

WHAT IS PAUL'S MESSAGE?

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE—NO WORKS

THE CRUCIAL MATTER OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

No one can read Luther today without realizing how the reformer's perspective was skewed by the polemical context in which he lived and wrote. These caveats aside, we are prepared to affirm that on the crucial matter of justification by faith alone, Luther was a careful and faithful interpreter of Paul. The words [Martin Luther] wrote in the preface to his 1535 commentary still ring true today:

This doctrine can never be discussed and taught enough. If it is lost and perishes, the whole knowledge of truth, life, and salvation is lost and perishes at the same time. But if it flourishes, everything good flourishes—religion, true worship, the glory of God, and the right knowledge of all things and of all social conditions. There is clear and present danger that the devil may take away from us the pure doctrine of faith and may substitute for it the doctrines of works and of human traditions. It is very necessary, therefore, that this doctrine of faith be continually read and heard in public. [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, pp. 69–70). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

In these seven verses Paul used some of the most compressed language found anywhere in his epistles to set forth the central thesis he wanted to impress upon

the Galatians: acceptance with God is affected through a simple act of trust in Jesus Christ and not through anything else. [Ibid.]

What was under dispute at Antioch was now the burning question in Galatia: not the personal clash between two leading apostles or even the rift between two sections of the church (the “men from James” versus the Pauline party) but rather the one and only basis of salvation for all peoples everywhere. Paul drew his argument to a crushing conclusion in 2:21. If the doctrine advanced by the Galatian agitators, and encouraged at least implicitly by the inconsistent behavior of Peter and Barnabas, were true, then Jesus Christ had no business dying on the cross! [Ibid.]

At the same time there is a dark shadow that falls across these first two chapters, an insidious opposition to the gospel that forms the backdrop of Paul's passionate appeal to the Galatians. “Some people” had evidently thrown Paul's recent converts into confusion by imposing addenda to the message of grace he had proclaimed to them. Who these people were we do not know, but we can fairly assume that they had some kinship with the “false brothers” who sought to impose circumcision on Titus at Jerusalem and the “circumcision group” that intimidated Peter at Antioch. In the face of their demands Paul would not budge an inch. Because the truth of the gospel was at

stake, no concession or compromise could be considered. [Ibid.]

Put otherwise, if the Torah could have produced righteousness before God, why should anyone have turned from Judaism to Jesus in the first place? Having assumed this basic agreement as the foundation for his declaration of justification by faith, Paul now turned to meet specific objections that had been hurled against this teaching. [Ibid.]

****We should remember that the problem in Galatia was not the overt repudiation of the Christian faith by apostates who formerly professed it but rather the dilution and corruption of the gospel by those who wanted to add to the doctrine of grace a dangerous admixture of “something more.” [Ibid.]

*****None of the key parties—Paul, Peter, the agitators, the Galatians—were questioning the need for Christ faith for justification. What was in dispute was whether “works of the law” needed to be added to Christ faith for justification. Paul's insistence on Christ faith and not works of the law is typical of his antithetical argument in Galatians. What should not be overlooked, however, is the real force of Paul's argument in this verse (and indeed, in this paragraph). He is not arguing that Gentiles should be included, with Jews, in the people of God; he is arguing, rather, that Jews should be included, with Gentiles, in the mass of ordinary humanity. Jews are “sinners” just like the Gentiles, with the radical implication that follows: their obedience to the covenant stipulations cannot put them right with God; only a total reliance on Christ, by faith, can do so. [Moo, D. J. (2013). *Galatians* (p. 157). Grand

Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.]

***Stott ... Conclusion: Four Christian truths seem to stand out from this paragraph.

1. First, man's greatest need is justification, or acceptance with God. In comparison with this, all other human needs pale into insignificance. How can we be put right with God, so that we spend time and eternity in His favour and service?
2. Secondly, justification is not by works of the law, but through faith in Christ. Luther expresses it succinctly: ‘I must hearken to the Gospel, which teacheth me, not what I ought to do (for that is the proper office of the Law), but what Jesus Christ the Son of God hath done for me: to wit, that he suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death.’¹
3. Thirdly, not to trust in Jesus Christ, because of self-trust, is an insult both to the grace of God and to the cross of Christ, for it declares both to be unnecessary.
4. Fourthly, to trust in Jesus Christ, and thus to become united to Him, is to begin an altogether new life. If we are ‘in Christ’, we are more than justified; we find that we have actually died and risen with Him. So we are able to say with Paul: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (verse 20). [Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The message of Galatians: Only one way* (pp. 66–67). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.]