

SO YOU THINK YOU'RE SAVED!

The "Justified-by-Faith-Only" Theory

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We have all met the good and sincere religious enthusiast who is ready to inform everyone willing to listen that he is “only a sinner saved by grace.” He is a believer in “justification by faith alone.” Given the opportunity, he would probably go on to say that he believes in “full, free and present salvation;” full salvation, because Christ has done all on his behalf; free salvation, because he need not, and in fact cannot do anything of himself towards it; present salvation, because he is already saved.

True, he is still a ‘sinner’; nothing can alter that. But provided he has faith in the sense of trust in Christ, he is in God’s grace; not that there is any reality called grace within his soul—in that sense he is a “graceless” being still—but because God looks upon him with “favour” where before he had been the object of God’s “disfavour.” The change is solely in God’s disposition towards him because he has complied with the condition: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” Acts 16:31.

BASIC PROTESTANT THEORY

Religious enthusiasts who speak in such a way are staking all on the one single doctrine which, more than any other, accounts for the separation of millions of professing Christians throughout the world from the Catholic Church.

Ultimately, all other differences in teaching or worship or discipline can be traced back to this one particular belief, the Protestant theory of justification by faith alone.

Not without reason, therefore, did the film in the early 1950’s, “Martin Luther,” introduce as one of its dramatic highlights the scene where Luther wrote with a flourish in the margin of his New Testament, and underscored with grim determination, the famous word “SOLAM,” meaning “alone,” opposite the text from Romans 3:28, “For we account a man to be justified by faith.” St. Paul wrote, according to the Latin text, “*justificari hominem per fidem*, not “*per fidem solam*”; but Dr. Martin Luther, having added the word “solam,” said he would have it so, and thus laid the foundation of the Protestant tradition which still survives after four centuries, but about which ever-increasing numbers of those committed to it are becoming unhappy.

There is no room for doubt that the central core of the message given to the world by the Protestant reformation is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Thus the Report of the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 declared that the deepest cleavage between Christians is “a whole corporate tradition of the understanding of Christian faith and life. We may illustrate this by saying that the emphasis usually called ‘Catholic’ contains a primary insistence upon the visible continuity of the Church in the apostolic succession of the episcopate. The one usually called ‘Protestant’ primarily emphasizes the initiative of the Word of God and the response of faith, focused in the doctrine of justification *sola fide* (by faith alone).

It is true that among many modern Protestant theologians there is a move towards a recovery of the Catholic outlook. Hence the publication of such books as “The Catholicity of Protestantism,” edited by the Rev. Dr. Newton Flew. But such theologians constitute only a minority voice among Protestants generally, the vast majority of whom lag far behind their leaders and take for granted their inherited tradition, absorbed by the one idea of justification by faith alone and making it almost the whole of their religion.

For their sakes an examination of this basic Protestant Doctrine is still necessary. But it will not be an easy task. The problem is a subtle and complicated one, of its very nature. All that can be promised is that every effort will be made to reduce things to the simplest terms in order to meet popular needs; talking the language of ordinary people, not that of advanced theologians who do not—yet, at least—represent the thinking of the rank and file among the adherents of their respective Churches.

MARTIN LUTHER’S DISCOVERY

To gain any worth-while understanding of this subject, it is necessary to have at least a working knowledge of its historical setting; and that leads to the hero of the film already mentioned, Martin Luther. There will be no room for more than the barest outline of his career. Our interest in this present booklet is not so much in his person as in the one basic teaching which led to all else in his new religion.

Martin Luther was born in 1483, entered an Augustinian Monastery in 1505, was ordained a priest in 1507, and engaged in teaching biblical theology from 1512 till 1517, lecturing chiefly on the Epistles of St. Paul.

A crisis in his life had begun to develop almost from the very commencement of his monastic life. Highly-strung, a prey to constant fears and scruples, he sought peace of mind in severe penances and other ascetical practices, although these alternated with periods of complete laxity which plunged him into still deeper anxiety and despair. He wanted at all costs to “feel good,” and he “felt bad.” At first he had no particular intellectual difficulties about the Catholic religion. His crisis arose out of a practical emotional need. And it was in 1508 that he first glimpsed what he persuaded himself might well be the solution of all his troubles. He read, in Romans 1:16-17, St. Paul’s words: “The Gospel of Christ... is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth... for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

The thought came to him that St. Paul meant nothing less than that the righteousness of God could be made our own simply by trusting in the righteousness of Christ; and that he had been wasting his time and his efforts in trying to do for himself what Christ had already done for him. A feeling of immense relief swept over him. He felt that he was saved, and that he could be saved in no other way than this.

When he began to teach theology, in 1512, he put forward his theory of justification by faith alone, of God’s forgiving love freely bestowed upon all who simply repent of their sins and trust in Christ. He convinced himself that that was the true faith of the Catholic Church; and he tried to combine his new-found doctrine with all other and normal teachings of Catholic theology.

