

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Through Faith Alone

A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law (Romans 3:28).

"By faith alone" was the motto of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. It was radical then. It is just as radical now. It does not mean quietism, that is, "Let Christ live the victorious life in you." Nor does it mean the slothful indolence of spiritual do-nothingism. The Reformation was revolutionary. "Faith alone" was not the slogan of a delicate, cloistered piety. It was the battle-cry of a movement that turned the world upside down.

What does "faith alone" mean? "Faith alone" is the confession that all which is necessary for our acceptance with God has been done by God himself in Jesus Christ. It is an acknowledgment that Christ himself, in our name and our behalf, met all our obligations before the bar of eternal justice. This redemptive act was so complete and perfect that we cannot and need not add anything to it. "Faith alone" means that we cannot in the least contribute to our salvation, but that we must submit to what God has already done – fully and completely.

"Faith alone" does not mean that faith in itself will make us pleasing and acceptable to God. Only one is righteous. Only one is pleasing. "Faith alone" is a confession that God's saving work has been done completely outside of our own experience. There are some who will admit that God alone saves, but they imagine that this saving work is done inside of them. But faith is always directed to the outside-of-

me action of God in Jesus Christ. As John Bunyan wrote, "It is the righteousness which resides with a person in Heaven which justifies me, a sinner, on Earth." The book of *Revelation* shows that the ongoing cause of Christ depends on the action of Christ in the control room of the universe. He alone can move history on toward its great consummation. He alone must come to bring salvation to those who eagerly wait for him (*Hebrews 9:28*). "Faith alone" is therefore a confession that salvation has been won by mighty, conquering acts in which we had no share.

"Faith alone" is a confession that our righteousness is not in us, but in Jesus Christ at God's right hand. It means that we continually confess that we are sinners and have no righteousness to justify us save that which is outside of us in the person of our mediator. It means that life is not fulfilled here and now in this historical process. We know that all that we do is unworthy. Our best deeds, when tried before the undimmed splendor of God's law, are no better than filthy rags. Notice that Isaiah says that all our "*righteousnesses*" – not our "*unrighteousnesses*" – are filthy rags.

We are never righteous before God by virtue of being born again, or by being filled with the Spirit, or by lives of new obedience, or by acts of "surrender" or "trust." The truth of "faith alone" is a great No! against the aspirations of humanism, Romanism, Pentecostalism, neo-evangelicalism, Arminianism, Wesleyanism, and all other -isms

which promise fulfillment through internal and earthly experience. "Faith alone" says, "Our completeness is realized only in him" (*Colossians* 2:10). "Faith alone" means that we admit our destitution. We confess before justice that we have nothing to pay.

"Faith alone" means that we come to God relying on his love and mercy and forgiveness. "Faith alone" is a humbling of man in the dust, a dependence upon God to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. Nothing empties a man like "faith alone." That is the reason why we are filled with the Spirit by faith (*Galatians* 3:14). Let us never speak of faith plus self-crucifixion, but of faith as self-crucifixion. "Faith alone" is the fountainhead of all true obedience. The first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me." In his *Catechism*, Martin Luther says:

A God is that to which we look for all good and where we resort for help in every time of need; to have a God is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart.... If your faith and confidence are right, then likewise your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your confidence is false, if it is wrong, then you have not the true God.... I say, whatever your heart... confides in, that is really your God.... If the heart is rightly disposed toward God and this commandment is kept, obedience to the remainder will follow of itself.

"Faith alone" frees a man for a life of good works. On the other hand, when a man fails to understand the Gospel and the law, he labors in vain and spends his strength for nothing. His effort is directed to do what God alone can do. Deep down, every soul is conscious of the need to be right with God. But justification is a great work that only God can do. When a man blindly spends his strength and effort to do God's work, he cannot be about his own work. When he works his fingers to the bone trying to save himself, he cannot love his neighbor, for he has no time for him. "The soul released from anxiety about itself is free to exercise concern about others. The heart is at leisure from itself to set

forward the salvation of those around" (W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* [London: Church Book Room Press, 1956], 194). This is a far cry from that false religion which removes all urgency for ethical action. "Faith alone" puts a man to work for God as nothing else can. It is not an opiate to put a Christian to sleep, but a stimulant to stir him to action. "Faith alone" is mighty. What makes it mighty is its mighty object. Like John the Baptist, it points away from itself to the Lamb of God, who alone takes away the sin of the world.