

Justification by Faith and Liberty of Conscience

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The first sermon by Jesus, as recorded in Luke 4:18, was about liberty. His text was Isaiah 61:1-3. Both Jesus and Isaiah joined liberty to the gospel. Jesus proclaimed liberty to those whose consciences were blinded and bound – “captives” to another’s will. Because they were bound to the enemies will, they hated the message of freedom proclaimed by Jesus and so they sought to kill Him. However, because Christ’s work was not finished, they were unable to accomplish their desire to destroy Him. His public work had just begun with this message of freedom. Later, Jesus surrendered to torture and death rather than to surrender His liberty of conscience. In death, Jesus emancipated humanity¹ and gave assurance of God’s insistence on freedom of conscience.

John followed Jesus in this as observed in Rev 15:2 revealing the fact that God’s people retain their liberty of conscience in victory over the beast and his image, even, if need be, at the cost of their lives. The third angel’s message, especially under its “loud cry” in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit illustrated by the metaphor of the “latter rain” is what gives the victory of freedom of conscience during the days of persecution just prior to Christ’s second coming.

In a recent exchange of ideas with two men reputed to be advocates of religious liberty, one of whom was a teacher of philosophy and who participated on a discussion panel regarding liberty of conscience from a legal viewpoint, I asked the following question: “Can a person understand liberty of conscience if he does not understand justification by faith?” The philosopher thought for a moment, then replied “No.” The other man grew strangely silent as he pondered the question.

The Purpose of this Paper

The above question leads to this presentation. The relationship between justification by faith and liberty of conscience is of the utmost importance and urgency, especially for SDA ministers. Liberty of conscience is derived from justification by faith. The message commanded by God to

¹ “With His own blood He has signed the emancipation papers of the race.” (*Ministry of Healing*, 89).

be given to the world² is the uplifting of Christ and His righteousness resulting in justification by faith in Him alone.

When God justifies, He sets us free. Involved in this is liberty of conscience, freedom to choose, religious liberty and all other freedoms. It is justification that brings with it life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In Rom 6:7, justification by faith has to do with liberty. Δικαίωω (*deek-eye-o'*) is the word here used for release from the power of sin: “He who has died has been freed (δικαίωω: signifies “to justify,” as in the RV, “is justified” lit.: “has been justified”) from sin.” (Rom 6:7).³ In every other place where the word δικαίωω is translated, in the New Testament, it is translated as justification (with the exception of “righteous” one time in Rev 22:11).⁴ This is no anomaly in Romans. Freedom, or liberty, is not something different, abnormal, nor peculiar to justification. It is an essential part of justification.

Justification by faith carries liberty of conscience on the face of it in order that liberty of conscience may achieve its recognition and acceptance with all other freedoms that flow from justification. Liberty of conscience is an expression of justification. Based on justification, freedom of conscience is essential to all other freedoms, rights, and pursuits.

When we think of justification by faith and liberty of conscience we think of Luther who championed both. However, before his understanding that justification is by faith in Christ, Luther was a foreigner to justification and to liberty. For years he struggled because he did not understand liberty, faith, or the righteousness of God. He did not understand “the gospel of Christ” in which “the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom 1:16,17). He thought God’s righteousness was something that had to be achieved by strenuous effort, rather than to be received by faith in Christ alone. Luther associated God’s righteousness with His righteous anger against sinners that needed to be appeased. None of the dictates of scholastic theology, nor the tried ways of discipline, confession, penance, not even partaking of the sacraments gave Luther any certainty about salvation. But finally, the pivotal text for him was Romans 1:17.

² *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p.92.

³ “Note. In Rom. 6:7, the verb *dikaioo*, translated ‘is freed,’ signifies ‘to justify,’ as in the RV, ‘is justified,’ i.e., in the legal sense...” Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W. (1996). *Vol. 2: Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (255).

⁴ Stephen's Textus Receptus with Morphology. Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 27th Edition does not use δικαίωω in Rev 22:11, but instead uses δικαιοσύνη.

“At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words ‘the righteousness of God is revealed in it [the gospel], as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith,’ I began to understand that ‘righteousness of God’ as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; and this sentence, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed,’ to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘the righteous person lives by faith.’ This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. ... And now, where I had once hated the phrase, ‘the righteousness of God,’ I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me.”⁵

Three times Luther either heard an audible voice or sensed impressions from within his heart that “The just shall live by faith.” These three times were in different places, at different times. The first time was in Wittenberg, Germany, but without making a lasting impression on him. The next two were in Bologna and in Rome, Italy. On his journey to Rome Luther fell deathly sick while in Bologna. In anguish and terror he felt the pangs of death.