Gradually, however, Luther encountered opposition to his new theory of justification by faith alone. On October 31, 1517, he published his 95 Theses on Indulgences, declaring that they destroyed the true spirit of repentance. Called to account, he refused to recant his views unless refuted by biblical evidence itself, refusing to accept the authority and traditional teachings of the Church as reliable sources of doctrine.

In 1520, he definitely broke with the Catholic Church, substituting for its authority that of the Bible as interpreted by each reader for himself. In a book, “The Liberty of a Christian Man,” he issued his proclamation that men are justified by faith alone, and that every Christian is his own priest, having direct access to God and needing neither a visible Church nor the mediation of any other priest. He translated the Bible into German so that people could read it for themselves; (Luther’s Bible was not the first German Bible) and, supported by some powerful German princes, he became the acknowledged leader of the Protestant reformation on the Continent of Europe.

There are innumerable aspects of this subject, whether bearing on the personal character and experiences of Martin Luther himself, upon the conditions prevailing among the clergy and laity of the Catholic Church at the time, and upon the political circumstances favourable to the propagation of the new religion. But with those we are not here concerned. The origin and development of the one new doctrine which led up to all else that went to the making of the Protestant outlook as contrasted with that of the Catholic Church provide us with the vital question we have to solve. Was Luther right in his interpretation of Romans 1:16-17, an interpretation which has had such tremendous consequences in the lives of so many millions of people during the past four centuries?

IDEA OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

All centres here upon the nature of the righteousness, justice or goodness to which man can attain, and upon the nature of the faith required in order to do so. Let us take first, therefore, the question of righteousness.

The Catholic Church teaches that at baptism (Jn. 3:5) the soul passes from a state of original or inherited sin to a state of grace (Rom. 6:23). God does not merely *declare* the soul to be righteous or just in His sight. He *makes* the soul holy in

itself by producing within it, through the activity of the Holy Ghost, a supernatural quality of spiritual goodness which is a true regeneration, renewal or renovation (Tit. 3:5). This spiritual quality incorporates us in Christ as His very members (1 Cor. 6:15), makes us live by Him as the branches exist by the very life of the vine to which they belong (Jn. 15:5), and through Him enables us to become in a mysterious way sharers in the divine nature itself (2 Pet. 1:4). The goodness, justice, righteousness or holiness of a soul in a state of grace is, therefore, a reality and not merely a fiction. It is *imparted* to the soul by God, sanctifying it in its very nature. It is not merely *imputed* to the soul by God, leaving the soul still contaminated by the filth of sin.

This ennobling and consoling doctrine, the true teaching of the New Testament, Luther altogether rejected. Concentrating on the one text of Romans 1:16-17, and on others which he thought he could fit in with it, he overlooks all other aspects of Christian doctrine taught elsewhere in the New Testament. He declared that the Greek word used by St. Paul for righteousness (*dikaioisune*) means simply ‘acquitted,’ as one is acquitted or declared not guilty in a court of law. Such a decree, he said, makes no change in the acquitted person. He remains exactly as he was before. He is merely told that the law does not regard him as a criminal. Therefore according to St. Paul, argued Martin Luther, man’s justification means that he is reputed or accounted as righteous in the sight of God, although he remains as sinful in his very nature as ever. The change is in God’s dispositions towards man, not in man himself. Henceforth God looks upon him with favour instead of disfavour, attributing to him the righteousness of Christ which is in no way really possessed within the soul.

Now it is quite true that St. Paul made use of a word which in the Greek language had the technical meaning of legal acquittal. And if the word can have no other meaning than that, one could scarcely dispute the interpretation of justification as implying no more than to be accounted as righteous or not guilty in the sight of God.

But Luther had not the advantages of modern scholarship. He belonged to an age when it was thought that the real meaning of the New Testament could be best ascertained by discovering the exact sense of the Greek language in which its books were originally written. Now even Protestant scholars are beginning to know better, for the Greek words took on a special sense when they were used by the New Testament writers to express Christian doctrines. The pagan Greek language was itself practically “baptized” by the Christians from the very beginning using it to express revealed supernatural and spiritual truths nowhere to be found in classical Greek literature. To understand New Testament Greek, then, it is not enough to have a Greek dictionary in hand; it is necessary to keep in mind the whole religious outlook of Christianity according to the teachings given them by the Apostles.

What, then, did St. Paul have in mind when he spoke of the soul’s “justification?” He was indeed thinking of liberation from heathen darkness for the Gentiles, and from bondage to the Jewish Law for the Jews, as a consequence of embracing Christianity and giving one’s wholehearted allegiance to Christ. But that was not the whole of his doctrine. For him, such a liberation was simply a presupposed condition of one’s “becoming a new creature in Christ” (2 Cor. 5-17). A transforming process from a state of sin to that of sanctifying grace takes place in the soul, a simultaneous deliverance from guilt and an admission to a new and supernatural spiritual life.

