

Along with *The Appeal to the Ruling Class* and *The Pagan Servitude of the Church*, *The Freedom of a Christian* is one of three documents that ignited Protestantism. Martin Luther started and completed *The Freedom of a Christian* in 1520, just three years after he nailed his controversial *95 Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The *95 Theses* were no less controversial because of Luther's propositional oppositions regarding the practice of the selling of indulgences. Luther rejected outright the idea of remission of punishment still due for a sin committed, especially because this doctrine fostered a methodological penitence. Furthermore, he rejected the idea that justification could be bestowed by the papacy. This religious teaching ensured righteousness to those who, as Luther tauntingly remarks, "blindly accept [ed] the authority of the priest, the confessor, the curia, or the pope."¹ The *95 Theses* confronted the acceptance of indulgences, and as a result, revolutionized the concept of justification. Similarly, Luther's essay, *The Freedom of a Christian*, was and still is a controversial document because it refutes the theory that good works solidify a person's salvation, a belief held strongly by the Catholics. "The Catholic tradition has long taught that salvation comes from the sum total of faith and good works – that a life of devotion and service on Earth earns the faithful the key to heaven."² On the contrary, Luther asserts that "faith alone, an acceptance of God renewed every day, ensures eternal salvation."³ This argument, The Doctrine of Justification, has caused debate for over five centuries. Since 1541, only twenty-one years after the completion of *The Freedom of a Christian*, a conference was held with the intention of ending the battle between Protestants and Catholics regarding the Doctrine of Justification. It was suggested that both doctrines could solidify salvation; hence, it was given

¹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, vol. 1, *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther: The Basis of Protestant Reformation* (New York: Philosophical Library), 353.

² *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas), 1 November 1999.

³ *Ibid.*

the name, “double justification.”⁴ Nevertheless, minor problematic equations such as the validity of righteousness (Protestantism) or imputed righteousness (Catholicism) could not be solved, and as a result, negotiations were unsuccessful. However, some 400 years later, in 1997, a peace treaty with the potential to settle old matters and reach an agreement on the Doctrine of Justification was once again constructed. Catholics and Lutherans in a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification proclaimed the following: “Good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope, and love – follow justification and are its fruits. Such works are made possible by grace and the Holy Spirit.”⁵ The Joint Declaration weighed the importance of both justification and righteousness, yet despite its contributions, it lacked the power to equalize both belief systems. But, on October 31, 1999, marking the 482nd anniversary to the day Luther posted his *95 Theses*, “a consensus in basic truths”⁶ was reached on the Doctrine of Justification. Pope John Paul II said, “[This was] a milestone on the not always easy road toward the restoration of full unity between Christians.”⁷

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther intends to establish a close union between the two seemingly disconnected theological doctrines: faith and works. In addition, he strives to prove that these two doctrines are contingent upon each other and when disconnected are ineffective. Luther’s first exposition is the Justification on the Doctrine of Grace, which entails a discussion on the soul of man with the distinction between the Old Testament Commandment and the New Testament Covenant. Luther then elaborates on priesthood and the benefits of propitiation. Finally, the third section deals with the Justification of the Doctrine of Works, which entails Luther’s discussion of the outer man.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Reumann, “Justification by faith: the Lutheran-Catholic convergence.” *The Christian Century* 114. (1997): 6.

⁶ “Lutherans and Catholics sign agreement,” *The Christian Century* 116 (1999): 1.

⁷ Ibid.

The debate of salvation by faith vs. salvation by works is by no means a light-hearted dispute. In fact, this topic, as well as the problem of evil, is probably one of the reasons we are forewarned not to engage in discussions concerning politics and religion. Theologian, Catholic, Lutheran, and even non-denominational have waged warfare over the Doctrine of Justification. Despite the perpetual argument over whether salvation is a gift to receive or a prize to be won, what follows is my attempt to set up an argument not merely enforcing my opinion, but to provide knowledge grounded upon the truth that salvation is indeed a gift received by faith. But what is faith unless put into practice? Therefore, it is crucial to understand that salvation by faith is not the final step towards righteousness; it is the first step. Countless people have pointed out that if our only mission on earth were to get saved, then after salvation, we should surely die. Our mission would be completed considered a success. However, faith in Jesus Christ is the first step towards righteousness, not the last step. Faith is not solely a belief; it is an action. What I shall argue here is that, when a person receives Jesus Christ because of the gift of salvation, that person will want to manifest what is grounded in his heart: the belief that Jesus Christ is who He says He is and that manifestation is called works.

