

LUTHER 500

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Sola Fide

Luther had tried for so long to *appease* a “Christ” he’d been taught to *dread* as his final Judge who’d send him to Hell. Sensing that *he’d never been able to appease this “Christ” and never would be able to appease this “Christ”*, he felt *excruciating frustration and anxiety*. It was no wonder that he was *angry with this “Christ”*.

But *finally*, in his relentlessly searching of Scripture *detached* from all of the distracting encrustations of the dogma of *medieval* Rome, Luther found the original *Good News* in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul cites the prophet Habakkuk and he writes: “In the Good News, a *righteousness from God* is revealed, a righteousness that is *by faith from first to last*, as it is written, ‘The *righteous will live by faith*.’” (Rom 1:17; Hab 2:4)

Suddenly, *Christ’s crucifixion in the place of sinners, for their salvation, made sense*. Luther’s *excruciating* fears, frustration and despair were *mercifully lifted* in this profound biblical revelation.

That 16th-century term, “excruciating”, was from the Latin word for the *cross* where Christ experienced the *excruciating* ordeal of *sacrificial atonement* for our sins. These Scriptures revealed that, *by faith*, there was *freedom* in God’s *free grace for all in Christ’s liberating us on the cross*. Luther learned to *trust* in the *crucified* Truth Himself, Christ in his battered body, and in the *risen* Truth Himself, Christ in his resurrected body. *This was the Christ he’d feared?* Oh, no. This was the Christ he’d come to know and to love.

To Luther, this was *the most radical and reviving revelation* of his life. Yet this Good News of Christ’s redeeming work on the cross had been there in the Scriptures all along. Crucifixes were ubiquitous in the cathedrals, cloisters and chapels and even on the walls of peasants’ houses. People wore them round their necks and, for some three centuries, they’d fingered them with the beads of their rosaries. Innumerable relics of the so-called “true cross” were the focus of pilgrimages across Christendom. But the *true meaning* of *Christ’s cross* never had crossed Luther’s mind. Now, from Scripture, he couldn’t get the true meaning of Christ’s cross out of his mind. By God’s grace, he never would, and never did.

A woman the religious leaders *deplored* as one to be shunned was bending over Jesus’ feet, showing her gratitude, and Jesus said to her: “*Shalom! Your faith has saved you, go in peace.*” (Luke 7:50) John, the Baptist, had said, of Jesus: “Whoever *trusts* in the Son *has* eternal life.” (John 3:36) John, the Apostle, recorded so famously that, “God so loved the world that He *gave* His only Son, that whoever *trusts* in Him shall *not* perish, but have eternal *life.*” (John 3:16) Writing to Ephesian Christians, Paul said: “By God’s grace *you have been saved through faith*, not by your *works*, but by God’s *gift.*” (Eph 2:8f) He told Corinthian Christians: “Since, in *God’s* wisdom, the world through *its* wisdom did *not* come to know God, God was pleased, through the foolishness of the message preached, to save *all* who *believe.*” (I Cor 1:21) And Luke, in his historical accounts of the earliest Christians, notes what they preached: “*Trust* in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your whole household.” (Acts 16:31)

According to the Scripture, sinners are *justified by faith alone – by trusting in Christ alone –* not by counting on their futile efforts at *self-righteousness*, trying to put God in *their* debt! They’re *already in debt* to God. But Jesus paid their debt.

Finally, Luther was freed from bondage to corrupt dogmas of the medieval ecclesiastical establishment and from all of his own counter-productive efforts to *be righteous* by his own merits.

How had this monk and professor never learned *this biblical truth*? Had he never read the Gospels or Paul's letters? He'd read them. But he'd read them *through the smoke and thick fog* of a medieval religious mindset. So, he hadn't *caught* their *original* meaning. Distracting influences of his era's presuppositions and preoccupations got in his way – just as *our* era's presuppositions and preoccupations can get in *our* way.

But Luther was now freed, in the fresh air of his receptivity to Scripture, to read what Paul wrote to Romans in the 1st century: “No one will be declared *righteous* in God's sight by *keeping the Law*, though it's in the Law that we become *aware* of our sin.” (Rom 3:20) Now, Luther read Paul's *explanation of this*: “A *righteousness from God, apart from the Law*, has now been revealed, to which both the Law and the Prophets testify.” (Rom 3:21) And Paul clarified: “*Righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who trust in him. ... For, although all have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God, all are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” Paul went on to say that, “God presented *him* [i.e., Christ Jesus] as a *sacrifice of atonement*, through *faith* in Jesus' blood. And *God did this*”, said Paul, “to demonstrate His *justice* ... *God did it to be just* and the One who *justifies* those who *trust in Jesus*. So”, Paul asked, rhetorically, “Where in any of this is there any basis for boasting? Boasting is excluded. Excluded on what principle? On keeping the Law? *No! On faith!* For we proclaim that a person is justified *by faith* and *apart* from keeping the Law.” (Rom 3:28)

Paul asked: “Is God the God of Jews *only*? Isn't God also God of the *Gentiles*? *Yes*, of Gentiles, too, since there's *only one God*. Therefore, God will justify the circumcised *by faith* and God will justify the uncircumcised *by faith*.” (Rom 3:21-30)

Luther had missed this – as Paul, himself, had missed it for years – just as *all of us can easily miss it* in *this world* where we're so conditioned to what we've heard or been taught or simply assumed for so long. In this world's prideful ways, we want to look for credit in ourselves and blame everyone else, but that's not where to look for salvation from sin and death that runs so deep within us.