A DREADFUL ERROR

In his denial of this, Luther contradicted divine revelation as well as reason. The great emotional stress under which he was labouring when his new doctrine dawned upon him blinded him to practically all else save the one thing by which he was so fascinated. As a matter of fact when, later, others implored him to listen to reason, he replied contemptuously that reason is but a “prostitute” bent on seducing mankind. But it was not only of the human intelligence that he took a gloomy view. He held that man has been so totally depraved by the Fall of Adam, that his heart and will have been so completely contaminated by inherited original sin, as to be rendered quite incapable of any good at all. Is it any wonder that he went on from such views to an entire repudiation of the Catholic doctrine in this matter?

Where modern unbelievers dishonour God by holding that man does not need redeeming at all and that he can manage quite well without God, Luther dishonoured God by holding that the divine image is so utterly defaced in man that God Himself cannot restore that image. The most God can do is to cover up His failure by a fiction, accounting a filthy soul

righteous by covering up or hiding its evil condition with the garments of the righteousness of Christ. The Catholic doctrine, on the other hand, neither dishonours God, nor robs man of every vestige of human dignity. It declares man subject to sin and therefore in need of the redemption unbelievers reject; but it also declares that man is not so corrupt as to be incapable of a truly interior and spiritual renewal by grace.

Protestant theologians today are themselves so little in sympathy with Luther's teaching that whilst professing to explain it they succeed only in explaining it away. Thus the Lutheran Professor of theology, Abdel Ross Wentz, writes: "Faith is a continuing act by which the soul throws itself upon God and receives the smile of God; and that smile of a loving Father adjusts the entire life to a new obedience. Adjustment by faith through divine favour, as Luther experienced and taught it, is not negative like 'salvation without works'; it is a very positive and continuing experience of the love of God which brings the assurance of forgiveness, transforms the well-springs of conduct, and gives a new quality to the whole of life."

Surely that is to talk, not Lutheran, but Catholic language. For Luther positively insisted upon "justification by faith alone," and denied any transformation of "the well-springs of conduct," and the reality of any "new quality" imparted to a nature so depraved as to be incapable of receiving such an infusion of grace! More and more, however, we find Protestant theologians following this line, forsaking Luther's ideas of justification, and speaking of God as "re-creating the whole man," and "setting him in an entirely new relationship to Himself and to his fellow men"; doctrines which the Catholic Church has ever taught, but which Protestants generally do not believe, or rather think and say they do not believe.

So much, then, for the doctrine concerning the nature of justification in itself. Now let us turn to the means by which it is claimed that it is brought about—faith.

NATURE OF FAITH

Protestants, following Martin Luther, accuse Catholics of regarding faith merely as a form of knowledge or assent to doctrine instead of seeing it in the biblical and Protestant sense of confiding trust and the commitment of one's whole life to Christ.

It would be a very great mistake, however, to think that Catholics do not believe that, besides having faith in Christ, one should have also a confident trust in Him and commit one's whole life to Him. We Catholics insist that all three are necessary. And it is an equally great mistake to imagine that the idea of faith as an assent to doctrine is unbiblical and to think that the only biblical sense of the word is the one Protestants maintain. Such notions are the result of a confusion of ideas which badly need clarification.

In the Greek language the word faith can mean either belief in a statement on the authority of another person, or belief in a person in the sense of trusting him or even of entrusting oneself to him. But we must recall here what was said earlier about new meanings acquired by Greek expressions on their "baptism" into the service of the Christian religion. In biblical usage, both the senses of the Greek which we have just mentioned are at times employed, but other and more comprehensive meanings are elsewhere intended.

Sometimes the word faith is used to designate the whole objective message to be believed by Christians and at all costs to be kept intact. St. Paul uses the word in that sense when he speaks of preaching "the faith which he once impugned" (Gal. 1:23); as does also St. Jude when he urges Christians "to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude, 3.)

Secondly, the word faith is used at times strictly to denote intellectual acceptance of the doctrines belonging to "The Faith," understanding the word in the preceding sense. Thus St. Paul, after proclaiming the facts and truths and promises of the gospel, said: "So we preach and so you have believed." I Cor. 15:11. And he declared that his task was to bring "into captivity every understanding unto the obedience of Christ." 2 Cor. 10:5. In these cases what is obviously involved is intellectual acceptance by faith in the authority of Christ as our divinely-accredited teacher of all that God has revealed. This is that strict sense in which Catholics normally understand the word faith.

In a third class of texts the sense is simply one of confidence or trust, as, for example, where St. Paul speaks of

Abraham as strong in faith and giving glory to God, ‘most fully knowing that whatsoever He has promised, he is able also to perform.’ Romans 4:21. Or again, where he says of himself: “I know whom I have believed, and I am certain that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him, against that day.” 2 Tim. 1:12.