Justification of the Doctrine of Grace

Martin Luther begins his essay with two propositions: “A Christian is free and independent in every respect, a bondservant to none” and “A Christian is a dutiful servant in every respect, owing a duty to everyone.”⁸ These two propositions come from one Scripture verse in I Corinthians. “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.”⁹ He begins his exposition by speaking on the former proposition.

⁸ Luther, *Freedom*, 357.

⁹ I Corinthians 9:19. King James Version.

First, Luther says to consider the inner, spiritual man. Philip H. Pfatteicher provides a superb, yet practical definition of spirituality in his book *Liturgical Spirituality*. He says, “Spirituality is essentially God dwelling within us. It is our most personal, most interiorized relationship with God, fully recognized, realized, and cultivated within us.”¹⁰ Spirituality is at the base of who we are. It is the makeup of our very existence. Luther explains that spirituality is not something you do; it is something you are. As Martin Buber said, “Spirituality is not a what; it is a Who.”¹¹ Luther admonishes, “When we consider the inner, spiritual man and see what belongs to him if he is to be a free and devout Christian, in fact and in name, it is evident that, whatever the name, no outer things can make him either free or religious.”¹² Luther desperately wanted to remove the church’s suppressed mentality that salvation could be secured by effort apart from spirituality. This type of labor was ineffective, futile, and hypocritical. According to Luther,

to be ethically good, can only come from a man who is already good; and a man can only be good in this sense if he has been made so by the miracle of the grace of God, grace which by definition can only be grace when it is free, unbought and unmerited: a gift which can only be prayed for.¹³

In other words, labor apart from the grace of God does not produce good works; it only produces works. Similarly, ministry apart from the church is not Christian ministry. Ministry when disconnected from the church means any act of aid or service done to others. Paul, when using the word ministry, uses the theological qualifier “of God” or “to God” to denote the nature of ministry in relation to the Kingdom of God. Ministry has to do with the Kingdom of God and

¹⁰ Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997).

¹¹ Parker Palmer, in his book, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* quotes Martin Buber. Martin Buber says that truth “is no longer only ‘It’ but thoroughly and profoundly ‘Thou.’”

¹² Luther, *Freedom*, 357.

is rooted in the context of the church. Likewise, “good works” and the nature of good works must be defined in terms of salvation.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians says, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith of Jesus Christ, even when we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”¹⁴ Paul in his epistle to the church at Ephesus reiterates, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”¹⁵ Kenneth S. West, in his book *Galatians in the Greek New Testament*, writes, “Paul exhorts the Galatians to hold fast to the freedom from [the] law which the Lord Jesus procured from them by the blood of His Cross, and not become entangled in a legalistic system.”¹⁶ Legalism is not only a strict adherence to the law, but it is also a prescription for failure because it fosters a false ideology that encourages man to keep all the statutes of God by memorizing all the “do’s” and “don’ts”. In addition, legalism facilitates the belief that man can work his way to salvation and please God enough to acquit his own sin. Conversely, Luther points out, “If you were constituted entirely of meritorious works from top to toe, you would still not be a godly man, nor do God honour.”¹⁷ Legalism idealizes the man as competent enough to perform his own salvation. Furthermore, legalism is a caricature for Christianity and a catalyst for pride. James 4:6 reads, “GOD RESISTETH THE PROUD, BUT GIVETH GRACE UNTO THE HUMBLE.” Man is completely incompetent in providing his own salvation. Philippians 2:12 reads, “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. The phrase “work out your own salvation” does

¹³ Luther, *Freedom*, 354.

¹⁴ Galatians 2:16. KJV.

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:8. KJV.

