

Back to the Basics: Luther and the Reformation

Overview

Have you ever found religion responsible for creating feelings of doubt, guilt and frustration? Has the church ever seemed overly focused on tradition, religious status, and rules? Have you ever felt your desire for a meaningful, vital spiritual life in Christ stifled by church tradition, social requirements, and various demands of religious leaders?

What is the vital core of our faith? How do we experience peace with God when he seems so unapproachable? What is the central message of the gospel that we must communicate in our 21st century culture?

A 16th century monk posed similar questions in a very public way giving answers that were radical for his day and time. His quest for peace with God lay at heart of what we now call the Reformation, and the questions he posed deserve attention today.

As we study the Reformation, the questions we will address include:

- What is grace?
- What is faith?
- How are we made right with God?
- How do we find true peace in our relationship with God?

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Understanding the Setting

DATE	GERMANY	FRANCE/ SWITZERLAND	ENGLAND	ANABAPTIST	COUNTER- REFORMATION
1517	Luther posts 95 Theses; Begins Protestant Reformation				
1519		Zwingli begins New Testament sermons			
1520	Papal Bull condemns Luther as heretic				
1521	Diet of Worms – Luther excommunicated				
1523		Zwingli starts Swiss Reformation		Anabaptists arise in Europe	
1525	Luther marries Katherine von Bora		Tyndale’s English New Testament		
1530	Luther and Melanchthon write <i>Augsburg Confession</i>				
1534	Luther’s Bible		Henry VIII leads England’s break with Rome		
1536		Calvin arrives in Geneva (leaves in 1538); Begins writing <i>Institutes</i>			
1540					Ignatious of Loyola founds Jesuits
1541		Calvin returns to Geneva			
1545-63					Council of Trent
1546	Luther dies				
1555	Peace of Augsburg				
1558			Church of England created		
1559		Final edition of Calvin’s <i>Institutes</i> published			
1562			“Thirty-nine Articles” promulgated		
1572		St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre			
1577	Formula of Concord				

Step 1: Grasp the Issue

Sound Bites

“Indeed everything that is Christian and is good is to be found (under the papacy) and has come to us from this source. For instance, we confess that in the papal church there are true Holy Scriptures, true baptism, and true sacrament of the altar, the true keys to the forgiveness of sins, the true office of the ministry.” – John Calvin

“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.” – Martin Luther

“Today the light of the Reformation has been significantly dimmed. The consequence is that the word *evangelical* has become so inclusive as to have lost its meaning.”

– The Cambridge Declaration, 1996

“A Christian man is free from all things; he needs no works in order to be justified and saved, but receives these gifts in abundance from his faith alone.” – Martin Luther

“We are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is not alone.” – John Calvin.

“Where the Gospel is absent and human teachings rule, there no Christians live but only pagans, no matter how numerous they are and how holy and upright their life may be.”

– Martin Luther

“If [evangelicals] do not make an effort ‘to recover and confess the truth of God’s Word as did the Reformers,’ we will not have any church at all to pass on . . .”

– James Montgomery Boice

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Case Studies

In a moment of evangelistic bravery, you invited Brian to join you for the Christmas program at your church. He doesn't regularly attend, and you thought this might be a nice opportunity to break the ice with him. To your surprise Brian answers, "Thanks, but no thanks. Church just brings me down. I tried for a while. I gave my life to God, but no matter what I did I never felt okay. People at church seemed to accept me, but I just couldn't make the lifestyle change. I always felt guilty. Even when I did the right things, it never felt like I was doing enough. There was this huge gap between my expectation and who I really was. I just couldn't enjoy myself and be me. I still love Jesus and trust him, but I had to leave the church or lose my mind."

As a Christian, you know what he means, but you also have known times of acceptance, love, peace, and joy in Christ's presence. How do you explain this to him?

It happens. On a recent flight, the passenger beside you begins to witness to you. He is a warm and friendly man in his late 50s who explains that he is a Roman Catholic. Throughout the flight you have a pleasant conversation, and while you don't agree with everything he says, you do find yourself surprised to be in agreement on some major doctrinal issues. As the plane lands, he leaves you two questions to think about: "First, for most of its history the church has been understood as the Roman Catholic church under the authority of the Pope. How can you ignore this reality? Second, how can you not participate in the basic sacraments of the Catholic church such as the Eucharist when they were seen as a necessary part of the Christian life for 1500 years?"

Given an opportunity, how would you respond?

What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?

Step 2: Study the Scriptures

Romans 1:17

Romans 3:20-24

- Note the characteristics of the righteousness discussed.
- What part do we play in this righteousness?
- How is it related to the law?
- How is it related to faith?

Ephesians 2:8-10

As Paul elaborates on the message of salvation by grace through faith, he brings in an additional element, that of purpose.

- According to Paul, what is one reason for which God has created us?

James 2:14-17

- What does verse 17 mean?
- What are the implications of this truth?

Step 3: Consult Other Sources

Trying to capture the Reformation in one chapter is somewhat like trying to describe the Grand Canyon with a postcard. To help, the readings will be focused primarily on the new vision of how we are saved and the work of Martin Luther.