“As he waited for death he thought he heard a voice crying to him and saying, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ It seemed as if the voice spoke to him from heaven, so vivid was the impression it made. This was the second time this passage of Scripture had been borne into his mind, as if one had spoken it to him.”⁶

After he heard that message, Luther got up from his death bed completely healed, and so he continued his journey to Rome. When Luther first saw of Rome he fell to his knees and exulted, “Hail, holy Rome! I salute thee, thrice holy through the blood of 110,000 martyrs shed there!”⁷

But while in Rome, Luther still had no freedom of conscience. He did many things to cleanse himself to make himself worthy of merit with God both for himself and for others. Finally, he went to La Scala Santa (“The Holy Stairs”) also known as Pilate’s Staircase. Luther’s purpose there was to get relatives out of Purgatory. Along with fellow pilgrims, he crawled the stairs on his knees.

“At every step he prayed the Lord’s Prayer, and thus had nine years’ indulgence for every step – Pope Leo IV said so. [Supposedly,] the step on which Jesus broke down is marked with a cross, and on this step Luther got a double indulgence of eighteen years. Twenty-eight steps to the top, and then his grandfather Heini “was out of purgatory.” ... Luther

⁵ Christian History Magazine-Issue 34: Martin Luther: “The Reformer’s Early Years.”

⁶ James Wiley, *History of Protestantism*, vol 1, Bk 5, Ch 6 “Luther’s Journey to Rome”

⁷ Wiley, *Ibid*.

says he was sorry his parents were still living; for, had they been dead, he could then and there have gotten them out of purgatory.”⁸

Out of Darkness and Into the Light

Shortly after returning to Germany, from Rome, Luther was asked to teach at the newly built University in Wittenberg. It was from Rome seven years yet before he nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. While teaching at the University Luther worked on and finished his doctorate.

When the light of justification by faith finally dawned in Luther’s mind, he saw the relationship between it and liberty of conscience.

By the word we must refute and expel what has gained a place and influence by violence. I would not resort to force against the superstitious, nor even the unbelievers. Whosoever believeth, let him draw nigh, and he that believeth not, let him stand afar off. Let there be no compulsion. I have been laboring for liberty of conscience. Liberty is the very essence of faith.⁹

“Luther ... established freedom of conscience, whose defense he made an individual obligation, as a rational principle for the state.”¹⁰ “[I]t was the Reformation that first set a rigid limit to the absolute power of the state.”¹¹

Because of this great light, the medieval age and all that it encompassed socially and politically – the union of church and state along with feudalism, were laid waste. Western Civilization was changed.

“Out of Luther’s struggles emerged a theology that shook the foundations of medieval Christendom. Though Luther appreciated the protests made by such forerunners as John Wycliffe of England and John Hus of Bohemia, he recognized his own efforts as qualitatively different. ‘They attacked the life,’ he said. ‘I attack the doctrine.’ ”¹²

As he himself put it at another time, “Others before me have contested practice. But to contest doctrine, that is to grab the goose by the neck!”¹³ Others in addition to Wycliffe and Hus worked

⁸ William Dallmann, *Martin Luther: His Life and His Labor for the Plain People*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo. (1917), p. 37.

⁹ Merle D'Aubigne *History of The Reformation*, b. 9, ch. 8. (Four times E.G. White quoted this reference: “The Signs of the Times,” October 25, 1883 par. 9; *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol 4, p.148.2 (1884); *The Great Controversy*, p. 189.2 (1888); *The Great Controversy*, p. 189.2 (1911).

¹⁰ Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹² *Martin Luther—The Early Years: Christian History, Issue 34*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.

¹³ *Ibid.*

for reform within the Church of Rome. However, contemporaries with Luther such as Dutch scholar Erasmus distanced themselves from Luther all the while attempting to bring about reform in the Papacy, but to no avail.

We pick up another thread in the tapestry woven through Luther by the Spirit of God. Going back several hundred years to the conflict between French philosopher-theologian Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and Archbishop Anselm (1033/34–1109) of Canterbury, although diametrically opposed theologically, they both desired reformation in the Church of Rome. Abelard developed his Moral Influence Theory of atonement partially as a reaction to Anselm's Satisfaction Theory.