¹⁶ Kenneth S. West, *Galatians in the Greek New Testament* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1946).

not mean that you should work for salvation in order to obtain it. The Greek phrase “work out” denotes the expression, manifestation, or actualization of something one already possesses. The Philippians are encouraged to “work out” the salvation that God has already procured for them, carrying it to its logical conclusion: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ Jesus Christ began the work of salvation and at the messianic banquet will complete the work of salvation. Therefore, it is only through Jesus Christ that we are brought to a lifestyle of holiness. It is only through the precious blood of Jesus Christ that we are transformed from one sphere of existence (the Adamic nature) to the new sphere of existence (the nature of Christ). Jesus Christ fulfilled a work that began in the Old Testament; contrary to myopic belief, the New Covenant did not abolish the Old Covenant. In fact, Jesus says, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” The New Covenant provides what the Old Covenant lacked, fulfillment. The seed of Abraham (Jesus Christ) fulfills the promise warranted in the Old Testament.

Priesthood

In the second section of *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther deals with priesthood. His impetus for writing this section is two-fold. First, he thinks it is extremely important for Christians to be aware of their positions as children of God. While Luther also reprimands the priests for creating their own positions of superiority over the church, I will discuss only the former position.

¹⁷ Luther, *Freedom*, 364.

¹⁸ Philippians 1:6. KJV.

Luther begins by announcing, “Since Christ has the primogeniture with all appropriate honor and worth, He shares it with all Christians who are His, that, through faith, all may be kings and priests with Christ.”¹⁹ In other words, because of the propitiation of Jesus Christ, all Christians are kings and priests. The propitiation of Jesus Christ rectified the nature of man and restored him to communion with God. Pfatteicher says, “Salvation is nothing else than communion with God, union between Christ and the believer, their mutual indwelling,”²⁰ Indeed, we rule and reign as kings, and in addition to that, we, as priests, have permission to stand before God blameless. Luther proclaims, “By virtue of his [our] kingship he [we] exercises authority over all things, and by virtue of his [our] priesthood he [we] exercises power with God, for God does what he asks and desires.”²¹ The priesthood of the believer and his unique relationship with God are, according to Luther, “a treasure we possess in Christ.”²² Every believer has the privilege of direct access to God, but with privilege comes responsibility. Luther agrees: “Christ redeemed us that we might be able spiritually to act and pray on behalf of one another just as, in fact a priest acts and prays on behalf of the people.”²³ This is the reason that St. Peter calls the New Testament generation, “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation [and] a peculiar people.”²⁴

Justification of the Doctrine of Works

Luther now focuses on the latter half of the proposition in order bring clarity to the paradox regarding faith and works. He says, “We ought to remember that in every Christian

¹⁹ Luther, *Freedom*, 365.

²⁰ Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality*, 5.

²¹ *Ibid.* 366.

²² *Ibid.* 364.

²³ *Ibid.* 366.

²⁴ I Peter 2:9. KJV.

there are two natures, a spiritual and a bodily. In as far as he possesses a soul, a Christian is a spiritual person; and in as far as he possesses flesh and blood, he is a sensual person.”²⁵ Luther has already spoken of man’s spirituality; now he will explain the significance of the outer man in relation to good works.

Luther begins with his second thematic proposition: “A Christian man is a dutiful menial, a bondservant to everyone.”²⁶ It is essential to pay attention to the order of succession in the verse I Corinthians 9:19. Once again, the verse reads: “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.” First, Paul mentions that he is free, better yet, he is free from all men. Second, in the latter half of the verse, Paul says, “I made myself servant unto all.” Servanthood, in the Pauline concept, is ministry because to serve is to provide for or to yield assistance to others. As noted earlier, Christian ministry is rendering service to others in the name of God. Luther says, “A man must be religious before he can work the works of religion”²⁷ just as Paul says that first he is free from all men so that he might be a servant to all. Salvation bestows to man the capability to serve. Luther defines works of service as: acts of charity, brotherly helpfulness, self sacrifice for the common good, and goodwill in general; as well as the personal qualities of patience, kindness, and all the virtues which St. Paul includes among the fruits of the spirit.”²⁸ Luther says all of these acts “consist of serving God in return, without reward, and out of unconstrained love.”²⁹ If we try to perform these works apart from the grace of God, the labor is legalistic and unproductive. Paul also speaks about unfruitful works.

²⁵ Ibid. 357.