To get started it helps to get a little background. First, the medieval view of the world had already been challenged by the Renaissance. Its interest in classical literature would lead Reformer's to renewed interest in studying the scripture in its original languages, not just the Latin of the Roman Church. Martin Luther's writings as well as translations of scripture into people's language could be sent rapidly throughout Europe because of the invention of the printing press. As government structures changed the power of the pope and church would be challenged by new nations and princes. But as Reading 1 points out believers also began to look at their faith in a new way. Reading 2 looks at Martin Luther and the challenge he posed to church as it had been done for centuries. Reading 3 digs in a little deeper into the critical of issue of how we are saved. It is a little complex but with careful reading one can begin to see why Luther felt that is was critical that we are saved by faith alone. Finally, Reading 4 discusses the impact of the Reformation on how Christians understand the concept of the church.

As you read try to answer these questions: What three major principles set Protestants and Catholics apart? What effect did the Reformation have on how Christianity was practiced? What four basic questions did Luther raise? Why did Luther feel the righteousness of God to be so threatening that he "hated God"? What did he mean by "saving faith?" What did Calvin mean by an "invisible church?"

"A New Twist in the Narrative," by Roger Olson.

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"A Wild Boar in the Vineyard," by Bruce Shelley.

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"The Doctrine of Justification by Faith," by Alister McGrath.

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A New Twist in the Narrative by Roger Olson

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Christian theology in Europe was in trouble. It might not even be an exaggeration to say that the story had lost most people's interest. The great Christian humanist Erasmus used *theology* as a synonym for pointless speculation and *theologian* for an ivory-tower thinker who had lost touch with reality. Of course, Erasmus was a theologian in his own way, but for many people like him, theology was to be equated with scholasticism in its various late medieval forms. It was also looked upon as a science—if it deserved that title—under the complete domination of the papal Curia, the Vatican bureaucracy that dictated what everyone had to think. And most enlightened people like Erasmus considered the Curia almost hopelessly irrelevant and corrupt.

Erasmus offered his “philosophy of Christ” as the solution for the lethargy of Christian thought and life. It would, he hoped, breathe new life into the dead science of theology by focusing it on practical matters of morality, ethical living by the example of Jesus, and real-world concerns of peace and harmony among all people. In the early decades of the 1500s few rivals for Erasmus's program appeared. And yet his voluminous and popular writings did not seem to be making a dent in the traditionalism and corruption of the official theology of Rome. The time was ripe for more radical solutions than Erasmus had to offer. The great Bohemian reformer of Prague, John Hus, had prophesied just such a solution almost one hundred years earlier, shortly before his martyrdom at the Council of Constance

(1415). So similar was Martin Luther's theology to Hus's that many labeled him “the Saxon Hus” because he was from the principality of Saxony in eastern Germany. Martin Luther did not just breathe new life into Western Christian theology, however; he revolutionized it. Compared to calm, patient Erasmus, the German Reformer was like a bull in a china shop. To bold, decisive Luther, Erasmus was like a little voice crying in the wilderness of worldliness, heresy, corruption and an almost total eclipse of the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Backgrounds of the Reformations

Most historians date the dawn of the great sixteenth-century Reformation of church and theology to a single day in 1517. On October 31 of that year an Augustinian monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg named Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses (points for debate) to the cathedral church door in the city where he taught. His theses implied that the only official church of Western Christendom—the church of Rome—was in serious error. Within months all of Europe was reading Luther's theses due to the new invention of Gutenberg—the movable-type printing press. Pope Leo X read them and declared that the Saxon monk must be drunk. Later he called Luther “a wild boar in the vineyard of the Lord” and excommunicated him. But Luther's Reformation train had already left the station and there was no stopping it.

Soon other leading voices were raised against the standard theology of Western

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Christendom, and city after city joined Wittenberg in banning masses and reforming worship and theology. Zurich, Geneva and Strasbourg jumped onto the Protestant bandwagon, as did many leading German cities and principalities. Eventually all of Scandinavia joined the new movement, and within a few years Scotland and England were Protestant as well.

A third Great Schism was taking place in Christendom. The first was the split between East and West in 1054. The second was the medieval struggle between two and then three popes from 1378 to 1417. Now the third was the division between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe beginning around 1520 with Luther's excommunication from the church of Rome.

All the Protestant Reformers had certain common beliefs and aims. Three major Protestant principles are usually identified as setting them apart from the church of Rome and its official theology: *sola gratia et fides* (salvation by grace through faith alone), *sola scriptura* (Scripture above all other authorities for Christian faith and practice) and the priesthood of all believers. Each Protestant leader interpreted these in his own way, but all shared them in common and sought to give Christianity a new foundation in them. Their uniform aim was to return the church of Jesus Christ to its true New Testament foundation and rid it of all false teachings and corrupt practices. Unfortunately, they could not agree on how to do that, and a unified Protestant theology and church were never achieved. Nevertheless, in spite of differences, all the major Protestant Reformers and the churches they led held to and proclaimed the same basic message: the Word of God over all human traditions, salvation by grace through faith alone and every true Christian a priest unto God without need of a special mediator other

than Jesus Christ.

