

CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

By David Streater

What did Christ Jesus accomplish on the Cross?

The answer to that question divided the church in the days of the Apostles between those who held to the teaching that Christ's sacrifice was a complete work and those who wished to return to Jewish rites and ceremonies and add them to the Gospel. Paul's uncompromising answer to those who wished to add to Christ's work is found in the opening chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians.

The clearest exposition of the Atonement is developed in the Apostle's letter to the Romans in which Paul deals with the righteousness of God. The lucidity of the Apostle's teaching on righteousness and justification – for these two ideas are closely related – shows that the ground of our justification is laid in Christ's sacrifice at Calvary. Yet by the middle of the second century there appeared to be a blindness falling upon the Church at large.

True, individuals continued to hold to the truth and multitudes would have held to the faith of Christ for salvation without being able to articulate precisely what they believed. Yet the historical evidence is that where biblical teaching is lacking in clarity and doctrines are not formulated plainly, error will soon replace it. It is the story of the Church through twenty centuries and not least our present age as we approach the millennium.

Luther's discovery

It is to Martin Luther, once described by Charles Spurgeon as, 'a bull headed German', that a debt of gratitude under God is owed for restoring the doctrines of salvation to those who believe. The occasion of the breach which divided the western Church was Luther's *Ninety Five Theses* published in 1517. In the theses which Luther set forward for debate – a common practice among scholars at that time – two articles demonstrated clearly the cleavage between Rome's doctrines and those of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther attacked two tenets which were fundamental to the Roman system of salvation. In emphatic terms he affirmed that salvation was the immediate gift of Christ and that the grace of God was received by faith alone. It was for these two doctrines that he was called upon to recant but refused.

To study Luther's journey into faith is important. He records that he was desperately afraid of the term, 'the righteousness of God.' This made him tremble because his interpretation was that this referred to the attributes of God. In the face of such holiness and righteousness, *where could a poor sinner turn for salvation?*

In the Roman fold he had been taught faith and works but such teaching left him unsatisfied and unshriven. Like the Apostle Paul, he had gone about to establish his own righteousness but failed. His long experience had left him able to follow the teaching of the Apostle and so he had come to understand that Paul's phrase, 'the righteousness of God' did not mean God's attributes but the provision of a righteousness in Christ which was acceptable to God, to be received by faith.

As Luther had endured for many a long year a travail of soul through the distortion of the biblical Gospel so now he was able to rejoice in the liberty which the true Gospel had brought to him. It was

this doctrine, with the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, which swept through Europe in the early part of the sixteenth century.

The Ground of Justification

Luther's question, 'Where could a sinful man turn for salvation?' needs rephrasing: How shall a man be declared righteous before God? There are two answers to that question. If the question is asked in a moral sense then Luther's answer is incorrect. However, there is another way of asking the question which is in a legal sense. Effectively, it is asking a different question.

The two questions use the same words, but start from differing presuppositions. The moral question can be answered by the activity of the person as to whether he is good or bad. The legal question asks only whether the claims of divine justice are satisfied. If they are satisfied then the person is declared to be righteous by God. Luther saw that it was the legal question that Paul was asking and answering in his letter to the Romans.

Justification by God is not merely pardon but the pronouncement of a legal righteousness. It is not to make inherently righteous or holy but to declare – not the state – but the standing before God of the believer. The ground of that standing is the righteousness of Christ. Yet what does that term mean? In brief, it means all that Christ became, and did, and suffered to satisfy the demands of divine justice.

It began in eternity before the foundation of the world when fallen humanity was contemplated by God the Father and there was chosen in Christ a huge group whom 'no man can number'. It continued in the Incarnation when He came as the second Adam for His people, as their representative head and substitute. He was obedient to all the law, tempted at every point and yet without sin. His righteousness was perfect. Yet there was still the penalty to be paid for our sin.

It was in His suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and upon the Cross of Calvary that Christ paid the penalty in full. He was 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', not by example but by sacrifice, rendering full, substitutionary satisfaction to the violated holiness of God. That this sacrifice was accepted by the Father was demonstrated in the Resurrection.

The Righteousness of God

As Luther discovered, the righteousness of God is not His glorious attribute but the provision that He has made for those who will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not have a righteousness of their own but have the righteousness of God by faith.

God freely offers the righteousness which was achieved by His Son through His obedience and the shedding of His blood, to deal with the due punishment for our sin. By the substitution, the sinners' guilt is expiated and God is propitiated. God's love and God's justice met at Calvary and BY FAITH CHRIST IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. (Romans 3: 19-26).

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