

Faith for 500 Years

For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:28 NIV)

On 31st October 1517 a German monk named Martin Luther nailed a document of 95 theses or short theological statements, to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in Germany. This act was the start of what became called the Reformation, when the good news of Jesus, which had been buried in the medieval Roman Catholic church, was rediscovered leading to the formation of the protestant or reformed churches (including the Church of England). This year we celebrate 500 years since that critical event.

Perhaps the most important of Luther's theological rediscoveries was the truth of *justification by faith alone*, which we see expressed very clearly in Paul's letter to the Roman churches. For Luther this was

"the article with and by which the church stands, without which it falls"

So what is it and why does it matter so much?

To understand justification you need to imagine yourself as a defendant in a court of law awaiting your verdict. In our courts we would expect to be found "guilty" or "not-guilty," but this law court has a more positive verdict than "not-guilty," which is to declare someone just or righteous, i.e. it is not just that you haven't done wrong, but also that you have done right. In God's law court we desperately want to be justified or declared righteous, otherwise we will face his just judgement of hell.

However, Paul writes:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23 NIV)

We know Paul is right. Each of our consciences stands in the witness box along with Bible passages like the 10 Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount confirming for us that we are indeed not righteous, but sinners. By nature we break God's law. This means that before God, on our own terms, there is no way we will get that verdict of righteous or just. That leaves us with the very serious question of: how then can we be justified and not face God's sentence because of our sin?

The most common approach of religion is to self-justify by trying harder to be good. In much of the Judaism of Paul's time this was an issue of doing "works of the law," i.e. be a good Jew, get circumcised, do the sacrifices, keep yourself pure and so on. It's the sort of thing you see the Pharisees promoting in the gospels. In modern terms it's the kind of thing we do when we "try to be a good person" - giving to charity, being nice to people whenever we can, speaking up for justice and so on.

The problem is that it doesn't work, which is something that Martin Luther found out very powerfully in his own experience. In the end, the problem with the method of being good is that to be found "not-guilty" we have to keep all of the law, all of the time and never commit a sin (Galatians 3:10; 5:3), which is impossible for sinners like us.

Thankfully, God provided an answer that does work. The righteousness of God is made available to us through Jesus death on the cross. At the cross, Jesus takes on our sin and experiences the punishment that our sin deserves as our substitute (Romans 3:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). With our sin dealt with though, we are not just given the verdict "not-guilty," but we are in fact given the verdict "righteous", because God gives us Jesus' righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:21-24). It's not that we suddenly act in sinless and righteous ways (you may have noticed that you don't!), but in God's court, Jesus righteousness is credited to us.

So we've considered the "justification" bit, what about the "by faith alone" bit? The key issue here is that this justification is a gift that we receive by faith and not something we earn by doing good things. So Paul writes:

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. (Romans 4:4-5 NIV)

So we receive justification as we put our faith in Jesus, which means coming to him open-handed to receive a gift. This is justification by faith, but we must also emphasize the *alone* aspect. So often people want to bring works of the law in through the backdoor. So in Paul's day the false message going around was: "you will be declared righteous by trusting in and Jesus *and* by being circumcised" for example. In the Roman Catholic church, it might be someone saying "you will be justified if you trust Jesus *and* attend mass and confession." The rediscovery of the Bible's message by Luther and others was that there could never be an *and* to faith in Jesus. It was only faith in Jesus that justified you.

This is a tremendous truth. For Martin Luther it changed him from a man crippled by his inability to deal with his sin, to a man who trusted Jesus had dealt with his sin at the cross and so a man who was confident that he was righteous in Christ before God. With that message he turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6 ESV) once again.

In our 21st century world, where people seem to turn to everything from denial, to counselling and medication, to alcohol and drugs to shield themselves from the truth their consciences speak about their guilt before God, we should remember Martin Luther's 500-year-old rediscovery of the justification by faith alone. In fact we should do more than remember it, we should proclaim it with renewed courage and passion just as Luther did 500 before us.

In our Bible studies over the next few weeks we're going to be looking at some of the great truths and great characters of the Reformation as a way of rediscovering the wonderful news of Jesus Christ for ourselves, as well as having two film nights watching the stories of two of those characters.

Stephen