Finally, speaking not merely of faith as such, but of “saving faith,” St. Paul uses the word in a very broad and comprehensive sense, not excluding any of the above meanings, but including them all and much else besides. He views the faith that justifies as the complete embracing of the Christian religion in practice, with the whole man engaged, heart and soul, intelligence, will and conscience. This is not merely an indefinite trust or mystic self-surrender. It means primarily the intellectual acceptance of truth by faith in the authority of Christ who declares it. That belief in Christ gives rise to complete confidence in Him, love of Him, self-donation to Him, and a resultant obedience to His law and devotedness in all good works for His sake.

NOT MERELY TRUST

It is in this last sense that faith is counted unto us for righteousness, and which St. Paul intended when he wrote: “Being justified therefore by faith, let us have peace with God through Our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 5:1. He knew quite well, however, that he was not there using the word faith in the strictly literal sense of the word.

Such “saving faith” included trust or confidence in Christ, which arises from the virtue of hope and excludes the extremes of both presumption and despair. It also included a self-giving to Christ proceeding from love or charity. And that St. Paul knew how to distinguish between these different virtues when occasion demanded it is evident from his great declaration: “Now there remain faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” I Con. 13:13.

Catholics are in full agreement with St. Paul. When they declare faith to be, in the strict and primary sense of the word, an intellectual acceptance of doctrines on the authority of Christ, they do not hold that to be of itself “saving faith.” If such faith be not enlivened by trust in Christ, love of Him, obedience and self-donation to Him they are quite prepared to describe it as “dead” faith, as does St. James. Jas. 2:17.

Protestants, on the other hand, do fall into error when they restrict the meaning of faith to trust in Christ and simple acceptance of Him as Lord and Saviour almost to the exclusion of everything else. To the vast majority of Protestants, to have faith in Christ has come to mean one thing, and one thing only, trust in Christ, with an emotional experience of assurance that they are saved, whilst remaining practically indifferent to sound Christian doctrine in all its many vital aspects. As Harnack remarked: “Luther set up evangelical faith in place of dogma.”

What has here been said about faith could be summed up in a simple imaginary conversation between a Protestant and a Catholic as follows:

- P. You Catholics understand faith in an altogether wrong sense.
- C. That I cannot admit.
- P. At any rate, you understand it in a very limited sense.
- C. We understand it in the strict and proper sense as accepting revealed truth on the authority of God. We do not say that such faith itself is sufficient for salvation. We do say that it is one necessary element required for salvation. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” Heb. 11:6.
- P. But that was not the kind of faith St. Paul meant when he used the word.
- C. It was what he meant when he was speaking of faith as a particular virtue in its own right: as for example, when he spoke of the three distinct values of faith and hope and charity.
- P. When he said that we are “justified by faith” he meant by trusting in Christ.
- C. He did not. It is an error to concentrate on the one element of trust to the exclusion of all the other factors St. Paul had in mind when speaking of justification, and to think that “faith alone,” in the sense of trust, can result in one’s salvation. Such a “trust,” which is really a form of hope in Christ, can quite easily become a source of presumption or despair if it leads one to neglect necessary conditions or if it is suddenly discovered to be but self-delusion; and that in

turn can lead to loss of faith in the true sense of the word, and even to the loss of one's soul rather than to its salvation.

TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES

With his doctrine of "justification by faith alone," Luther brought in a new kind of Christianity unlike anything that had gone before. As we have seen, faith for a Catholic is an intellectual virtue based on belief in truth revealed by God and safeguarded by the teaching authority of the Catholic Church.

For Luther, it was an affective virtue, a sentiment of confidence in God's favour. Religious feelings supplanted doctrinal orthodoxy and allowed emotional experiences to run riot at the expense of reason. All that man can do, ran the new teaching, is to trust in the mercy of God and believe with firm confidence that God has received him into His favour. As the Augsburg Confession, Part I, Art. 4, puts it: "Men are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favour and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake." This doctrine of justification of faith was the keystone of the whole Lutheran system and became the battle-cry of the Protestant reformation.

The most drastic consequences followed upon it. An almost entirely self-centered individualism resulted, evangelical piety making personal conversion, guaranteed by feelings of assurance, the centre of its work. Popular Protestantism urges the individual "to believe in Christ and be saved." The sense of community and of corporate religion inevitably declined. No intermediaries were needed, priests, sacraments or saints. The individual was prior to the very Church itself which had to be defined in a totally different way, no longer as a visible institution founded by Our Lord, but as a vague invisible aggregate of the "saved," known only to God.

The Catholic has the gospel set before him by his Church; he accepts the truth guaranteed for him by the guidance of the Holy Spirit operating within the Church: he repents of his sins; and from the Church, the mystical body of Christ, he receives the very grace and life of Christ, a life he must make his own in accordance with St. Paul's words: "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." Gal.2. In Catholic teaching neither the individual nor the Church can be ignored; but Protestant theology with its doctrine of justification by faith only, quite upset this balance.