The Protestant movement provoked a reaction from the church of Rome, which decided it needed to do two things: rid itself of the worst abuses and corruptions that had led some princes of the Holy Roman Empire to support the Protestants, and firm up its own theology by deciding and declaring once and for all what Christian truth would be regarding Scripture and tradition, salvation and the church. To that end the pope called a new council to respond to Protestantism. The Council of Trent is considered the nineteenth ecumenical council of the church by Rome, and it met off and on from 1545 to 1563. It is often considered the heart of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and although it abolished many of the abuses that had helped spark the Protestant movement, it also baptized as dogma many of the unofficial and informal beliefs of the Roman Catholic tradition against which Luther and other Protestants had reacted. Ultimately, it deepened the divide within Western Christendom. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did that chasm narrow so that Catholic and Protestant theologians could conduct dialogue with one another and begin to regard one another as authentic Christians.

To one degree or another, all the major Protestant theologians of the 1520s through the 1540s thought that the church of Rome and scholastic theology had simply buried the gospel under layers of human tradition. They were generally not willing to say that there were no Christians within its fold, but they were more or less agreed that the leaders and teachers of the church had gone so far astray from anything recognizable as apostolic Christianity that it was beyond reform. A new start had to be made, especially once the pope began excommunicating Protestant leaders right and left.

It is extremely important to recognize that the Protestants were mainly concerned with theology and not just with the structure and practices of the medieval Catholic church. While the Reformation may have begun with Luther's protest against the selling of indulgences by papal hawkers, that and other concrete disputes over particular practices of Rome were symptoms of a deeper disagreement over the very nature of the God-human relationship. Luther and the leading Reformers of Switzerland, Zwingli and Calvin, believed that the church of Rome could justify the sale of indulgences (exemption from time in purgatory) because it misunderstood the nature of God's righteousness and human sinfulness. At the deepest level, then, the dispute was about soteriology and not specific corrupt practices.

The Protestant Reformation revolutionized Western Christianity. From 1520 on, no single church has existed to unify Western society, and in that sense Christendom died. The medieval synthesis of the one church headquartered in Rome ceased to exist. The era of denominationalism was ushered in against Luther's own wishes. He had no intention of dividing Christendom. His own theology did not advocate splitting the church up into warring or mutually ignoring factions. It happened nevertheless. Gradually, over the decades and centuries, Western Christianity splintered as Protestantism took on ever new forms.

In its first generation, Protestant Christian theology existed in four distinct branches. All four still exist, but even they have divided within themselves. The four were and are Lutheran (or *Evangelische* in German), Reformed ("the Swiss" to Luther), Anabaptist (considered the major part of the Radical Reformation), and Anglican (the Church of England). Each had its own distinct emphases

that differed from the others, while all shared the three main Protestant principles. . . .

. . . it will be helpful first to delineate the situation in church and theology at the beginning of the Protestant revolution. That is because to a large extent Protestantism was just what its name implies—a *protest* against something. Luther and the other Protestants were protesting the condition of the church of Rome. Although on paper the official theology of the Roman Catholic Church was solidly anti-Pelagian and even anti-Semi-Pelagian, and although some of its leading thinkers strongly advocated Augustinian monergism, the popular theology of the church had fallen into a nonevangelical synergism that would have had both Augustine and Aquinas spinning in their graves. At the very least, church leaders and even some leading theologians of Roman Catholicism were implying that grace was a commodity to be earned or even bought. *Merit* had become a key term in Catholic soteriology. One could be truly saved only to the extent that he or she had gained sufficient merit before God through faith and works of love. *Faith* had come to be interpreted as faithfulness to the teachings and practices of the official church, and *works of love* had come to be interpreted as buying indulgences, paying for masses for souls in purgatory and taking expensive pilgrimages to view relics as well as giving alms to the poor, doing penance, participating in the sacraments and carrying out devotional practices such as prayer and meditation.

The implication behind this system of salvation as well as the explicit theoretical support it received from some late medieval Roman Catholic theologians was that humans can and must add their own efforts to the grace of God in order to achieve salvation. Salvation was increasingly being viewed as a reward that one received for cooperating with

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grace. Even though all Catholic theologians affirmed that the initiative in salvation lay with the grace of God in baptism, many went on to emphasize “habitual grace” that increased gradually within a baptized person’s life through works of love. Only as this grace did its work of transforming the person from sinner into saint—actually holy and righteous within—could God “justify,” or “declare righteous.” “Generally, the medieval church defined the righteousness of God as the demanding justice of God.”¹ God could and would declare one completely forgiven and fit for heaven when that person was no longer a sinner but was transformed into a holy person by cooperating with grace by all means possible. For most late medieval Catholic Christians, that meant enduring eons in purgatory after bodily death. The result for many—including Luther in the monastery before his recovery of the gospel of grace by faith alone—was fear of God’s judgment that destroyed all assurance of salvation. For some it resulted in self-righteousness as they congratulated themselves for their spiritual achievements. All the Protestant Reformers (and some Catholics) considered this soteriology implicitly Pelagian—a moralistic and legalistic works righteousness completely contrary to the New Testament proclamation of God’s righteousness given as a gift by grace through faith alone.