Luther's understanding was closer to Anselm than to Abelard. Abelard denied that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but taught instead that His death was designed to greatly impress mankind with a sense of God's love, resulting in softening the heart and leading to repentance and thus reformation. Accordingly, the Atonement was not directed towards God with the purpose of maintaining His justice, but towards man with the purpose of persuading him to right action.

His doctrine was subjective only – what happens within the believer, by the infusion of love. “ ‘Justification’ has become for Abelard a divine infusion of love.”¹⁴ (And further, Abelard's theory did not help him personally.) John Stott summarizes Abelard's practice and disagreement with Anselm:

He [Abelard] is best known for his passionate attachment to Heloise (whom he secretly married after the birth of their son), which had such tragic consequences for them both. In his public academic life, however, his scintillating lectures and debates attracted large audiences. A younger contemporary of Anselm, he agreed with him in repudiating the notion that Christ's death was a ransom paid to the devil. But he violently disagreed with his teaching that it was a satisfaction for sin.¹⁵

Luther definitely did not follow Abelard and his Moral Influence Theory. It appears that neither Abelard nor Anselm dealt with liberty of conscience. Part of the Moral Influence Theory found its way into the doctrine that opposed Luther and justification by faith. The doctrine of Rome was/is the infusion of love through sacramental graces making one righteous in order to be justified. But justification and liberty of conscience were never afforded to heretics by Rome. For the Papacy there could be no justification by faith in Christ alone. Luther's Scriptural doctrine of

¹⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, InterVarsity Press (2006), p. 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

grace – justification by faith – was his doctrine of offense (attack) against the doctrines of the papacy. This was the doctrine by which Luther grabbed “the goose by the neck.”

Luther argued that Christians were free of the arbitrary control of either the church or the state. God alone is Lord of the conscience. In 1517 at the tribunal in Worms, Germany Luther said his conscience were taken captive by the Word of God alone.¹⁶

Justification by faith in Christ alone freed society from the religious subjectivism and stagnation, which had crippled progress. The Reformation redirected the energy of Christians towards applying the Rulership of Christ to all areas of life – intellectually, politically, socially and economically.

Along with the teaching of justification by faith and freedom of conscience, Luther championed universal education and literacy and religious liberty. (There is a difference between religious liberty and freedom of conscience in that religious liberty can be taken from us, but liberty of conscience cannot. It can be surrendered, but never taken.)

While Luther proclaimed vigorously justification by faith in Christ alone he later wavered on the principle of liberty of conscience during the Peasant’s Rebellion in which he sided with the Princes against the peasants. This led to a Protestant union of church with the German state. (Calvin also set up a church-state union all the while teaching justification by faith for the elect).

Non-intended Consequences of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith and its Inherent Liberty of Consequence

The first non-intended consequence was the Protestant Reformation. Luther never intended on an independent Protestant movement. This came about as the result of Papal opposition to the teachings of justification by faith and liberty of conscience. In Protestantism, liberty of conscience is freedom of religious belief and practice. This was taught and practiced in the Anabaptist Radical Reformation. This movement advocated that neither the state nor the church had any right to restrict conscience. Many persons within this movement gave up their lives

¹⁶“Since your most serene majesty and your high mightiness require of me a simple, clear, and direct answer, I will give one; and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the councils; because it is as clear as day that they have often erred and contradicted each other. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture or by cogent reasons; if I am not satisfied by the very texts that I have cited; and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's word, I neither can nor will retract anything, for it cannot be right for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me! Amen!” Luther, as quoted by Merle d'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, b. 7, ch. 8.

rather than giving up their liberty of conscience. (Much later this principle of liberty of conscience was seen and enacted in Virginia: The Virginia Bill of Rights of 1776, Article 16 insists that “all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience”).

From the Reformation, following freedom of conscience, came the “priesthood of all believers” developed, not by Luther, but by Calvin. This led to another non-intended consequence of justification which is Capitalism in place of feudalism. Capitalism is the economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state or by the church. Capitalism emphasizes greater productivity in a free market economy. Capitalism was/is the economic practice of which Protestantism is the theory. (But today, because of the distancing of America politically and spiritually from Protestantism there is a desire on the part of some Americans to return to a feudal-like system of hierarchical control, which is in harmony with the future worldwide economic control as outlined in Rev 13 when economic sanctions will be put in place relative to the mark of the beast.)

