

Luther's Doctrine of Justification

Dr Alister McGrath, of Wycliffe College, Oxford, continues our studies in historical theology with a consideration of this central doctrine of the Reformation. The series is edited by David F. Wright, Dean of the Faculty of Divinity and Senior Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History, University of Edinburgh

Martin Luther (1483-1546) needs no introduction as a reformer. His contribution to the European Reformation of the sixteenth century ensures his place in any history of Europe, while his theological and spiritual legacy to the western church continues to be remarkably fertile. While Luther may require no introduction, however, the same cannot be said for his doctrine of justification. The present writer is inclined to suspect that Christians totally misunderstood his doctrine, mistakenly believing that Luther teaches that we are justified *on account* of our faith. This article will explain how Luther's characteristic ideas on justification developed, and what form they finally took.

The development of Luther's ideas

Luther began his career as a university theologian, and until the year 1519 his programme of reform was primarily directed towards the way theology was taught at the University of Wittenberg. In 1513, he began a course of lectures for the faculty of theology at Wittenberg, dealing with the exposition of the Psalms. His early views on justification, which are reflected in his exegesis of the period 1513-14, parallel those of the late medieval school of thought sometimes referred to as 'nominalism' but now increasingly referred to as the 'modern way', *via moderna*.

The theologians of the 'modern way' developed a theology of justification which, to many of its critics, seemed to be Pelagian (in that it placed considerable emphasis upon human abilities to perform morally good actions).

According to those theologians, an individual could perform an action which would place God under an obligation to reward him with justification. This action (usually referred to as *facere quod in se est*, 'doing what lies within your ability') was a genuine possibility for sinners, who were thus able to effect their justification by doing morally good actions. These actions are, in effect, the precondition for justification: no morally good actions, no justification. In his early period, Luther belonged to this school, which he encountered initially as a student at the University of Erfurt, and subsequently as a seminarian at the Augustinian monastery in the same city.

It is clear, however, that Luther was having his misgivings concerning this understanding of justification, even at this stage. These misgivings are echoed in an important text, generally referred to as the 'autobiographical fragment of 1545'. In 1545, Luther contributed a preface to an edition of his Latin works, in which he reflected upon his career as a reformer. He recounts the events which led to his break with Rome in 1520, and reflects upon the religious questions which lay at the basis of his revolt. It is clear that the most important difficulty concerned the idea of 'the righteousness of God'. Luther tells his readers that he was terrified by the very idea of the 'righteousness of God', as Paul

describes in Romans 1:16-17. How, he asked, could the idea of a righteous God be gospel? How could it be good news for sinners? To understand Luther's difficulty, let us consider how the theologians of the 'modern way' interpreted this concept.

For the theologians of the 'modern way', the 'righteousness of God' refers to God's fidelity to his obligations. God is under an obligation to reward an individual who 'does what lies within his abilities', and to punish an individual who fails to do this. Luther initially accepted this understanding of the 'righteousness of God', yet by 1514 seems to have serious misgivings concerning it. What, he seems to have been asking, happens if an individual is so compromised by sin that he is unable to meet the basic precondition for justification? God in his righteousness is under an obligation to punish such an individual. Writing in 1545, Luther tells his readers of how he was terrified by the idea of the 'righteousness of God', which to him spelled one thing and one thing only: condemnation. How could Paul mean such a dreadful thing?

Luther then relates how he meditated upon Romans 1:16-17 night and day, wondering what Paul meant. Then, suddenly, he had a breakthrough. In what seems to have been a moment of illumination, Luther suddenly realized that he had misunderstood the phrase 'the righteousness of God': he had thought that Paul meant 'the righteousness by which God himself is righteous', whereas Paul actually meant 'the righteousness by which God justifies sinners'. Justification, then, is a gracious gift from God, something which is given and not earned. As Luther himself wrote, from that moment onwards, he read Scripture in a completely new light. It was as if he had been born all over again, and entered into paradise itself.

Luther then recounts how he discovered that Augustine worked with a similar understanding of the 'righteousness of God'. There are, of course, differences between Augustine and Luther: for example, Luther insists (against Augustine) that God's righteousness is supremely revealed in the cross, and contradicts human understandings of justice. Nevertheless, he feels that he has recovered an authentically Augustinian insight into justification, which had been totally compromised by the theologians of the 'modern way'. From now onwards, Luther would work towards recovering the ideas of Augustine, which he felt had been silenced within the church.

Luther thus initiated a programme of reform within the Wittenberg theological faculty, in an attempt to reduce the influence of the 'modern way' at the university. He gained supporters within the faculty, notably its dean, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. By 1518, Luther was able to write to a colleague with the news that the Bible and Augustine were now invested with supreme authority at Wittenberg. The Ninety-Five Theses on indulgences

(October 1517) and the Leipzig Disputation (June-July 1519) further enhanced Luther's standing as a reformer. By 1520, Luther was established as a popular as well as an academic, reformer. The doctrine of justification by faith alone was now a central feature of the programme of church reform set forth by Luther. But what does 'justification by faith alone' mean for Luther?