Of course there were many other important issues that came to divide the Protestants from the Roman Catholic Church, and many of them were also theological in nature. But no single issue so captured the imagination and created as much furor as soteriology and especially the question of

God’s righteousness and how humans gain a share in it or benefit from it for salvation. When challenged to produce the biblical support for their soteriology, the Catholic leaders appealed to the unwritten tradition of the church alongside Scripture. The medieval church had come to consider informal and unwritten tradition as equally authoritative as the Bible. Luther and the other Protestants rejected two sources of authority for church and declared Scripture above all human traditions. When Luther stepped onto the stage of Christian theology from about 1513 to 1518, that was the condition which he found himself and all Western Christendom: captive to an informal, unwritten tradition controlled by a corrupt pope and Curia in Rome and caught up in a near-Pelagian, synergistic soteriology of merits and works of love. His major sources of inspiration in correcting that condition became Scripture (especially Paul’s epistles), Augustine’s theology and some aspects of nominalism.



¹ John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. xviii.

A Wild Boar in the Vineyard by Bruce Shelley

In the summer of 1520 a document bearing an impressive seal circulated throughout Germany in search of a remote figure. “Arise, O Lord,” the writing began, “and judge Thy cause. A wild boar has invaded Thy vineyard.”

The document, a papal bull—named after the seal, or *bulld*—took three months to reach Martin Luther, the wild boar. Long before it arrived in Wittenberg where Luther was teaching, he knew its contents. Forty-one of his beliefs were condemned as “heretical, or scandalous, or false, or offensive to pious ears, or seductive of simple minds, or repugnant to Catholic truth.” The bull called on Luther to repent and repudiate his errors or face the dreadful consequences.

Luther received his copy on the tenth of October. At the end of his sixty-day period of grace, he led a throng of eager students outside Wittenberg and burned copies of the Canon Law and the works of some medieval theologians. Perhaps as an afterthought Luther added a copy of the bull condemning him. That was his answer. “They have burned my books,” he said, “I burn theirs.” Those flames in early December, 1520, were a fit symbol of the defiance of the pope raging throughout Germany.

The Church of the popes no longer hurls anathemas at Protestants, and Lutherans no longer burn Catholic books, but the divisions of Christians in western Christianity remain. Behind today’s differences between Catholics and Protestants lie the events of the age of Luther, a period of church history we call The Reformation (1517-1648).

The Meaning of Protestantism

What is Protestantism? The best description is still that of Ernst Troeltsch, who early in the twentieth century called Protestantism a “modification of Catholicism” in which Catholic problems remain, but different solutions are given. The four questions that Protestantism answered in a new way are: (1) How is a person saved? (2) Where does religious authority lie? (3) What is the church? And (4) what is the essence of Christian living?

Protestant reformers throughout sixteenth-century Europe came to hold similar convictions about these questions, but fresh answers emerged first in Martin Luther’s personal conflict with Rome. Other men and women felt deeply the need for reform, but none matched the bold struggle of soul within the burly German.

Born in 1483, the son of a Saxon miner, Luther had every intention of becoming a lawyer until, one day in 1505, he was caught in a thunderstorm while walking toward the village of Stotternheim. A bolt of lightning knocked him to the ground, and Luther, terrified, called out to Catholicism’s patroness of miners: “St. Anne, save me! And I’ll become a monk.”

Much to his parents’ dismay, Luther kept the vow. Two weeks later, obsessed with guilt, he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt and proved to be a dedicated monk. “I kept the rule so strictly,” he recalled years later, “that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer monkery, it was I. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed

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myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.”

Luther pushed his body to health-cracking rigors of austerity. He sometimes fasted for three days and slept without a blanket in freezing winter. He was driven by a profound sense of his own sinfulness and of God’s unutterable majesty. In the midst of saying his first Mass, said Luther, “I was utterly stupefied and terrorstricken. I thought to myself, ‘Who am I that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God.’” No amount of penance, no soothing advice from his superiors could still Luther’s conviction that he was a miserable, doomed sinner. Although his confessor counseled him to love God, Luther one day burst out, “I do not love God! I hate him!”

The troubled monk found the love he sought through the study of Scripture. Assigned to the chair of biblical studies at the recently established Wittenberg University he became fascinated with the words of Christ from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Christ forsaken! How could our Lord be forsaken? Luther felt forsaken, but he was a sinner. Christ was not. The answer had to lie in Christ’s identity with sinful humanity. Did he share mankind’s estrangement from God in order to assume the punishment required of sin?

A new and revolutionary picture of God began to develop in Luther’s restless soul. Finally, in 1515 while pondering St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans Luther came upon the words: “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith” (1:17, KJV). Here was his key to spiritual certainty: “Night and day I pondered,” Luther later recalled, “until I saw the connection between

the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”

Luther saw it clearly now. Man is saved only by his faith in the merit of Christ’s sacrifice. The cross alone can remove man’s sin and save him from the grasp of the devil. Luther had come to his famous doctrine of justification by faith alone. He saw how sharply it clashed with the Roman church’s doctrine of justification by faith and good works—the demonstration of faith through virtuous acts, acceptance of church dogma, and participation in church ritual. Later, in a hymn that reflects his vigorous style, Luther described his spiritual journey from anxiety to conviction:

In devil’s dungeon chained I lay
The pangs of death swept o’er me.
My sin devoured me night and day
In which my mother bore me.
My anguish ever grew more rife,
I took no pleasure in my life
And sin had made me crazy.

