

# Through faith alone 'How can I find God?'

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*This is the second of four addresses, subtitled, 'Key themes of the Protestant Reformation', by one of the Editorial Board of Evangel. It was originally given in an Anglican context.*

**KEYWORDS:** Reformation, theology, justification, righteousness of Christ, Martin Luther, condemnation, righteousness of God, grace, trust, God's word, Holy Spirit, good works, perfect sacrifice

If we watch history programmes on the television, we hear 'the Reformation' referred to, and we are told that it had a dramatic impact on the course of British (or European) history. But what was it? The Reformation was a 16th century movement of renewal, which sought to return to the teaching of the Bible and the early church Fathers. It had a dramatic impact on Western and Central Europe, because whereas before virtually all Western Christians had belonged to the Catholic Church, the Reformation resulted in the appearance of a range of new religious bodies: Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and so on. The religious landscape of Europe today owes a great deal to the events of the Reformation. So if we want to understand 'how the churches came to be the way they are', we need to understand what happened four or five centuries ago.

In these studies we are thinking about 'ultimate questions' which highlight what the Reformation has to say to us today. The thought of the Reformers has often been summed up in four phrases: 'by grace alone, by faith alone, Scripture alone, and Christ alone'. Nowadays, we tend to say, 'that's just theology' when we mean that what a politician is saying is too theoretical and irrelevant to real life, but 'theology' – the study of God and how we can know him – lay at the heart of events during the Reformation era. It's true that other circumstances were involved, such as Henry VIII's desire to change his wife, German peasant resentment at oppression, the longings of various nations for a greater degree of independence. But the Reformation was primarily a movement fuelled by deeply-felt concerns about our understanding of God, and how we relate to him.

The question addressed here is, '**How can I find God?**'; in other words, how can I know God? And the Reformation response is '**by faith alone**'. The 39 Articles were produced in the 16th century as a summary of the Church of England's teaching. Article 11 says that 'We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings: wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort . . .' What does that mean?

For the Reformers, **justification**, to put it simply, **means that we are declared to be accepted by God**, 'in the right' with him. Our sins are no longer counted against us, and we are seen as sharing in the righteousness of Christ. And that

happens as we place our faith in Jesus Christ as the one who by becoming man, dying and rising again has done all that is needed to reconcile us to God. So 'Justification by faith' is the phrase often used to sum up the Reformers' understanding of how we are saved, and they drew on Romans and Galatians as the sources for their teaching.

To explain why it is 'by faith alone' that we can come to know God, let me tell you **the story of Martin Luther**, 'the monk who shook the world', who played such a crucial role in the events known as the Reformation. His own experience of seeking and finding God shaped his teaching on the subject, and his teaching has influenced generations of Western Christians. In the 15th and early 16th centuries, if you had gone to your priest to share your spiritual anxieties and seek his counsel, you would have been told 'Do what you can'. In other words, if you do what you can to turn to God, God will meet you and enable you to carry on what you have begun – a sort of medieval version of 'God helps those who help themselves'.

But there was one snag with this approach: how could you ever be sure you had done your best? This was what troubled Luther. He recalled that he was the most zealous of all the monks in his monastery: he fasted so severely that his health was affected, and confessed his sins in such scrupulous detail that his superior got exasperated with him, but he never felt that he had done all that he could, and so he was not good enough for God to accept him. He felt threatened by the idea of the righteousness of God. Luther believed that God was righteous because he judged everybody impartially, according to his perfect standards. He accepted all who met the standards and rejected all who fell short of the mark. And since everyone did fall short of the mark, Luther reasoned, humanity was left without any hope. God's righteousness must inevitably result in the condemnation of sinners because none were capable of meeting the conditions for acceptance with God. So Luther came to hate the phrase, 'the righteousness of God'; he said that he hated God, even while he was trying his hardest to please him. He became preoccupied with the question, 'How can I find a gracious God?'

After some years of this agonising struggle, the penny dropped. Luther was meditating on Romans 1:17, which says that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, and he came to the conclusion that the phrase 'the righteousness of God' was not speaking about what God *is*, but about what he *gives*. The good news is that the righteousness of God is not a righteousness which leads him to *punish* the sinner for failing to meet the standards, but a righteousness which God graciously *gives* to the sinner. And God gives his righteousness to us as we place our trust in Christ. So the righteousness which secures our acceptance with God is his,

not ours. Luther regarded his discovery as a great breakthrough.