Equally disastrous was the effect upon worship. The Bible, interpreted by each reader for himself, became the one supreme rule of faith. It was the doctrine of the "inner light," and it led to the chaos in religious belief and practice about which the Protestants of today are becoming more and more acutely conscious and distressed. In worship, the pulpit supplanted the altar, and the Eucharist became little more than a social meal. The ministry of the word rendered the ministry of the sacraments almost meaningless. In the new interpretation of Christianity the sacraments could not be a means of grace; at most they could be "ordinances" to symbolize a favour already conferred. So they came to be regarded as more or less superfluous and to be neglected. Indeed, the logical end of the road was reached in the complete abandonment of liturgical worship and sacramentalism by such bodies as the Quakers and the Salvation Army.

The effect on the spiritual life was calculated to have equally sad results. The theory of justification by faith alone could not maintain Christian standards of spirituality.

Luther had failed to find peace of soul personally in ascetic self-discipline and efforts at "good works." He never declared a good life unnecessary. His "pecca fortiter sed crede fortius" (sin boldly but believe still more firmly) was not meant to be an encouragement to yield to sin without scruple. He intended simply that however great a sinner one may be, granted repentance, he can be justified solely by faith. But to be zealous for good works, thinking them to be a means to salvation, was to manifest a lack of faith in God's power to save.

The popular results of this teaching, however, were tragic. Men declared good works prescribed in order to please God utterly meaningless. It was an easy step from that to conclude that the observance of the moral law itself was not really necessary; still less, any ascetical self-discipline for the sake of an imaginary and impossible "spiritual progress." If there is but an exterior imputation of the righteousness of Christ there can be no such thing as a truly interior sanctification of the soul; and the one supreme task is to reinforce one's feelings of assurance in one's own personal salvation. And such feelings had no necessary connection with obedience to the laws of God or with duties in regard to one's fellow men.

True, the conduct of the vast majority of Protestants is better than their creed; but it is with the creed itself that we are

here concerned, and logically that creed leads to the undermining of Christian standards of conduct, and still more of all efforts to attain to higher degrees of holiness in one's personal spiritual life.

NECESSITY OF GOOD WORKS

The idea of "full, free and present salvation" for those "justified by faith," as if Christ had done all and the Christian had to do nothing towards his own salvation, led to the dreadful doctrine that it is belief and not behaviour that matters—a doctrine which is the very basis of hypocrisy. Christ therefore warned His hearers against imitating the Pharisees, of whom He declared: "They say. and do not." Matt. 23:8. Quite evidently He thought that not only what we believe matters, but also how we behave. In other words, He insisted on the necessity of both faith and good works for salvation, as does the Catholic Church.

Against this it is urged that Scripture forbids men to rely upon their own righteousness, and insists that all must acknowledge that they are sinners needing redemption by Christ

Now it is true that all men without exception, when they come to Christ, must admit that they are sinners and that He alone can redeem them. For those who turn to Christ must acknowledge His authority as God and as our Supreme Judge; and that they are under condemnation for the sins they have committed and for which they cannot forgive themselves. Nothing of their own previous "righteousness," if they had any, is of any avail here.

Yet after they have repented of their sins and have obtained forgiveness, righteousness is expected of them. For God is not indifferent as to how we live. We must show our antagonism towards evil by trying to live a holy life; and the will to do this is necessary for salvation. We cannot rely upon our salvation unless we fulfil that condition.

If that be so, however, what are we to make of St. Paul's words: "For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, for it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man may boast?" (Eph. 2:8-9.) St. Paul is there referring to the fact that before one's conversion and attaining to the grace of Christ no "good works" can possibly deserve that grace; and also to the fact that, even after one's conversion, it is the grace of Christ which gives value to good works done under its inspiration and with its assistance. But St. Paul does not deny the value of good works performed under the influence of grace after one's conversion as a means to eternal salvation.

Christ Himself certainly went out of His way to stress the necessity of good works for our salvation. He warned us: "Not everyone that saith to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doth the will of My Father who is in heaven." Matt. 7:21. Praising good works, He said: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is very great in heaven." Matt. 5:12. He declared that such good works, or the absence of them, will be a deciding factor in the Last Judgment. Then He will say: 'Come, ye blessed . . . for I was hungry and you fed Me,' or "Depart, ye cursed, for I was hungry and you gave Me not to eat." Matt. 25:34, 41. How can it be said that salvation is "wholly without works," if, for lack of good works, it can be forfeited?

St Paul wrote: "I have fought the good fight... and there is laid up for me a crown of justice." 2 Tim. 4:8. That implies that good works done by those in a state of grace provide one with a just claim in Christ to eternal salvation. In the same sense St. Peter says: "Wherefore, labour the more, that by good works you make sure your calling and election." 2 Pet. 1:10.

If we believe in the Bible, we must believe in all of it, not concentrating on a few isolated texts and forgetting all else.