Thus spoke the Son, “Hold thou to me,
From now on thou wilt make it.
I gave my very life for thee
And for thee I will stake it.
For I am thine and thou art mine,
And where I am our lives entwine
The Old Fiend cannot shake it.”

The implications of Luther’s discovery were enormous. If salvation comes through faith in Christ alone, the intercession of priests is superfluous. Faith formed and nurtured by the Word of God, written and preached, requires no monks, no masses, no prayers to

the saints. The mediation of the Church of Rome crumbles into insignificance.

Luther's Attack upon Papal Authority

Luther had no idea where his spiritual discovery was leading him. It took a flagrant abuse of church finances to propel him into the center of religious rebellion in Germany, and into another revolutionary position regarding papal authority.

The sale of indulgences, introduced during the Crusades, remained a favored source of papal income. In exchange for a meritorious work—frequently, a contribution to a worthy cause or a pilgrimage to a shrine—the church offered the sinner exemption from his acts of penance by drawing upon its “treasury of merits.” This consisted of the grace accumulated by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and the meritorious deeds of the saints.

All too often, zealous preachers of indulgences made them appear to be a sort of magic—as though a good deed, especially a contribution, automatically got its reward, regardless of the condition of the doer’s soul. Sorrow for sin was completely and conveniently overlooked. That troubled Luther deeply.

Armed with his newfound understanding of faith, Luther began to criticize the theology of indulgences in his sermons. His displeasure increased noticeably during 1517, when the Dominican John Tetzel was preaching throughout much of Germany on behalf of a papal fund-raising campaign to complete the construction of St. Peter’s basilica in Rome. In exchange for a contribution, Tetzel boasted, he would provide donors with an indulgence that would even apply beyond the grave and free souls from purgatory. “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,” went his jingle, “the soul from purgatory springs.”

To Luther, Tetzel’s preaching was bad theology if not worse. He promptly drew up 95 propositions (or theses) for theological debate and on 31 October 1517, following university custom, he posted them on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. Among other things, they argued that indulgences cannot remove guilt, do not apply to purgatory, and are harmful because they induce a false sense of security in the donor. That was the spark that ignited the Reformation.

Within a short time the German Dominicans denounced Luther to Rome as a man guilty of preaching “dangerous doctrines.” A Vatican theologian issued a series of countertheses, arguing that anyone who criticized indulgences was guilty of heresy. Initially willing to accept a final verdict from Rome, Luther began to insist on scriptural proof that he was wrong—and even questioned papal authority over purgatory. During an 18-day debate in 1519 with theologian John Eck at Leipzig, Luther blurted out: “A council may sometimes err. Neither the church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture.”

Thus, Luther had moved from his first conviction—that salvation was by faith in Christ alone to a second: that the Scriptures, not popes or councils, are the standard for Christian faith and behavior.

John Eck did not miss Luther’s likeness to John Hus. After the Leipzig debate he moved to have Rome declare Luther a heretic. Luther in turn decided to put his case before the German people by publishing a series of pamphlets. In his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*, the Reformer called on the princes to correct abuses within the church, to strip bishops and abbots of their wealth and worldly power, and to create, in effect, a national German Church.

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In his *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* Luther made clear how justification by faith reshaped his doctrine of the church. He argued that Rome's sacramental system held Christians "captive." He attacked the papacy for depriving the individual Christian of his freedom to approach God directly by faith, without the mediation of priests, and he set forth his own views of the sacraments. To be valid, he said, a sacrament had to be instituted by Christ and be exclusively Christian. By these tests Luther could find no justification for five of the Roman Catholic sacraments. He retained only Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and he placed even these within a community of believing Christians, rather than in the hands of an exclusive priesthood.

Thus, Luther brushed aside the traditional view of the church as a sacred hierarchy headed by the pope and returned to the early Christian view of a community of Christian believers in which all believers are priests called to offer spiritual sacrifices to God.

In his third pamphlet published in 1520, *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, Luther set forth in conciliatory but firm tones his views on Christian behavior and salvation. This is probably the best introduction available to his central ideas. He did not discourage good works but argued that the inner spiritual freedom that comes from the certainty found in faith leads to the performance of good works—by all true Christians. "Good works do not make a man good," he said, "but a good man does good works."

Thus, on the threshold of his excommunication from the Roman Church, Luther removed the necessity of monasticism by stressing that the essence of Christian living lies in serving God in one's calling whether secular or ecclesiastical. All useful callings, he said, are equally sacred in God's eyes.

Heretic, Outlaw, and Hero

In June 1520 Pope Leo X issued his bull condemning Luther and giving him 60 days to turn from his heretical course. The bonfire at Wittenberg made clear Luther's intent, so his excommunication followed. In January 1521 the pope declared him a heretic and expelled him from the "one holy, catholic and apostolic Church."