Luther on justification by faith

The central feature of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith is his insistence that justification is a totally unmerited gift of God, bestowed as an act of grace upon sinners. The idea that an individual can, in any sense, be said to merit his justification is unequivocally rejected. Justification is totally a gracious work of God. 'Justification by faith', for Luther, does *not* mean that a sinner is justified *on account of his faith*, as if faith was a human work. It means that *faith is a gift of God*. Justification does indeed come about through faith – but that faith itself is a gracious gift of God, not a human action. If faith is the precondition of justification, God himself meets that precondition. To suggest that Luther 'put faith in the position of a work' is an absurdity: he does nothing of the sort.

A popular misunderstanding of Luther's doctrine of justification runs like this. In the Middle Ages, it is said, you were thought to be justified by good works. In other words, you earned your way to salvation. Luther, however, replaced this belief in 'justification by works' with 'justification by faith'. In other words, you believed in God, and as a result God justifies you. You are justified on account of a mental attitude, rather than a moral action. This view, which is remarkably common, has no relation with reality! Luther teaches no such doctrine of justification, which simply makes faith into a human work. Any reader who has any difficulty with this point is recommended to consult the works suggested for further reading.

But does not Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone exclude good works from the Christian life? Certainly not, although it must be conceded immediately that Luther occasionally wrote rather obscurely on the matter, perhaps allowing us to understand how some have interpreted him in this way. For Luther, the doctrine of justification by faith alone totally excludes good works *as a cause of justification*: it affirms, however, that good works are the natural consequence of justification. Just as a good tree brings forth good fruit, so the justified sinner will naturally and spontaneously perform good works. Good works express and presuppose justification – but do not cause it in the first place. Justification remains an act of God, something which is done to us, rather than something which we can do for ourselves.

Luther further emphasises our inability as sinners to justify ourselves by developing the idea of the 'alien righteousness of Christ', *iustitia Christi aliena*. For Luther, we are not justified on the basis of a human righteousness, but on account of an alien righteousness, provided by God himself. For Augustine (whom Luther agrees with on many points), we are justified on the basis of an internal righteousness, which God infuses into us, or imparts to us: Luther, wishing to stress that it is God, and God alone, who justifies us, teaches that we are justified on the basis of a righteousness which we do not possess, but which is 'imputed' or 'reckoned' to us. This idea of 'imputed righteousness' came to be of central importance to Protestant thinking on justification, and provides one of the best means of distinguishing Protestant from Roman Catholic teaching on justification.

For the Protestant, we are justified on the basis of an external, imputed righteousness; for the Roman Catholic, justification takes place on the basis of an *internal, imparted* righteousness. The following quotation will make this point clear:

God does not want to save us by our own personal and private righteousness and wisdom. He wants to save us by a righteousness and wisdom apart from this, other than this; a righteousness which does not come from ourselves, is not brought to birth by ourselves. It is a righteousness which comes to us from somewhere else.

What, then, is the current value of this doctrine? Luther affirms that the only secure foundation of the Christian life lies outside us, in God himself. It prevents us from becoming spiritually arrogant, and reminds us of the mercy of the God who calls us into fellowship with him. The 'theology of the cross' (Luther's characteristic way of thinking about the cross, based upon his doctrine of justification by faith) has greatly stimulated many modern theologians, such as Jurgen Moltmann, and brought a much-needed realism into the Christian understanding of God in the modern period. And it allows us to rest secure in the knowledge that all that needed to be done for our salvation has been done, and done well, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Luther himself put it:

By the one solid rock we call the doctrine of justification by faith alone, we mean that we are redeemed from sin, death and the devil, and are partakers of life eternal, not by self-help, but by outside help, namely, by the work of the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ alone.

For further reading

An excellent introduction to Luther is provided by James Atkinson, *Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism* (London, 1981).

On the development of his theology of justification, see the detailed study of Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford/New York, 1985).

A more readable account of his doctrine of justification may be found in Alister McGrath, *Justification by Faith: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, 1988), pp. 47-57.

Notes

1 James Atkinson, *The Darkness of Faith: Daily Readings with Martin Luther* (London, 1987), p. 4. This (cheap!) collection of extracts from Luther's writings, together with Professor Atkinson's superb introduction, is an ideal Luther 'sampler' for those who have yet to discover his value as a devotional writer

2 See Alister McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross* (London, 1987), for an introduction to this theology

3 Atkinson, *Darkness of Faith*, p. 4