THE GOOD THIEF

Here allusion can well be made to the case so often cited, that of the good thief to whom Christ said on Calvary: "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise." Lk. 23:43. Since that thief had done no good works, how do you explain his salvation, if faith alone is not sufficient?

To say that the good thief did no good works, however, is to take far too narrow a view of what good works mean. We must not think only of being good to the poor, or of other forms of humanitarianism. After all, the good thief publicly proclaimed the innocence of Christ; and equally, with deep humility, acknowledged his own guilt. These were already

“good works.”

In any case, that the good thief did not have time to do further good works after his conversion could not affect the principle that good works are necessary, good works which the good thief would certainly have the will to do, had he had the opportunity. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: ‘In doing good let us not fail. For in due time we shall reap, not failing. Therefore whilst we have time let us work good to all men, but especially to those who are of the household of the faith.’ Gal. 6:9-10. It rests with God how much time each of us will have. But whilst we have it God expects us to do good; and our salvation depends upon our doing it. If we do it, St. Paul tells us that we shall reap our reward. And Our Lord Himself tells us, as we have seen, that our not doing it can result in the loss of our souls.

But even were we to grant that an exception was made in the case of the good thief, the exception proves the rule; and we cannot argue from the special dispensation in his case to what is normally required.

“THE LAW CANNOT SAVE!”

But did not St. Paul expressly tell the Galatians that we are ‘justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law; because by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified?’ Gal. 2:16. He did. But with what was he concerned?

St. Paul was refuting the Judaizing Christians, those early converts to the Church who claimed that, in addition to their acceptance of the teachings of Christ and the fulfillment of His law, those baptized were obliged still to observe the prescriptions of the Jewish or Mosaic Law. Denouncing that, St. Paul insisted that Christ had abolished the Mosaic Law, fulfilling yet transcending it, and made possible by His death on the Cross and the power of grace a righteousness which observance of the Mosaic Law of itself could give man no power to attain. But he did not by that intend that Christians, emancipated from observance of Jewish obligations, are to be saved merely by faith in Christ without observing the law of Christ Himself in our daily conduct.

St. Paul teaches, of course, that even for Christians good works, whilst necessary, cannot of themselves be the cause of salvation. They need a value derived from Christ. Divine grace is indeed a communication of the very righteousness of Christ to our souls, giving a new value to all the good works we strive to do. It is this grace which enables us to fulfil the law, not according to the letter, but in the spirit. Thus St. Paul writes that “the justifications of the law may be fulfilled in us who walk, not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit.” Romans 8:4.

St. James, well aware of the mind of St. Paul, wrote most strongly on this subject. ‘Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.’ Jas. 1:22. And again: “What shall it profit if a man say he hath faith, but hath not works? Shall faith be able to save him?... Thou believest that there is one God. Thou dost well. But the devils also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead.... By works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Even as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” Jas. 2:14, 19-20, 26.

Rightly, then, the Catholic Church insists, and has always insisted, that both faith and good works are required for righteousness in the Christian sense of the word, and for salvation. Right beliefs and right conduct are necessary.

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Let us now turn to the really dreadful doctrine that a felt assurance of salvation is the necessary sign that one has been justified by faith alone.” This has truly been the bane of all the heirs of the Protestant reformation.

It has resulted in a self-centered and subjective individualism, divorced from all ideas of the Church incorporating us as members of the mystical body of Christ. People have tended to regard the whole of religion as consisting in their own interior and personal state of religious feeling.

It has led to the most extravagant and even morbid attempts to induce an artificial sense of security by periodical outbreaks of highly-charged emotional revivalism. And in those converted at such meetings there has resulted only too often an almost sickening self-complacency in the thought of being among the “saved” which is as far removed as possible from the humility declared by the gospel to be a first condition of our rehabilitation in the sight of God.

Nor is there any more cruel tyranny than to demand such a “religious experience” as a passport to salvation. What are

those multitudes of people to do who are psychologically incapable of such an upsurge of emotion, and who have never honestly felt the interior revolution and the personal assurance required? If they take the doctrine seriously, they must either indulge in a hypocritical pretence that they have undergone such an experience, or yield to utter despair.

It is one thing to hope for salvation, live in the light of that hope, and put one's confidence in God's mercy. That is lawful. But it is quite another thing to keep telling oneself, and everybody else, that one is already saved, and that all who have not the same self-assurance are in a state of damnation. That is a form of presumption, not only not justified by Scripture, but absolutely opposed to it

Christ warns us to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41); He makes us pray to be preserved from temptation (Lk. 11:4); and surely such warnings are meaningless to the man who thinks himself already and permanently saved. Christ also said: "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh, shall find watching." Lk. 12:37. He there implies that it is quite possible for one who believes in Him to fall a victim to temptation, and to be found unprepared to meet judgment when death comes.