The German problem now fell into the hands of the young emperor, Charles V, who was under oath to defend the church and remove heresy from the empire. He summoned Luther to the imperial Diet (or assembly) meeting at Worms to give an account of his writings. Before the assembly Luther once again insisted that only biblical authority would sway him. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he told the court. "I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

Charles V was not impressed. He declared Luther an outlaw. "This devil in the habit of a monk," his pronouncement said, "has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle, and has invented new ones." Luther had 21 days for safe passage to Saxony before the sentence fell. It never came. Luther was saved from arrest and death by the prince of Saxony, Duke Frederick the Wise, whose domains included Wittenberg. The Duke gave Luther sanctuary at his lonely Wartburg Castle. Disguised as a minor nobleman, Junker George, the Reformer stayed for nearly a year; during the time he translated the New Testament into German, an important first step toward reshaping public and private worship in Germany.

Meanwhile, the revolt against Rome spread; in town after town, priests and town

councils removed statues from the churches and abandoned the Mass. New reformers, many of them far more radical than Luther, appeared on the scene. Most important, princes, dukes, and electors defied the condemnation of Luther by giving support to the new movement.

In 1522, Luther returned to Wittenberg to put into effect a spiritual reform that became the model for much of Germany. He abolished the office of bishop since he found no warrant for it in Scripture. The churches needed pastors not dignitaries. Most of the ministers in Saxony and surrounding territories abandoned celibacy. Monks and nuns also married. Luther himself took a wife in 1525, a former nun, Katherine von Bora. A new image of the ministry appeared in western Christianity—the married pastor living like any other man with his own family. “There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage,” Luther said later. “One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtales on the pillow which were not there before.”

Luther also revised the Latin liturgy and translated it into German. The laity received the Communion in bread and wine, as the Hussites had demanded a century earlier. And the whole emphasis in worship changed from the celebration of the sacrificial Mass to the preaching and teaching of God’s Word.

All, however, was not well in Germany. During 1524 Luther revealed how much he had surrendered in gaining the support of the German princes. Encouraged by the Reformer’s concept of the freedom of a Christian man, which they applied to economic and social spheres, the German peasants revolted against their lords. Long ground down by the nobles, the peasants included in their twelve demands abolition of serfdom—unless it could be justified from the

gospel—and relief from the excessive services demanded of them.

At first, Luther recognized the justice of the peasants’ complaints, but when they turned to violence against established authority, he lashed out against them. In a virulent pamphlet, *Against the Thievish and Murderous Hordes of Peasants*, Luther called on the princes to “knock down, strangle, and stab . . . and think nothing so venomous, pernicious, or Satanic as an insurgent.”

In 1525 the princes and nobles crushed the revolt at a cost of an estimated 100,000 peasant lives. The surviving peasants considered Luther a false prophet. Many of them returned to Catholicism or turned to more radical forms of the Reformation.

Luther’s conservative political and economic views arose from his belief that the equality of all men before God applied to spiritual not secular matters. While alienating the peasants, such views were a boon to alliances with the princes, many of whom became Lutheran in part because Luther’s views allowed them to control the church in their territories, thereby strengthening their power and wealth.

Luther’s Lasting Influence

By 1530, when a summit conference of Reformation leaders convened in Augsburg to draw up a common statement of faith, leadership of the movement had begun to pass out of Luther’s hands. The Reformer was still an outlaw and unable to attend. The task of presenting Lutheranism fell to a young professor of Greek at Wittenberg—Philip Melancthon. The young scholar drafted the Augsburg Confession signed by Lutheran princes and theologians, but the emperor was no more inclined to conciliation than he had been at Worms.

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After Augsburg Luther continued to preach and teach the Bible in Wittenberg, but even sympathetic biographers have found it hard to justify some of the actions of his declining years. As *Time* once put it, “He endorsed the bigamous marriage of his supporter, Prince Philip of Hesse. He denounced reformers who disagreed with him in terms that he had once reserved for the papacy. His statements about the Jews would sound excessive on the tongue of a Hitler.” By the time of his death in 1546, says biographer Roland Bainton, Luther was “an irascible old man, petulant, peevish, unrestrained, and at times positively coarse.”

Fortunately, the personal defects of an aging rebel do not in any way detract from the grandeur of his achievement, which ultimately transformed not only Christianity but all of Western civilization.

After 1530 the emperor, Charles V, made clear his intention to crush the growing heresy. In defense, the Lutheran princes banded together in 1531 in the Schmalkald League, and between 1546 and 1555 a sporadic civil war raged. The combatants reached a compromise in the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which allowed each prince to decide the religion of his subjects, forbade all sects of Protestantism other than Lutheranism, and ordered all Catholic bishops

to give up their property if they turned Lutheran.

The effects of these provisions on Germany were profound. Lutheranism became a state religion in large portions of the empire. From Germany it spread to Scandinavia. Religious opinions became the private property of the princes, and the individual had to believe what his prince wanted him to believe, be it Lutheran or Catholic.

Luther’s greatest contribution to history; however, was not political. It was religious. He took four basic Catholic concerns and offered invigorating new answers. To the question how is a person saved, Luther replied: not by works but by faith alone. To the question where does religious authority lie, he answered: not in the visible institution called the Roman church but in the Word of God found in the Bible. To the question—what is the church?—he responded: the whole community of Christian believers, since all are priests before God. And to the question—what is the essence of Christian living?—he replied: serving God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay. To this day any classical description of Protestantism must echo those central truths.