We all *do* miss, *have* missed and *will* miss again what's right in front of us, when we're not *prepared* to see it, when, indeed, we're prepared *not* to see it, and when, for whatever *our* reason, we *don't want* to see it and even do all we can to *resist* seeing it. Still, we're *haunted*, having not found what we're looking for, or having lost what we once believed. It's found in the Christ of the cross – by trust in Him, by faith.

If you've ever seen your way clear to *changing* your mind after gaining *clearer* understanding of something, be *grateful* for the *humility* to have been able to follow that *new insight* and *evidence*, and pray that you may always change your mind *whenever God's grace comes calling*.

Refusing to do so is the *arrogance* that John, in a letter, called, “the pride of life”. (I John 2:16) It's a foolish *self-righteous, self-reliant* wish to have been *right* all along, in spite of the clear *need to change* your mind for the sake of *your* own welfare, not to mention the welfare of *others*.

One reads, hears or sees something one's read, heard or seen *many* times before. But, given one's only *apparent* or *superficial* familiarity with words and sentences, one's prone to *misread, mishear, mistake* and *misjudge what's written, what's said, even what's demonstrated experientially*, because of all we've *already* and all too *readily* told ourselves it “means”,

“meant”, or *needs* to “mean” – even if it *doesn't mean that*, never *did mean that* and never *will mean that*.

See, we all have a *self-centered bent* to believe what we *suppose* we *need* to believe or disbelieve, what we *suppose* we can't *afford* to believe. That old habit is now called the irrationality of “confirmation bias”. But what if we can't *afford not* to believe in God's deepest love for us all in the Christ of the cross? As with all such assumed needs for things to mean what we've already decided they *must* mean, even without being open to anything otherwise, we're *warped* so far as concerns *the eternal truth* we need to hear.

Have you, *yourself*, ever heard, read or seen something *yet again*, but *now* it's as though it's for the *very first* time? That's because we lull ourselves into accustomed assumptions and *self-serving self-assurance*. So, we're unaware that we've blown it yet again by thinking we'd *already* “gotten” it. Habituated to such foolishness along with our desperate desire to *be right*, regardless of whether or not we *are right or wrong*, we *don't get* that we *never got* it.

But the situation goes *deeper* when we move from the seemingly everyday missing of meanings to the infinitely more significant *spiritual* missing of meanings that have to do with God's dealings with us and our resistance to God's dealings with us.

It's at this deeper, *spiritual* level that I well recall Dr. Boyd's earnest frustration in several of his last sermons at City Church when he'd ask: “Do you yet not get it?” As it was City Church, he didn't expect shout-outs of, “Amen, preacher!” But I related to how he felt. I preached there, too. After worship, at coffee hour, the feedback was so often so oblivious to the Good News of the Gospel that had been presented in Scripture, hymns, sermon and prayers. Typically, much of it was mere small talk or indifference or even belligerence. At least the belligerence may have shown an awareness of the Gospel that had been presented, but rejected.

Jesus spoke of ears *to hear*, of eyes *to see*, minds and hearts *open* to God's grace in him who is, himself, God's Good News of grace. And, indeed, many ears, eyes, hearts, and minds have been *closed against* Christ. I sometimes pass a church building draped with a banner that announces they're “Open Minded”. Not to the Gospel!

But, what of God's Gospel may we not yet be open to, being so used to mere *words about* the Gospel that we neglect to *trust alone in the Christ* of the Gospel, the *Living Word* of the Gospel. We may, by *rote*, finish Paul's sentences *about* faith, and neglect to respond to *what Paul wrote*: “The righteous shall live *by faith*”. (Rom 1:17)

What *assumptions* do we bring to the text? *Assumptions influence interpretations*. And our *most basic* assumptions are those we're *least* aware of, given the fact that they *are* our *most basic* assumptions – what we simply take for granted, have always taken for granted, and without realizing that they *are assumptions*.

And, what *expectations* do we have for what we'll *find* in some text that we assume we already know? Explicit expectations do interfere with our finding what we *don't expect* to find. What *bias* do we *want to confirm* in this or that text? It's our bias, you know, that “confirms” our *finding* what we think we *need* to find. So, we assume we “*find*” it there. But, *our bias put* it there.

Given all that can *interfere* with a more accurate understanding of *any* text – and that includes our ignorance of history and other cultures as well as our being too acclimated to our own time and place, socially, economically, religiously, psychologically, et al. – one must be honest and open to be *teachable*.

