



**Martin Luther and the
Doctrine of Justification**

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Martin Luther and the Doctrine of Justification

In 1545, Martin Luther wrote the preface for the publication of his complete works in Latin. Therein, he included a biographical statement that included his recollection of the early events of the Reformation. This text revolved around Luther's description of how he came to the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Luther began with a description of the indulgence controversy initiated in 1517 with the publication of his *Ninety-Five Theses*. Describing himself as a young doctor of theology, Luther explained that he sought to convince people not to listen to indulgence preachers. He wrote to two archbishops, published the Theses and then published explanations of the Theses in 1518.¹

As a typical professor in late medieval Germany, Dr. Luther belonged to a religious order, the Observant Augustinians, which supplied professors to the university in Wittenberg. Additionally, in 1514 he became a regular preacher in the city church. His duties as a professor and preacher compelled Luther to study intently the Bible and the writings of significant Christian theologians.² Late medieval scholastic theologians taught that only faith formed by love expressed through good works merited eternal life. According to these theologians, God promised to reward good works performed in a natural state with an infusion of grace. Based upon his goodness, God made an agreement with humans

to accept the actions of those who do their best based on their own natural abilities. Once they have received this infusion of grace, then Christians could work with God's grace in order to become righteous before God.³

Although Martin Luther became famous because of the publication of the Ninety-Five Theses in November 1517, his scholarly activities had led him to a biblical understanding of justification by faith alone. From 1515 to 1518, Luther lectured on Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In these lectures, we see the emergence of the Reformation teaching on justification. Writing in 1545, Luther explained this process within the context of the events associated with the indulgence controversy. He wrote that his conscience oppressed him because he only understood the righteousness of God as that by which God punishes sinners. When Luther discerned the distinction between God's active righteousness and passive righteousness, he finally grasped the good news that God justifies sinners through faith in Christ.⁴

While Martin Luther had formulated the theology of justification from 1515 to 1519, he had not faced an ecclesiastical trial for his "false teaching." Political circumstances in Europe had distracted his theological enemies and the papacy from Luther's growing popularity. In 1520,

¹ Martin Luther, *Preface to His Complete Latin Writings*, AE 34:327–36.

² AE 34:329; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation*, 1483–1521, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 125–27 (receiving the doctorate), 150–51 (preacher); James M. Kittelson, *Luther: The Reformer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 83–86.

³ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 233–34. Philip Melancthon explained the scholastic understanding of justification in *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Art. IV.9–20. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 121–24.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Preface to His Complete Latin Writings*, AE 34:337; Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 48–54.

however, Pope Leo X condemned many of Luther's teachings and threatened him with excommunication. During that year, Luther wrote against papal authority and called upon the German princes to reform their own territories. Additionally, he explained the proper relationship between justification by faith in Christ and the daily life of the Christian. In *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther described the origin and nature of faith in Christ and its effects on the believer. First, the Word of God saves those who receive it by faith alone that justifies the sinner before God. Then, true faith in the Gospel liberates the Christian from seeking after outwardly pious acts in order to earn divine favor.⁵

In 1521, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, summoned Martin Luther to testify before the imperial Diet of Worms. On April 18, he gave his famous speech before this gathering in which he refused to recant his writings and affirmed his teaching of justification before God by faith alone. During his journey to Worms, he preached at Erfurt on the first Sunday after Easter. In this sermon, he emphasized the significance of Christ's redemptive act through his death and resurrection. Clearly, he wanted to emphasize faith in Christ as the means by which God grants his righteousness to sinners when he proclaimed:

Our Lord Christ says: I am your justification. I have destroyed the sins you have upon you. Therefore, only believe in me; believe that I am he who has done this; then you will be justified ... righteousness is identical with faith and comes through faith.⁶

In the same sermon, Luther repeated his refutation of the scholastic teaching of justification and emphasized that true good works follow faith. When Martin Luther departed from Worms as a condemned heretic (a crime in the sixteenth century), his future seemed quite precarious. However, Dr. Luther had articulated his teaching on justification by faith in Christ clearly before the most powerful secular rulers and church officials of his time.

During the following years, Luther and his theological colleagues began a reformation of their doctrine and practice within the church and society. However, their central message rested on the teaching on justification.⁷ In 1531, Luther lectured on Galatians again. Four years later his

students' notes were published as a commentary. This text explained the Lutheran teaching on justification more thoroughly than any previous material. In the preface for this publication, Luther wrote, "For in my heart there rules this one doctrine, namely, faith in Christ. From it, through it, and to it all my theological thought flows and returns, day and night."⁸ He explained that justification meant that God redeemed human beings from sin, death and the devil, and granted them eternal life through Jesus Christ without any human action.

In another section of this commentary, Luther explained, "The doctrine of justification is ... that we are pronounced righteous and are saved solely by faith in Christ, and without works."⁹ Here Luther followed St Paul's use of juridical language to clarify how God redeems sinners through Jesus Christ. While a human judge declares someone innocent or guilty based on that person's actions, God declares sinners innocent because of Christ's work on the cross. Therefore, sinners must always look outside themselves to God's external Word of forgiveness. Sinners become Christians by listening to the Gospel and trusting the message, not by doing good works. Having received God's Word by faith, then Christians begin to live differently. As Luther wrote, "For true righteousness does not come through the works of the Law; it comes through hearing with faith, which is followed by the powerful deeds and fruits of the Spirit."¹⁰

Faith justifies the ungodly because it turns away from the sinful self and gives God the glory for his righteousness and mercy in Christ. Receiving God's Word by faith is the supreme form of worship. According to fleshly reason, this is impossible. It seems absurd to believe God would forgive sinners through words without any human action. The self-righteous seek to earn God's favor through religious activity. They try to please God through self-chosen works because they do not believe His Word. In this way, they steal God's majesty and replace it with their own actions. Believers, like Abraham, trust in God's promises, even though weakness remains in their flesh. Given that Christians remain sinners in this life, they must continually hear the doctrine of justification. They must hear or read God's Word often, especially St Paul's letters, in order to continue to understand the paradoxical nature of justification. It is God's Word declared in Christ, but the sinner/

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, AE 31:343–47; Kittelson, *Luther*, 145–57.

⁶ Luther, *Sermons at Leipzig and Erfurt*, AE 51:63.

⁷ The following section follows in part Roland Ziegler, "Luther and Justification," *For the Life of the World* 8:1 (2004): 4–5.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), AE 27:145.

⁹ AE 26:223.

¹⁰ AE 26:226.

saint must continue to hear it until the Last Day or death. God does not count their sins against them and considers them just. “Therefore,” Luther concluded, “this is a marvelous definition of Christian righteousness: it is a divine imputation or reckoning as righteousness or to righteousness, for the sake of our faith in Christ or for the sake of Christ.”¹¹

When Luther wrote the preface to the publication of his Latin writings in 1545, he did not know his own death would take place within a year. However, his health had deteriorated sufficiently by that time so that his life was nearing its end. When he recorded his thoughts on the events that had instigated the Reformation, he focused on the doctrine of justification. He explained that his constant meditation on God’s Word, particularly Rom. 1:17, led him to understand how God forgives sins and justifies sinners. Through diligent study, Luther realized that God gives sinners his righteousness graciously by faith. Thereby, the Gospel does reveal the righteousness of God for sinners. This passive righteousness by which God justifies sinners by faith inspired Luther to write, “Hence I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”¹²

¹¹ AE 26:233.

¹² Martin Luther, *Preface to His Complete Latin Writings*, AE 34:336–38.