²⁶ Ibid. 369

²⁷ Ibid. 372.

²⁸ Ibid. 354.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . . And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains . . . And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and I though give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.³⁰

A personal relationship with God will inevitably produce good works. To know God, --know in the Hebrew context, “yada”, denoting knowledge by experience—is to love God. Therefore, to know God means to have a personal relationship with Him and personal, experiential knowledge of God results in service to others, otherwise known as works. Works, then, are the physical manifestation of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. James 2:14 reads, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”³¹ James T. Draper in his book, *James: Faith & Works in Balance*, says, “When we come to these verses, we are confronted with one of the most misunderstood and certainly one of the most controversial passages of Scripture anywhere in the Word of God.”³² Some say Paul teaches grace whereas others believe that James teaches works. First, let’s recognize the differing audiences to whom Paul and James wrote: Paul to Gentile believers and James to Hebrew believers. Clifford Walter Edwards, in *Christian Being and Doing: A Study-Commentary on James and I Peter* says,

Paul confronted many who insisted that they could earn God’s favors by the strict observance of the laws of Judaism. He (Paul) vigorously protested that none of us live

²⁹ Ibid. 369.

³⁰ I Corinthians 12:1-13 KJV

³¹ James 2:14, 24 KJV

³² James T. Draper, *James: Faith & Works in Balance* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1981).

the kind of life that can make such claims for favor upon God. Christianity is built not upon our earning, but upon God's freely giving forgiveness and love.³³

Paul asks this question, "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?"³⁴ Paul explains to the Roman church. "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS COUNTED UNTO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS. For the promise that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith."³⁵ Genesis 15:6 is Paul's basis for Romans 4. Therefore, Abraham was saved because he believed God, not because of his works. His works proceeded from his faith. Edwards says,

James, however, is faced with quite a different situation. The issue is no longer whether one receives God's love by earning it or by receiving it in faith. Those to whom James speaks already claim to be Christians and claim to have faith, but in fact they insult the poor, gossip maliciously, and avoid their responsibilities toward those in need.³⁶

Draper says, "James was refuting a heresy that salvation has no bearing on how we live"³⁷ which is his impetus for saying, "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."³⁸ Therefore, inwardly a man is justified by faith, and outwardly, his works justify him.

³³ Clifford W. Edwards, Christian Being and Doing A Study-Commentary on James and I Peter (New York: Clifford Walter Edwards, 1966).

³⁴ Galatians 3:3. KJV.

³⁵ Romans 4:3, 13. KJV.

³⁶ Edwards, *Christian*, 60.

³⁷ Draper, *James*, 86.

³⁸ James 2:17, 20, 24, 26. KJV.

James was not refuting Paul as some may argue. James's teachings reflect neither a negative nor a positive response to Paul's teachings. In fact, James's teaching stems from Paul's teachings. James did not exclude grace through faith; instead he emphasized faith by adding a second kind of faith, a professing faith. Rather than dismiss faith, James taught two kinds of faith: saving faith and professing faith.

Conclusion

The Doctrine of Justification has been controversial topic for over some 400 years. Polemicists have engaged in combat over The Doctrine of Justification of Grace and The Doctrine of Justification of Works for centuries. Luther advocates both doctrines, but stipulates that grace precedes works. Luther says, "Good and devout works never make a man good and duteous; but a good and religious man does good and religious works."³⁹ Good works proceed logically from a godly person. Luther continues, "Therefore, when a man becomes either devout or sinful, the process does not begin with his actions, but with his faith."⁴⁰ Jesus says, "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things."⁴¹ Works are the physical manifestation of faith. Luther exclaims, "We must preach neither one nor the other alone, but both together. We must preach the word of God and the commandments of God."⁴² It is as spiritually impossible to separate grace from works as it is spiritually impossible to separate the Old Testament from the New

⁴⁰ Luther, *Freedom*, 373.

⁴¹ Matthew 12:35. KJV.

⁴² Luther, *Freedom*, 374.

Testament. Grace will be evidenced in works as James M. Houston says in the editor's note of *Religious Affections*, "True religion will be evidenced in responsive affections."⁴³

⁴³ James M. Houston, *Religious Affections: A Christian's Character Before God*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996).