The words are often quoted: 'He who heareth my word and believeth him that sent me, hath life everlasting; as cometh not to judgment, but is passed from death to life Jn. 5:24. But we must ask just what those words signify. They simply mean that one who accepts Christ's word in the sense of His total gospel and puts its precepts in practice passes a "death-state" of sin into a "life-state" of grace. If he perseveres in that state of grace, and therefore in the love and friendship of God until death, then he will have no need to fear an adverse judgment, but will inherit life everlasting. But the words quoted certainly give no guarantee that one who has attained at any stage in this life to the grace of God can never forfeit that grace by later sin. As people of bad will can develop a good will, so people of good will can lapse into bad dispositions; and all without exception need to fear their own weakness and even malice.

Never, at any stage in this life, are we allowed to make it a certainty that we shall be saved. We are warned that if we think ourselves to stand, we must beware lest we fall (I Con. 10:12); and that we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Of himself St. Paul wrote: "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection, lest having preached to others I myself should become a castaway." 1 Con. 9:27.

There is no room, then, in St. Paul's teaching for self-assurance and presumption. Such dispositions are not Christian. They are very dangerous, for they make salvation dependent on imagination and feelings—most untrustworthy guides. And they blind people to the necessity of belonging to the Church Christ established, of receiving the sacraments He instituted, and of making every effort to avoid sin and practise Christian virtue.

Never were credulous people more disastrously deceived than they were by Martin Luther's doctrine that justification is by faith alone, guaranteed by personal assurance in each one's own heart. Such a doctrine violates both Scripture and reason, and brings Christianity into disrepute with all thinking men.

CURRENT ILLUSIONS

Lest it be thought that the ideas attributed to Protestants in this booklet are no longer held by them, and that an injustice has been done to their outlook, it might be well to quote no less an authority than the Lutheran Bishop Stahlin who, in a recent lecture in Germany—he is Bishop of Oldenburg—declared that multitudes of modern Protestants have come to feel that they are "responsible only to their own consciences"; that for them there "is no binding dogma and no compulsory creed"; that they push "certain aspects of the Bible message out of sight, or at least to the very edge of their field of vision"; and that they think any talk of the authority of the Church, of necessary ecclesiastical order, or of liturgical worship is a betrayal of Protestantism and a capitulation to Catholicism.

"If any man believes," he said, "that he can sacrifice the fullness of the Christian revelation to some vague formless religious feeling or vague belief in Providence, he may hold himself to be a good Protestant, but...he is simply not a Christian."

A further illustration of the modern Protestant attitude comes from a prominent Methodist minister, the Rev. Alan Walker, leader of the 1954-1955 "Methodist Mission to the Nation" in Australia, who has been regarded as so successful

that he has been invited to give similar missions in America by the Methodist Churches there.

Declaring that troubled people often ask how one becomes a Christian, he devoted one of his main discourses to that problem, undertaking to explain the process most clearly, so that there could be no possible room for doubt or obscurity.

“Being a Christian,” he said, “is far more than following the Golden Rule, than mere church-going, or than mentally accepting a series of doctrines.”

By saying that more is required than the practices mentioned, room is left for the suggestion that they also ought to be fulfilled. And Mr. Walker undoubtedly meant that. But many of his Protestant listeners could have concluded that he was speaking slightingly of such ‘good works,’ and that he was excluding them as not necessary in order to be a Christian.

The truth is that, if one who *is* a Christian wants to *behave* as a Christian, he must try to follow the Golden Rule of charity towards all his fellow men, he must faithfully attend church to fulfil public duties of divine worship on the days prescribed, and he must mentally accept the doctrines of the Christian religion by faith in all that Christ has revealed to be true.

There is a difference between *being* a Christian and *behaving* as a Christian. It is most important to note that difference. For “being” comes before ‘acting.’ We cannot ‘act’ as human beings unless we first ‘exist’ as human beings. So one has to “be” a Christian before he can “act” as a Christian; although, of course, one might be a Christian yet not act as a Christian should; in which case he would be a bad Christian. The full significance of this we shall see later.

“A Christian,” Mr. Walker continued, “is one who, by a deliberate act of faith and trust, enters into an inner fellowship with the living Person of Jesus.”

That is an echo of the original Protestant doctrine of justification by faith only, although there is a departure from it by the reference to the “inner fellowship” with the living Person of Jesus. Luther’s idea of justification as a “legal acquittal” and an external imputation to the soul of the merits of Christ meant a change in God’s dispositions towards us, so that instead of looking upon us with disfavour He looks upon us with favour. Of itself this would imply no inner relationship with the Person of Jesus—which involves the Catholic doctrine of interior grace!

But far more noteworthy is the fact that, throughout the whole of his discourse, Mr. Walker made no mention whatever of the Sacrament of Baptism! Not faith and trust of themselves, but baptism received in a spirit of faith and trust makes a Christian and creates an inner fellowship with the living Person of Jesus. And it is baptism which is the most essential step of all towards becoming a Christian.

