

## Justification by Faith

*Martin Luther*

The early leader of the Reformation was Martin Luther (1483–1546). Born in Germany to a wealthy peasant family, Luther became an Augustinian monk and a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. While at this post in 1517, he became involved in the indulgence problem with Tetzel and issued rather academic challenges in his ninety-five theses. News of this act quickly spread, and a major controversy developed. Although originally intending to stimulate only modest reforms within the Catholic Church, Luther soon found himself espousing doctrines markedly differing from those authorized by the Church and taking actions that eventually resulted in his expulsion from the Church.

Luther himself attributed his spiritual evolution to certain crucial experiences. The most important of these was his first formulation of the doctrine of “justification by faith,” which constituted the core of his beliefs and much of the basis for Protestantism. In the following excerpts from his autobiographical writings, Luther describes this experience.

CONSIDER: What Luther meant by “justification by faith”; why this doctrine might have been so appealing to many Catholics; why this doctrine might have been threatening to the Catholic Church.

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered 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. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to be inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven. . . .

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see Him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face.

## On the Bondage of the Will

*Martin Luther*

A central distinction between Luther’s views and those of Catholicism concerned the power of free will and good works to effect salvation. According to Catholicism, people had the ability to contribute to their own salvation by choosing to engage in good deeds, pious acts, approved behavior, and so forth. Luther rejected this, arguing that people were powerless to effect their own salvation, that salvation was granted only by God out of his mercy. The following is an excerpt from Luther’s On the Bondage of the Will, written in 1520 in response to a defense of free will and good works by the famous Christian humanist Erasmus.

CONSIDER: How Luther’s arguments here follow from his ideas about justification by faith; the characteristics of God in Luther’s eyes.

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want ‘free-will’ to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my ‘free-will’ (for one devil is stronger than all men, and on these terms no man could be saved); but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether He required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt. But now that God has taken my salvation out of

the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. 'No one,' He says, 'shall pluck them out of my hand, because my Father which gave them me is greater than all' (John 10.28-29). Thus it is that, if not all, yet some, indeed many, are saved; whereas, by the power of 'free-will' none at all could be saved, but every one of us would perish.

Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favour promised to me; so that, if I work too little, or badly, He does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God.

## Institutes of the Christian Religion: Predestination

John Calvin

*Lutheranism was the dominant movement of the first decades of the Reformation. But by mid-century it had lost much of its dynamism and remained confined primarily to major portions of Germany and Scandinavia. Leadership of the expanding Protestant movement in other parts of Europe fell to John Calvin (1509-1564). Born in France and trained as a lawyer and Classical scholar in French universities, Calvin had an important religious experience and adopted many of Luther's doctrines. Because of his views, he fled France for Geneva in the 1530s, eventually establishing a theocratic government there in the 1540s. While agreeing with most of the doctrines of Lutheranism, Calvin stressed the notion of predestination. This is illustrated in the following excerpt*

SOURCE: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. II, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh, Great Britain: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), pp. 529, 534, 540.

from the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), Calvin's rigorously logical masterpiece, which systematically establishes and explains the Calvinist Christian theology. Here, he stresses the importance of justification by faith and calling—striving to live a good life doing that which one has been called upon by God to do—as evidence that one has already been elected by God for salvation.

CONSIDER: How Calvinism avoids the danger of passivity and resignation that might be implied in this conception of predestination; how these views compare with Luther's views on free will and good works; why this doctrine would be threatening to Catholicism.

The covenant of life is not preached equally to all, and among those to whom it is preached, does not always meet with the same reception. This diversity displays the unsearchable depth of the divine judgment, and is without doubt subordinate to God's purpose of eternal election. But if it is plainly owing to the mere pleasure of God that salvation is spontaneously offered to some, while others have no access to it, great and difficult questions immediately arise, questions which are inexplicable, when just views are not entertained concerning election and predestination. . . .

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death. . . .

We say, then, that Scripture clearly proves this much, that God by his eternal and immutable counsel determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction. We maintain that this counsel, as regards the elect, is founded on his free mercy, without any respect to human worth, while those whom he dooms to destruction are excluded from access to life by a just and blameless, but at the same time incomprehensible judgment. In regard to the elect, we regard calling as the evidence of election, and justification as another symbol of its manifestation, until it is fully accomplished by the attainment of glory. But as the Lord seals his elect by calling and justification, so by excluding the reprobate either from the knowledge of his name or the sanctification of his Spirit, he by these marks in a manner discloses the judgment which awaits them. I will here omit many of the fictions which foolish men have devised to overthrow predestination. There is no need of refuting objections which the moment they are produced abundantly betray their

hollowness. I will dwell only on those points which either form the subject of dispute among the learned, or may occasion any difficulty to the simple, or may be employed by impiety as specious pretexts for assailing the justice of God.