The Doctrine of Justification by Faith

by Alister McGrath

At the heart of the Christian faith lies the idea that human beings, finite and frail though they be, can enter into a relationship with the living God. As we have seen, this idea is articulated in a number of metaphors or images, such as “salvation” and “redemption,” initially in the writings of the New Testament (especially the Pauline letters) and subsequently in Christian theological reflection, based upon these texts. By the late Middle Ages, one image had come to be seen as especially significant: justification.

The term “justification” and the verb “to justify” came to signify “entering into a right relationship with God,” or perhaps “being made righteous in the sight of God.” The doctrine of justification came to be seen as dealing with the question of what an individual had to do in order to be saved. As contemporary sources indicate, this question came to be asked with increasing frequency as the sixteenth century dawned. The rise of humanism brought with it a new emphasis upon individual consciousness, and a new awareness of human individuality. In the wake of this dawn of the individual consciousness came a new interest in the doctrine of justification—the question of how human beings, *as individuals*, could enter into a relationship with God. How could a sinner hope to do this? This question lay at the heart of the theological concerns of Martin Luther, and came to dominate the early phase of the Reformation. In view of the importance of the doctrine to this period, we shall consider it in some detail, beginning with Luther’s discussion of the doctrine.

Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough

In 1545, the year before he died, Luther contributed a preface to the first volume of the complete edition of his Latin writings, in which he described how he came to break with the church of his day. The preface was clearly written with the aim of introducing Luther to a readership which may not know how Luther came to hold the radical reforming views linked with his name. In this “autobiographical fragment” (as it is usually known), Luther aimed to provide those readers with background information about the development of his vocation as a reformer. After dealing with some historical preliminaries, taking his narrative up to the year 1519, he turned to describe his personal difficulties with the problem of the “righteousness of God”:

I had certainly wanted to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans. But what prevented me from doing so was not so much cold feet as that one phrase in the first chapter: “the righteousness of God is revealed in it” (Romans 1:17). For I hated that phrase, “the righteousness of God,” which I had been taught to understand as the righteousness by which God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners. Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually hated him. . . I was in desperation

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to know what Paul meant in this passage. At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words “the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith,” I began to understand that “righteousness of God” as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God (faith); and this sentence, “the righteousness of God is revealed,” to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “the righteous person lives by faith.” This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light . . . And now, where I had once hated the phrase, “the righteousness of God,” I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me.

What is Luther talking about in this famous passage, which vibrates with the excitement of discovery? It is obvious that his understanding of the phrase “the righteousness of God” has changed radically. But what is the nature of this change?

The basic change is fundamental. Originally Luther regarded the precondition for justification as a human work, something which the sinner had to perform, before he or she could be justified. Increasingly convinced, through his reading of Augustine, that this was an impossibility, Luther could only interpret the “righteousness of God” as a *punishing* righteousness. But in this passage, he narrates how he discovered a “new” meaning of the phrase—a righteousness which God *gives* to the sinner. In other words, God himself meets the precondition, graciously giving sinners

what they require if they are to be justified. An analogy (not used by Luther) may help bring out the difference between these two approaches.

Let us suppose that you are in prison, and are offered your freedom on condition that you pay a heavy fine. The promise is real—so long as you can meet the precondition, the promise will be fulfilled. As we noted earlier, Pelagius works on the presupposition, initially shared by Luther, that you have the necessary money stacked away somewhere. As your freedom is worth far more, you are being offered a bargain. So you pay the fine. This presents no difficulties, so long as you have the necessary resources. Luther increasingly came to share the view of Augustine—that sinful humanity just doesn’t have the resources needed to meet this precondition. To go back to our analogy, Augustine and Luther work on the assumption that, as you don’t have the money, the promise of freedom has little relevance to your situation. For both Augustine and Luther, therefore, the good news of the gospel is that you have been *given* the necessary money with which to buy your freedom. In other words, the precondition has been met for you by someone else.

Luther’s insight, which he describes in this autobiographical passage, is that the God of the Christian gospel is not a harsh judge who rewards individuals according to their merits, but a merciful and gracious God who bestows righteousness upon sinners as a gift. The general consensus amongst Luther scholars is that his theology of justification underwent a decisive alteration at some point in 1515.

Luther on Justifying Faith

Central to Luther’s insights was the doctrine of “justification by faith alone.” The idea of “justification” is already familiar. But

what about the phrase “by faith alone”? What is the nature of justifying faith?

“The reason why some people do not understand why faith alone justifies is that they do not know what faith is.” In writing these words, Luther draws our attention to the need to inquire more closely concerning that deceptively simple word “faith.” Three points relating to Luther’s idea of faith may be singled out as having special importance to his doctrine of justification. Each of these points was taken up and developed by later writers, such as Calvin, indicating that Luther made a fundamental contribution to the development of Reformation thought at this point. These three points are:

- 1 Faith has a personal, rather than a purely historical, reference.
- 2 Faith concerns trust in the promises of God.
- 3 Faith unites the believer to Christ.

We shall consider each of these points individually.

1 First, faith is not simply historical knowledge. Luther argues that a faith which is content to believe in the historical reliability of the gospels is not a faith which justifies. Sinners are perfectly capable of trusting in the historical details of the gospels; but these facts of themselves are not adequate for true Christian faith. Saving faith involves believing and trusting that Christ was born *pro nobis*, born for us personally, and has accomplished for us the work of salvation.