German sociologist Max Weber coined the phrase “the Protestant work ethic.” He wrote a book in 1905 entitled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in which he argued that capitalism historically emerged in Protestant countries because they instilled those virtues that led to the development of capitalism: hard work, honesty, frugality, thrift, and punctuality. These virtues, coupled with the idea of a calling, provided the impetus ending serfdom and establishing a free political and economic order.

Weber argued that Protestants, beginning with Luther, had re-conceptualised work as a duty which benefits both the individual and society as a whole. Thus, the Catholic idea of good works was transformed into an obligation to work diligently as a sign of grace. Whereas Catholicism teaches that good works are required of Catholics to be saved (viewing salvation as a future event), the Reformers taught that good works were only a consequence of an already-received salvation in Christ alone.

There has been a revitalization of Weber's interest, particularly in a New York Times article, published in 2003, where the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development released the article that seems to confirm that

“the experience of Western Europe in the past quarter-century offers an unexpected confirmation of the Protestant ethic. To put it bluntly, we are witnessing the decline and fall of the Protestant work ethic in Europe. This represents the stunning triumph of secularization in Western Europe -- the simultaneous decline of both Protestantism and its unique work ethic.”¹⁷

The theology and values of the Bible, rediscovered by the Protestant Reformers in the 16th century, have been the principal ideas creating what we know as Western civilization.

It was not Luther’s intention to create a new civilization; his intention was to proclaim the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. Although his life was dedicated to a far more important activity than building an earthly nation, city or civilization, what we have today comes from him out of the Protestant Reformation founded on the doctrine of justification by faith.

Eventually the separation of church and state emerged within Protestantism, especially through the Radical Reformation, led by the Anabaptists and followed by the early Pilgrims to America. This led to religious and civil liberties and constitutional government, especially in the United States which has led the free world in the establishment of democratic forms of government. The following spiral illustration captures the non-intended consequences based on the doctrine of justification by faith from the Protestant Reformation.



¹⁷ “The World; Why America Outpaces Europe (Clue: The God Factor),” New York Times, June 8, 2003.

America the New Experiment

French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, observed that the unprecedented liberty, justice and productivity achieved in the United States of America was/is a direct result of its Christian principles. “There is no country in the world where the Christian religion maintains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”

German historian Von Ranke is cited thus:

“The 19th Century German historian, Leopold Von Ranke described John Calvin as the ‘virtual founder of America.’ Reformer John Calvin laid the foundations for the English and American Bills of Rights, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the privilege against self-incrimination, the independence of judiciary, the right of habeas corpus, the right not to be imprisoned without cause, and other key principles of separation of powers, checks and balances, constitutional and representative government, etc.”¹⁸

Historian Carlton Hayes, in *Christianity and Western Civilization*, observed: “Wherever Christian ideals have been generally accepted and their practice sincerely attempted, there is a dynamic liberty; and wherever Christianity is being ignored or rejected, persecuted or chained to the state, there is tyranny.”¹⁹

America has been known as the land of liberty based on the Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence from Britain, the Constitution with its Bill of Rights are all based on Protestant doctrine. No other religion on earth could have produced the Constitutional Democratic Republic of the United States.

Edward Everett, in an oration on the Pilgrim founders of this nation, said: “Did they look for a retired spot, inoffensive for its obscurity, and safe in its remoteness, where the little church of Leyden might enjoy the freedom of conscience? Behold the *mighty regions* over which, in *peaceful conquest*, . . . they have borne the banners of the cross!”²⁰

The second paragraph of the Declaration is most widely known: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The first right from our Creator is life. Before liberty and the pursuit of happiness there first must be life. And

¹⁸ The Reformation Society, South Africa. <http://www.reformation.sa.org/index.php/reformation/115-the-reformation-roots-of-western-civilisation>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Speech delivered at Plymouth, Massachusetts, Dec. 22, 1824, page 11. Quoted in *The Great Controversy*, pp 440-441.

life is the direct product of justification which in turn is based on the Cross of Christ as stated in Rom 5:18 – “[T]hrough one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life,” then comes “liberty [of conscience] and the pursuit of happiness.”

The Declaration of Independence, in harmony with the Creator’s gifts of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” was the foundation upon which a new nation was established on earth, one previously never in existence as such.