Luther was not the only one, and may not have been the first, to rediscover this. The Catholic 'Evangelicals' were a group of scholarly reformers in Italy. One was the Venetian diplomat, Gasparo Contarini, who later became a cardinal. He had a similar experience to Luther's in 1511, and later wrote: ' . . . no one can at any time justify himself through his works or purge his mind of its inclinations. One must turn to the divine grace obtained through faith in Jesus Christ . . . We must justify ourselves through the righteousness of another, that is, of Christ, and when we join ourselves to him, his righteousness is made ours.'

The major Reformers were aware that, whatever their other differences, they agreed on justification by faith. Lutheranism was to view it as 'the article by which the Church stands or falls'. But they did not believe that faith in itself was some kind of meritorious quality. We do not merit salvation by exercising faith in Christ. **Faith is simply the way in which we receive him.** It is the hand by which we grasp Christ.

So, for the Reformers, **what mattered was the object of a person's faith.** People could put their faith in many things: rituals surviving from pre-Christian centuries, doing good works, the intercession of the saints on our behalf, and so on. But for the Reformers, faith in anything and anyone other than Christ was misplaced. Indeed, one Swiss reformer, Zwingli, called such faith 'idolatry' because it was trusting in a human creation rather than in God who alone should be the object of faith. What matters is not how strong our faith is, but what it is in. And for them, Christian faith was nothing other than faith in Christ as the one who alone could rescue fallen human beings and restore them to God's favour.

### And what is faith?

There are two aspects to it:

1. **'the faith'**: understanding and acceptance of the good news about Jesus Christ. We need to hear the message, and to give our assent to it as true. But faith is not only that.
2. **trust.** Erasmus defined 'faith' as trust or confidence, not merely intellectual assent to Christian teaching. Not only do we accept the Christian gospel as true, but we entrust ourselves to the one of whom it speaks – Jesus Christ. Faith includes believing that the events of salvation history took place for us, that when Christ died and rose again, he did so for us. We acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves, and we place our confidence in him as the one who is able to save us, and who has promised to do so for all who come to him.

### What is the result of that kind of faith?

Well, it unites the believer with Christ so that he becomes present within us. What Luther called an 'exchange' takes place: our sin becomes his, and his righteousness becomes ours. And because the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ in this way, we begin to change on the inside. As it was later put, 'it is faith alone which saves, but saving faith is never alone'. So justification by faith is not, as some have claimed, a 'legal fiction' – something which is true on paper but false in reality. The person who has been justified by faith is not free to go off and live as they like, as some of my friends used to claim. Instead, if we have been united with Christ by faith, we shall find it 'breaking out' into good works – not *in order to* get ourselves accepted by God, but *because* we have been accepted by him. We do good works because we are righteous, rather than becoming righteous as a result of doing good works.

### And how does faith come?

Well, Romans 10:17, another favourite text of the Reformers, says, 'faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God'. In other words, it is as we hear God's word read and preached that the Holy Spirit enables us to respond to it in faith. If we want to strengthen our faith, it's a good thing to meditate on God's promises as they are presented to us in word and sacrament. It's helpful to remind ourselves of some of the Bible's promises, such as the one in John 6:37, 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away'. The Reformers understood that our faith is often weak. Like our good works, it is always imperfect; we could never rely on either for God to accept us. But the gospel says that we are accepted not because of anything we do, but because of what Christ has done. Richard Hooker, the 16th century Anglican theologian said, 'God doth justify the believing sinner, not for the worthiness of his belief, but for his worthiness who is believed.' In other words, God accepts us not because our faith is up to scratch, but because our faith is in the Saviour whom he has provided. And Christ is a worthy object for our faith because, as we say in the Communion Service, on the cross he made 'one full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, satisfaction, and oblation for the sins of the whole world'. (cf. Hebrews 10). I love to share in the Eucharist each week because it is a regular opportunity to feed on God's promises and so to have my faith strengthened as I realise what God has done for me.

Through the ages people have asked how they can be accepted with God, 'right with God', and the Christian faith answers, 'by God's grace alone', because it is God who makes the first move to bring us to himself, and 'by faith alone', because that is how we respond to what God has done in Christ. The question for us to ask ourselves is whether we have ever made that response.