So Sacred Scripture insists that we must believe and be baptized (Mk. 16:16), and also, as St. Peter declared in his first sermon: “Repent and be baptized every one of you.” Acts 2:38. The significance of baptism was explained by St. Paul when he wrote: “As many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ.” Gal. 3:27. The Methodist Church, of course, does make provision for baptism, but apparently little meaning is attached by them to the rite. At any rate, Mr. Walker, in his discourse on how to become a Christian, spoke as if he had not so much as heard that there is any Sacrament of Baptism!

“This (entering into fellowship with Jesus by faith and trust),” Mr. Walker went on, “means recognizing Jesus Christ as the Lord of life, believing in prayer, and accepting the Christian ethic as the truth, doing one’s best to live up to it.”

Here again we have confusion between *becoming* Christian and becoming a *good* Christian. To be a *good* Christian, one must recognize Jesus Christ as the Lord of life in practice, must be faithful to prayer, and try to live up to the Christian ethic, or moral standards of conduct. And one becomes a more or less *good* Christian as he succeeds more or less in doing so. But he *becomes* Christian by baptism. If one fails to live up to requirements in conduct, that does not mean that one is not Christian. It means merely that he is not making all the effort he should in order to live as he ought.

“Because of this,” Mr. Walker added, “a Christian needs the Church. I believe no one can be a Christian who does not join the Church, entering into its fellowship, learning its teachings of the Gospel, sharing in its task of winning the world for Christ.”

In spite of himself, the good Methodist missionary found himself here compelled to talk Catholic language—however haltingly—rather than Protestant language. It is a far cry from Chillingworth’s famous dictum that “the Bible, and the

Bible only, is the religion of Protestants” to Mr. Walker’s declaration that the Christian must hear the “Church” in order to “learn its teachings of the Gospel.” But once the Church is mentioned, the great weakness of Protestantism becomes evident. Its ideas on that subject are exceedingly vague.

The truth is that man needs the Church, not only for the help it can give him towards the living of a Christian life in practice, but *that he may be a Christian at all*. For Christ founded His Church as a living organism, in and through which He Himself would live and act. By baptism a man becomes simultaneously a member of Christ and a member of His Church. That is why, for the living of a Christian life, a Christian needs the Church; even as the living activity of any member of the human body needs to have at its disposal the life of the whole body. Such is the teaching of the New Testament, and of the Catholic Church.

One thing above all, however, must have still left troubled the souls of thinking Protestants who heard Mr. Walker. For if no one can be a Christian without joining ‘the Church,’ then the question of which Church one must join is as vital a problem as that of becoming a Christian at all. That problem Mr. Walker neither faced nor solved. The only valid answer is—”The Catholic Church.” Unable to say that, he preferred to say nothing, failing here, as in so much else, to keep his promise to leave troubled people with no room for doubt or obscurity. Protestantism, how ever modern its dress, and of whatever denominational type it may be, is simply unable to give those final answers Christianity was intended to provide.

CONCLUSION

During the four centuries that have elapsed since Martin Luther gave to the world his new theory of ‘justification by faith alone,’ millions of good Protestants have described themselves as Christians saved by the grace of God. They have relied upon their own personal reading of the Bible, have regarded religion as a matter between their own individual souls and God, and have seen no need to become members of the Catholic Church.

But whilst believing in the Bible, they have not understood its teachings. For even apart from the fact that only for the Catholic Church they would not have the Bible at all, that very Bible is opposed to their isolation from her. If there is one thing clearly taught in the New Testament it is the doctrine of the Church as a divine society established by Christ, in which all believers should be united, professing the same faith, offering the same worship, receiving the same sacraments, and acknowledging the same religious authority.

We cannot ignore Our Lord’s words: “I will build my Church” (Matt. 16:18). Nor can we conceive that He would do so, if He did not intend that we should be members of it. Certainly His further words: “If a man will not hear the Church, let him be to thee as the heathen.” Matt. 18:17, should make every sensible person ask, “Which Church?” and not rest until he has found the right one.

St. Paul, insisting on the necessity of our being united in the true Church instead of being led astray by independent individuals, wrote: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no schisms (divisions) among you; but that you be perfect in the same mind and in the same judgment.” I Cor. 1:10. And he came back to that same thought with the plea “that there might be no schism in the body; but the members might be mutually careful one for another... You are the body of Christ, and members of member.” 1 Cor. 12: 25-27.

Why are Protestants divided from all Catholics throughout the world, not having the same mind and judgment, not speaking the same thing as the millions of all nations so remarkably united religiously within the unity of the Catholic Church? It is because they have inherited wrong principles from the very beginning of the reformation in the 16th century, principles which were not the means appointed by Christ for the attaining of the truth. He established His Church, guaranteeing its infallibility and perpetuity, and sent it to teach all nations. That Church is the Catholic Church; and the only road to the unity demanded by the New Testament is to belong to and be guided by that Church.

It is only in the Catholic Church that one will be able to learn without error the teachings of the Gospel, and receive all the means of grace Christ intended us to have.

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