘the faithfulness of Jesus.’ It reveals the powerful contrast the apostle makes between the works of the law [i.e., legalism] and the work Christ accomplished on our behalf. For Paul, the primary emphasis is not *our* faith in Jesus, but Jesus’ faithfulness. Thus the issue is not *our* works versus *our* faith—that would almost make our faith meritorious, which it is not. Rather, faith is only the conduit by which we take hold of Christ. We are justified, not on the basis of *our* faith, but on the basis of *Christ’s faithfulness*.” [5]

Christ was *faithful* to the everlasting covenant made between the members of the Godhead *before* sin entered this world. From that covenant made in heaven, through His life of suffering in fallen human flesh, and finally His endurance of the anguish of Gethsemane and the shame of the cross, Christ never once faltered in His faithfulness to the everlasting covenant promise to save mankind from sin. He was faithful to His word. And it is the evidence of His faithfulness revealed in the Scriptures that we cling to when we believe that He is able to “keep [us] from falling, and present [us] faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24).

It is *this* faith that every human being has been given (Rom. 12:3). It is *this* faith that once allowed to work in us, will produce the necessary righteousness that will fit us for heaven. “The proud heart strives to earn salvation; but both our title to heaven and our fitness for it are found in the righteousness of Christ. The Lord can do nothing toward the recovery of man until, convinced of his own weakness, and stripped of all self-sufficiency, he yields himself to the control of God. Then he can receive the gift that God is waiting to bestow. From the soul that feels his need, nothing is withheld.” [6]

You might argue that this is a tiny point, a subtle difference; nothing to really worry about. It is after all, only a two-letter word! How can it have any significant importance to my salvation?

It is a subtle distinction that caused the Reformation to falter and stall for 500 years. We don’t need to go back to Reformation theology, we need to return to what the Lord sent us in 1888. The message brought to us through A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner is a distinct message that uplifted the Saviour as the sin-pardoning Redeemer who is the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. “This is the message that God commanded to be given to world,” not warmed-over Evangelicalism that focuses on human effort, where “faith” is a grasping for reward that rejects the truth that forgiveness and the

blotting out of sin is the whole point of the Gospel. The message of Christ and His righteousness proclaimed by Waggoner and Jones “is the third angel’s message in verity, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure.” [7]

The message of the cross “lays the glory of man in the dust” and is offensive to the proud heart. The apostle Paul gladly submitted to the “offence” saying, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the *faith of the Son of God*, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:21). “The cross conveys to us the knowledge of God because it shows us His power as Creator. Through the cross we are crucified to the world and the world to us. By the cross we are sanctified. Sanctification is the work of God, not of man. Only His divine power can accomplish the great work.” [8]

—Ann Walper

Endnotes:

[1] Ellet J. Waggoner, *Christ and His Righteousness*, pp. 66, 70, 63 (Glad Tidings ed., 1999).

[2] Ellet J. Waggoner, *The Glad Tidings*, p. 56 (CFI ed., 2016).

[3] Ellen G. White, “Lessons From the Christ-Life,” *Review and Herald*, March 12, 1901.

[4] *The Glad Tidings*, p. 107.

[5] Carl P. Cosaert, *Galatians: A Fiery Response to a Struggling Church*, p. 42 (emphasis in original), Review and Herald Publishing Association (2011).

[6] Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 300.

[7] See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, pp. 91, 92.

[8] *The Glad Tidings*, p. 141.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/HKjh2Glgum4>

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