

Winter 2019 Newsletter

Detroit Bible Students Ecclesia

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JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

“Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 5:1

The most pressing internal problem facing the early church, was the question of faith vs. works. As the church began to grow, outsiders thought of it as just another Jewish sect. When the Bereans were commended by Paul for examining the Scriptures to prove his teachings (Acts 17:11), they were using the Old Testament scriptures, which was all the early congregations had. Acts 11:26 tells us that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. So, it is understandable that some confusion would be evident, and clarification of the issue was needed. The epistles to the Romans and Galatians are particularly focused on clearing up the controversy.

The congregations at Rome and Galatia were quite diverse. Some in the church were Jews trained under the Law while others were Gentiles. Many of the Jewish brethren, schooled in the precepts of Moses, had difficulty relinquishing the Law and its observances and sought to impose them on the Gentiles as well. Because outward compliance with rules is so much easier for mankind, Jesus took great pains to show that true obedience is in the heart

(Matthew 5:14-42; Romans 12:1,2) The new Christians needed to learn that the Law's purpose was to be a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ (Galatians 3:24; 4:1-4); to keep them separate from worldly pollutions.

Paul attempted to help them understand that when they accepted Jesus as the Messiah, they came into a new relationship with God which they could never claim through the Law (Galatians 2:16). None of the children of Adam could ever keep the Law perfectly, nor did the Law make anything perfect (Hebrews 7:19). Paul asked, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:1-3, *English Standard Version*).

Even with the apostles as personal instructors, the subject of justification by faith was a difficult concept for the early church to fully grasp. We can see through the

Scriptures that biblical understanding takes time, patience, study, and the holy spirit to illuminate our minds to know and understand the will of God (1 Peter 1:10-13).



The medieval church also had its difficulty understanding justification by faith. Although it was not a controversy about being righteous by keeping the Law, the Medieval church taught that salvation was acquired by works through penances, prayers, indulgences, or the veneration of relics to be performed by the penitent one.

This ideology also became a great source of revenue and power for the reigning church at Rome and led to many excesses, tricking believers into a false sense of security. Murderers, covenant breakers, liars, and other wicked persons could gain forgiveness for any crime by the purchase of an indulgence. A few coins in the coffer and one could become white as snow. One could even pay for absolution in advance (but see 1 Corinthians 6:9,10). Oh, how Jesus' sacrifice was made null and void!

The Reformation became inevitable as the church's venality hit epic proportions. The most prominent voice of the Reformation was Martin Luther. Perhaps his own personal weight of unworthiness drove his zeal to trumpet the message of "justification by faith" (Romans 5:1). In defense of his departure from the teachings of the established church he said, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God" (Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950). We should all have our consciences "captive to the Word of God."

It was the Luthers, the Tyndales, the Zwinglis, and the Melancthons of the Reformation who heralded literally in the mountains, valleys, and hills that salvation is free! (J. H. Merle d'Aubigne, *For God and His People*, p. XXV. Reprinted: BJU Press, 2000.) The Apostle Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10, *ESV*).

This rediscovered element of truth lifted the personal weight of unworthiness off the shoulders of the Lord's people. God covers our iniquities through the blood of his Son (1 John 1:7; Ephesians 2:13)—clothes us with the robe of Christ's righteousness (Isaiah 61:10)—and this mechanism gives us access to commune directly with him. We have no need to approach God through a church, an organization, or through indulgences, relics, special services, or the lighting of candles. We have the privilege to approach him through, and because of, Jesus' death, the blood of atonement. This is the conduit that God designed for sinful man to draw near him. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, *ESV*).

We are not "saved" by engaging in unique practices, or celebrating holy days, buying indulgences, attending services, doing social uplift works, or receiving special gifts of the spirit. Jesus warned, "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons, in your name, and done many wonders in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:22,23) All such efforts to earn salvation, other than through a sincere belief in Jesus and attention to his words, become a snare and delusion from the Adversary (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). From the Scriptures we know that salvation can be obtained only one way, and one way alone, through faith in him who died for us.

Does this then mean that we need only take the name of Jesus and then we can go on living as we did before? Certainly not! Paul said, "to the nations I made known the command to repent and to turn to God, doing works worthy of repentance" (Acts 26:20). James said, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17). So, does this mean that the Christian must engage in rescue/relief work or go on pilgrimages or clock hours of witness work? Are these the "works worthy of repentance?" Why did Jesus reject those works that were done in his name? They were works of show, not of contrition of heart.

Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 13:34), and "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). What does this mean? The Apostle Peter gives us some help by listing some works of the spirit. "Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if

these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5-8). Paul told the Philippian brethren, “Only let your conduct be as becomes the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 2:27). “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

“...Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called...Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness....Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers...Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:1,23-32). “Then having these promises...let us cleanse ourselves from all defilements of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

It is not until we examine the history of the church that we appreciate our present favored position. We have the means and ability to purchase Bibles, Bible helps, and vast electronic resources that give us insight into the Scriptures. We are truly rich if only we will take advantage of the blessings afforded us! As Paul wrote to Timothy, “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15) We need to “redeem the time” (Colossians 4:5), and, fixing our eyes on Jesus, “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22). “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and drink up the word of God. Pray for wisdom from above and allow the holy spirit to transform our conscience making it “captive to the Word of God.”

We have the privilege of traveling through the chronicles of Christian history and reflecting on the faithful voices of the past. Those earnest seekers of truth were carrying the torch of truth. Yes, they were faithful, quiet, humble brethren who had the privilege in God’s plans and purposes to act out their lives in accordance to his will. Their desire, just like the Master’s, was to do the will of Him who sent them (John 6:38).

While many saints of past ages “sailed through bloody seas,” as the hymn phrases it, the test of our time might be “days of ease.” The Apostle cautioned us, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the

world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 John 2:15,16). Let us not conform to the opinions, customs, or policies of this age, but live as though the New Age of Christ’s glorious earthly kingdom has begun (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-5; Isaiah 35:10).

There is no grander time, no grander place, and no grander opportunity than that of now being workmen with Christ (2 Corinthians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 3:9). For us it is but a “reasonable service” (Romans 12:1), but it is so great a miracle of grace that we have been given the privilege to know the great “love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19) that one can hardly conceive of the favor. Yes, we have been given the ability to know him, touch him, hear him (1 John 1:1) through the pages of the Scriptures.

In past issues of this newsletter we have presented internal evidences such as fulfilled prophecy, scientific insights, and cosmic principles that point to the hand of a Creator, that show that the Bible is the revealed Word of the God of the Universe. That its testimony regarding the fall of man into sin and the recovery of the race through the sacrificial death of Jesus is also true, and amply demonstrates the foreknowledge of God. There is no salvation through any other god conceived by man. However, that does not mean that the vast majority of all who have ever lived are lost forever. Christ died for ALL, and ALL who are in their graves will one day hear his voice and come forth (John 5:28,29).

As we recognize the magnitude of Christ’s love for us and for ALL men (1 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:2), may our study of the Word increase our appreciation for our God and Jesus, His Son, who gave his life that we may all have life through Him (1 Corinthians 15:22).

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