Instead of the prevailing Rex Lex (the king (and pope) is the law), the forefathers of America championed Lex Rex (the Law is king!) coming from, and in, Constitutional authority. Justification by faith based on Sola Scriptura eroded the foundations of ecclesiastical and political totalitarianism. The Protestant emphasis on justification by faith and the supreme authority of Scripture led to the concept of representative government and constitutional authority as the supreme law of the land. As a result,

Republicanism and Protestantism became the fundamental principles of the nation. These principles are the secret of its power and prosperity. The oppressed and downtrodden throughout Christendom have turned to this land with interest and hope. Millions have sought its shores, and the United States has risen to a place among the most powerful nations of the earth.²¹

America and Adventism

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights prepared the way for the Advent message and the proclamation of the “everlasting gospel.” God chose that Adventism would arise and thrive in a region where there existed “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

However, during the late 1800s the principles of this nation were about to be compromised. For twenty years the National Reform Movement (which began in 1863, the same year Seventh-day Adventists was organized as an entity under the Constitution of the United States in the State of Michigan) pushed to make this a “Christian nation.” In 1888 pressure for passage of a national Sunday law was introduced by Senator Blair of New Hampshire. At that time, this became the front and center issue within the United States.

God raised up A.T. Jones to proclaim justification by faith, in Christ alone, to our Church in order to prepare it for the onslaught brought on by a national law enforcing Sunday as the day of worship. When the message of justification by faith was rejected by a majority of our leadership, Jones became the leading opponent against the national Sunday law. As Religious Leader of the

²¹ *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, p. 441.

General Conference Jones went to Washington to contest the Blair Sunday Law. And by God's grace he succeeded in preventing it from becoming a national law at that time.

There is no way possible that anyone can endure the pressures of persecution that will come from a national Sunday law apart from the experience of justification by faith which comes to us in the end time setting of the "message of justification by faith" which "is the third angel's message in verity."²² Liberty of conscience, based on justification by faith in Christ, alone, will again be the main issue in the closing scenes of earth's history. The Sabbath will be seen as the sign of justification by faith and its consequent, liberty of conscience, as opposed to the Sunday which will be demonstrated to be the sign of righteousness by law and thus the denial of liberty of conscience. Justification by faith and the Sabbath will be equally opposed both by Protestants and Catholics. W. W. Prescott has insightful discernment into this issue. During the 1893 General Conference he did a series of sermons on the Holy Spirit. In Sermon # 5 he proclaimed:

[T]he time will soon be here when it will be practically as unpalatable a truth to tell them [those urging the mark of the beast upon people] that there is life and salvation only in Jesus Christ; to tell them that they do not know anything about justification by faith. And how shall we tell it unless we know the truth concerning it? I say that it will be just as unpalatable to them to tell them that truth as to tell them that in receiving the Sunday institution they are receiving the mark of the beast. So the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus will be equally unpalatable to teach in every nation.

Perhaps some have thought we have now found a doctrine upon which we shall have clear sailing, and that we can always preach justification by faith, and people will agree with us. It is not so. That is to say, it is not so if the genuine Protestant doctrine of justification by faith is preached, and not the papal doctrine of justification by faith, and it will be received as a favorable message, just as we can preach the papal doctrine of the sabbath, and it will be received. But if the Protestant – the true Christian – doctrine of the Sabbath is taught, and likewise if the true Christian doctrine of justification by faith is taught, the time is near at hand when one will be just as unpalatable as the other, and both will meet with the same opposition. And yet we are taught that we have a message that we are not to cringe to declare, and we are not to beg the pardon of the people for telling them the truth.²³

In Summary and Conclusion.

We have considered the concept of justification by faith and liberty of conscience, briefly, from the time of Christ with the bulk of this paper centering in the Protestant Reformation.

²² "The Review and Herald," April 1, 1890.

²³ W. W. Prescott, "The Promise of the Holy Spirit No. 5" General Conference Bulletin, 1893, pp 253, 254.

Drawing from the results of the Reformation we considered some of the non-intended consequences of justification by faith including the separation of church and state, religious and civil liberties, capitalism and economics as opposed to feudalism, and constitutional governments resulting in the United States as well as liberty of conscience. We also extended deliberative thought to the relationship between this form of government and the rise of Adventism, ending with the same battle to be fought as that during the Protestant Reformation over justification by faith versus that justification which comes by law. The issue before us will be over liberty of conscience. The Sabbath of God's law is about this liberty. Sunday law is about the coercion of conscience. So, it behooves us to understand and experience justification by faith, in Christ alone, which is the "loud cry" message of the third angel with its consequent freedom of conscience.