

LUTHER'S PERSONAL REFORMATION

APRIL 26, 2018 · SPENCER STEWART

In a previous post, we saw that Luther had not yet reformed when he posted the *Ninety-five Theses* on October 31, 1517. The first public display of Protestant theology came at the Heidelberg Disputation on April 26, 2018.¹ Therefore, Luther must have been born again by the Spirit and gifted Gospel-informed faith between those two dates. His testimony is fascinating.

Luther had been taught (and passed on to others) that God would not deny grace to those who made a sincere effort to earn it. But he knew his own heart well enough to know that it could not be trusted. Only pride would presume it had ever done enough and with enough sincerity. He rightfully feared the righteous judgment of God. By 1516-17, he thought the only thing one could do is despair of believing he could ever do anything to merit grace. That was a good start, but there was no positive, proactive trust in the Good News. Here is his testimony of his personal reformation, written in 1545:

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was... a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction [my works of penance]. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteous wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately [persistently] upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness

¹ See ProjectOne28.com/the-real-reformation-day.

with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me... . And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.²

Luther finally realized that righteousness is not earned. Righteousness is a gift from God received through faith, apart from works (see also Rom. 3:24-26 and 5:17). It is by faith alone because faith unites us with Christ, so that we have what He has. Christ fulfilled all righteousness, and all of His righteous deeds count as though they were ours.

Luther’s personal reformation must have happened between the Ninety-five Theses of October 31, 1517, and the Heidelberg Disputation of April 26, 1518, where we see this revelation on display. In Fall 1518 lectures, Luther taught clearly, “*sola fides justificat*” – we are justified by faith alone, apart from works. Justification is not the process of becoming inwardly righteous through our own works; it is God’s judicial verdict, His declaration of innocence and right standing. Luther’s Catholic opponents slandered this as a legal fiction, but it is legal reality! We really do have righteousness, though not our own (Phil. 3:9), because we have Christ, who is righteous (1 Cor. 1:30)! Here is how Luther explained it in 1520 in *The Freedom of the Christian*:

Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. As Paul teaches us, Christ and the soul become one flesh by this mystery (Ephesians 5:31-2). And if they are one flesh and the marriage is real – in fact, it is the most perfect of all marriages, and human marriages are poor reflections of this one true marriage – then it follows that everything that they have is held in common, whether good or evil, so the believer can boast of and glory in whatever Christ possesses, as though it were his or her own; and whatever the believer has, Christ claims as his own. Let us see how this works and how it benefits us. Christ is full of grace, life and salvation. The human soul is full of sin, death and damnation. Now let faith come between them. Sin, death and damnation will then be Christ’s; and grace, life and salvation will be the believer’s.³

Luther taught the troubled soul about “the joyous exchange”:

Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and Him crucified; learn to pray to Him despairing of yourself, saying, “You, Lord Jesus, are my righteousness, and I am Your sin; You have taken on Yourself what You were not, and have given to me what I am not.”⁴

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25).

² Qtd. in John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God’s Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 90-92. This was in Luther’s 1545 preface to his complete work. He dates this breakthrough to 1519, but that can’t be right; in his old age (a year before death), he must have confused the year because he obviously knew about this gift of righteousness in 1518 at Heidelberg (see, e.g., proofs 25-26; bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php#25).

³ Qtd. in Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, Third Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 112-113.

⁴ Qtd. in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, Revised Edition (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 70. I have modernized the English translation.