But if the text purports to be the very Word of God, and is, indeed, the very Word of God, and we take it to be the very Word of God, our reasonable responsibility is honest and humble *due diligence* under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

God's gracious gift to Luther illuminated and liberated him from having to read God's words as he'd habitually read them. He was freed to read God's words *afresh*. Those formerly all too seemingly "familiar" and all too *falsely* interpreted words of *faith* and *trust* that he'd never read aright now brought the most reviving revelation of his life: *Life!*

Thereafter, Luther wrote boldly: "Faith is the 'yes' of the heart, a conviction on which one stakes one's life. On what does faith rest?" then, he asked. "On Christ!" was his answer from *Scripture*. He explained: "I say 'yes' with full confidence of heart. Christ came for my sake, in order to free me from the Law, not only from the *guilt* of sin but also from the *power* of the Law. If you are able to say 'yes' to this, you have what is called faith, and this faith does everything", said Luther. And, he said, "This faith does not grow by our own powers. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit of God is present and writes it in the heart."

Three years after he'd posted his protest at Wittenberg, Luther cautioned against a common misunderstanding of *justification by faith alone*. Here's what he wrote: "Do not think lightly of *faith*. It is a work that is, of all works, the most excellent *as well as the most difficult*. Through faith alone you will be saved, even though you were obliged to do without all other works. For, as Paul says, it is the work of God, not of man. (Eph 1:19) There are other works that God does with *cooperation from us*, but this [gift of faith] alone, *God works within us, without our cooperation*."

To those who attacked him for turning people away from their rigorous religious routines to what was *caricatured* as a superficial assent, an "easy believe-ism" as it's been derided, Luther replied: "To be sure, faith seems to be an easy matter; but in reality it's difficult. Temptation and experience teach that *clinging to God's Word* so that the heart is unafraid of sins and death but trusts God, is *far more difficult* than *observing all the religious rules* of monastic orders. We can easily put on a cowl, let the hair be cut off, mumble, pray and fast. ... But these cannot turn the heart around and *rely* on God's Word in the agony of death so that one does not fear death but rejoices when it comes."

Those *works of religiosity* that Luther had so painfully found to be so *empty* of any good results, his self-righteous critics claimed were demanded of all. No wonder! *Works of religiosity* are *easy*, for they seem to put control of one's spiritual destiny in one's own hand. But trusting in oneself does not verify one's trustworthiness to the task at hand. That was the fatal mistake that Adam made.

Folks may try to appear to themselves and to others as measuring up. But they're painfully aware that they're not measuring up, else why all the endless effort to convince *themselves* and *others* that they *do* measure up? Boasting is itself, evidence that the boaster believes *he is nothing to boast about*.

This is why *humanly devised* religions, schemes to try to control the gods by rituals of religiosity, don't do it. It's why it's readily apparent that the Gospel of *grace* alone and by *faith* alone, *alone* among "religions" originates *Outside* of all of the self-righteous posturing *inside* sinful humanity.

And, what of good works in all of this about *faith alone*? In Luther's Preface to his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther said that faith "does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, already has done them, and continues to do them." How so? It's in the freedom of gratitude!

In 1520, Luther distinguished between two ways of believing. “In the first place, there’s believing what is true *about* God.” He called this “knowledge” or “information”. It’s there in Scripture. “Secondly”, he said, “there is faith *in* God. ... This faith is *mine* when I not only *hold* what is said *about* God to be true, but put *my trust* in Him.”

So, Luther wrote, by faith in Christ: “As long as I live ... I should be able to say: *Nevertheless* I have forgiveness of sins.” *Christian faith*, as Christians have learned throughout the ages, is *faith* that knows the *nevertheless* of persecution as well as the *nevertheless* of our continuing sins.

Under all such trying circumstances, Christians, *by faith*, are always under the Blood of the Lamb that affirms forgiveness.

Said Luther: “When I feel my sins most painfully, when they bite, hound, and frighten me most severely, I look at Christ and trust even unsteadily in Him, but nevertheless hold to Him, and say: I know that Thou hast said: He who trusts in Me shall have eternal life. So, though my conscience burdens me, and my sin frightens me, and my heart makes me tremble, nevertheless the words are true: ‘Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee’.” (Matt 9:2) Luther said: “It was not for the sake of *our* faith but for Christ’s sake, that faith and salvation are *given* to us.” So, he knew such faith to be a “living, daring confidence in God’s grace”.

As Christ is true and trustworthy, Luther could afford to move boldly ahead in gratitude into his life of Christian *discipleship, rightly relating faith and works*. As he summed it up: “Give God your faith, give your neighbor your works.” Trusting in Christ alone, freed Luther and all of us, “to use our works for the good of our neighbor.” Said Luther: “Think of nothing more than treating your neighbor as Christ treats you, and let all your works, along with your entire life, be directed to the good of your neighbor.”

Thus it was, that Luther biblically integrated his *faith* and *good works* in the one and only way *possible*, in the one and only way *useful*. *Freed* in Christ he was free to *follow* Christ. Amen.