2 Second, faith is to be understood as “trust” (*fiducia*). The notion of trust is prominent in the Reformation conception of

faith, as a nautical analogy used by Luther indicates. “Everything depends upon faith. The person who does not have faith is like someone who has to cross the sea, but is so frightened that he does not trust the ship. And so he stays where he is, and is never saved, because he will not get on board and cross over.” Faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and relying upon it. To use Luther’s analogy: Faith is not simply about believing that a ship exists—it is about stepping into it, and entrusting ourselves to it.

3 In the third place, faith unites the believer with Christ. Luther stated this principle clearly in his 1520 work, *The Liberty of a Christian*. Faith is not assent to an abstract set of doctrines, but is a union between Christ and the believer. It is the response of the whole person of the believer to God, which leads in turn to the real and personal presence of Christ in the believer. “To know Christ is to know his benefits,” wrote Philip Melancthon, Luther’s colleague at Wittenberg. Faith makes both Christ and his benefits—such as forgiveness, justification, and hope—available to the believer.

The doctrine of “justification by faith” thus does not mean that the sinner is justified because he or she believes, on account of that faith. This would be to treat faith as a human action or work. Luther insists that God provides everything necessary for justification, so that all that the sinner needs to do is to receive it. God is active, and humans are passive, in justification. The phrase “justification *by grace through faith*” brings out the meaning of the doctrine more clearly: The justification of the sinner is based upon the grace of God, and is received

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through faith. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is an affirmation that God does everything necessary for salvation. Even faith itself is a gift of God, rather than a human action. God himself meets the precondition for justification. Thus, as we saw, the “righteousness of God” is not a righteousness

which judges whether or not we have met the precondition for justification, but the righteousness which is given to us so that we may meet that precondition.



New Perspectives by Timothy Clark

Luther, Calvin, and other reformers answered ancient questions with new answers. They emphasized the central role of scripture in understanding God’s plan and the central role of faith in God’s grace as the way to become right with God. In addition, they reframed old assumptions about the church. This reading will attempt to highlight these issues.

Although Luther saw himself as an agent of change within the Roman church, his emphasis on the role of the Word of God redefined the word “church.” The church now became any congregation that preaches and follows the word of God. Ministers ordained by a formal structure would not be necessary to protect the church. Instead, preaching of the gospel would become the touchstone. “Where the word is, there is faith; and where faith is, there is the true church.” Despite this view, Luther had difficulty conceptualizing the body of Christ without an institutional church.

As the Reformation developed, other leaders began to redefine a more explicitly Protestant view of the church. In 1541 a conference that tried to find a compromise between Catholics and Protestants fell apart. In its wake, reformers like Calvin began to explicitly redefine the nature of the church. He looked to the scriptures to find a structure and administrative roles for this church. However, unlike the Roman Church, he argued that there is a clear distinction between the invisible church and the visible church. The invisible church is known only to God and is made of the elect. The visible church contains the community of believers on earth made up of both the good and evil. Of what importance is the church as an institution or building then? Calvin suggested that if God is the father of the true church, the visible church is the mother, God’s means to work out the salvation of the elect. As Alister McGrath suggests, for Calvin the marks of the true church were the preaching of the Word of God and right administration of the sacraments.

The church’s nature and function are defined by the phrase “One, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” **One**—Despite division in the visible church, it is united by one Christ, one baptism, and faith. **Holy**—Despite the failings of its members, it is set apart by a holy God. **Catholic**—Though spread across the earth and in multiple congregations, the church is a whole and is universal. **Apostolic**—Founded on the work and teaching of the apostles, the church is commissioned by Christ to preach the gospel and is a witness to the risen Lord.



Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. Why does religion sometimes lead to feelings of condemnation and insecurity? Can you relate a time in your life when you felt like Luther did before his dramatic conversion?
2. Based on your conversations with nonbelievers, what elements of the gospel do they misunderstand most frequently?
3. In light of Luther's message about the priority of scripture, what role does tradition and church history play in understanding God's truth? Does it help or hurt? Why?
4. Luther argued that faith was instrumental in justification. How much faith do you have to have? How do you have to demonstrate this? How long does this faith have to last?
5. If faith is essential for salvation, can I lose my salvation if my faith wavers? Why?
6. How are my deeds related to my faith? Can I continue to behave in a way that shows lack of submission to Christ yet be justified? Why?
7. Luther shook the church with his 95 theses. In what way does his doctrine of justification by faith defy almost all religious systems?
8. If we are saved by faith as individuals, do we need an organized church? Doesn't our focus on visible congregations just distract us from seeing God's true call?

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Step 6: Take Steps to Obey

1. As we have seen, God's initiative in reaching out to us in order to bring us salvation was fundamental to the theology of Luther and the Reformers. What are the implications of this focus on God's activity for your daily spiritual walk?

2. What daily steps can you take to remind yourself of your need for God's grace in order to grow as a Christian?

Issue Evaluation Form

Name: _____

Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:

Sound Bites and Case Studies (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

Study the Scriptures (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

Consult Other Sources (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

Discuss the Issue (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

Overall Impression of this Issue (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1 2 3 4 5

Corrections (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):