

# Reformational Liberty

Galatians 5:1, 13-15

This October 31<sup>st</sup> marks the 507<sup>th</sup> year since the Reformation kicked off when Luther nailed his 95 Theses to door of the church in Wittenberg. His example reminds us of how God uses faithfulness in little things to bring about great change. God sets us free in Christ to love Him and one another.

## Summary of the Text

The biggest conflict in the New Testament church is over whether Gentile believers need to become Jewish in order to be fully Christian. “Want to be like Jesus? Get circumcised and observe the ceremonial law”, was the command of the Judaizers. The ceremonial law (e.g. circumcision, dietary restrictions) made you an Israelite, but it was always possible to love God and not be a Jew. Naaman the Syrian, Uriah the Hittite, the Queen of Sheba, Nebuchadnezzar, and many others in the old covenant knew God and didn’t become Israelites. New covenant Gentiles didn’t have to, and the apostle Paul commands the Galatian Christians to stand fast in their liberty and not be circumcised (vv. 1-2). It would be one thing to get circumcised because you want to, another entirely because someone says you must. To add this requirement to the Christian faith is damnable (1:6-9) and really upset Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (5:12). Christians are justified by Christ and freed from the ceremonial requirements of the law because He fulfilled them (cf. Col. 2:11-12). We’re not just free but called to use our liberty, not as an opportunity for the flesh, but in love to serve one another (v. 13). Paul says all the law is about and summed up in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 14; cf. Lev. 19:18). To abandon this liberty means rather than serving or feeding one another, you will bite and devour. If you do this, he says, be careful lest you be consumed (v. 15).

## False Justifications

Luther said justification is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. Justification describes the way we are made right with God. In other words, how does a sinner—rebellious, guilty, and shameful before the all-holy God—become righteous? This is not the exact question that Paul and other New Testament writers deal with as the gospel goes to the Gentiles, but it is similar. They’re not dealing with late medieval sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church, but rather with how does a Gentile, a former pagan but still part of the *goyim* outside of Israel, come into the people of God and have full access to Him? The answer to both questions is the same: “We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:15-17). Paul spoke these words to Peter when he separated from eating with the Gentiles as the men (Jews) from James in Jerusalem came to Antioch (2:11-13). That separation amounted to a denial of the gospel and therefore Paul called Peter to repent, and he did (2:14). Both in the old covenant and the new, everyone is received by God and cleansed of sin by faith alone: “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’” (Rom. 4:1-3). Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, and David were all justified by faith. So the issue Paul addresses is not between the old and new covenants correctly understood, but between the old covenant distorted and now the new covenant distorted. Believing Gentiles now have full access just like believing Jews, and circumcision means nothing before God.

The late medieval Roman Catholic Church had developed a sacramental system where grace was given to the people through the ordinances and you needed to add this “grace”, these works, to your faith in order to be justified with God. Not only would you lessen your time in purgatory if you purchased an indulgence, but if you would please give to our St. Peter’s Basilica remodel campaign, you can spring grandma Gertrude out of

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those horrible flames and into heaven. Not only was this practiced, it was defended and codified at the Council of Trent (1545-63) where anyone who confessed to believe in justification by faith alone is anathema, damned. Luther and the reformers saw that when Jesus said “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2), He was not describing the sacrament of penance but the lifelong discipline of confessing and turning from sin. Thus Luther’s first thesis: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”

## True Justification

Justification is the article on which the church stands or falls because to add anything to the gospel takes salvation out of God’s hands and puts it in ours. Whether it’s the works of the law in the first century, the sacramental system of the fifteenth, or good deeds by which someone feels they are a “good person” in the twenty-first, the human heart wants to justify itself. Scriptural justification is the forensic declaration of righteousness. “Forensic” means judicial, whereby God judges someone innocent or guilty, righteous or condemned in His sight. As the new Adam, our representative, our sin was imputed to Christ, and His righteousness imputed to us: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21); “Now it was not written for [Abraham’s] sake alone that [righteousness] was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 5:23-25). This is the good news of the gospel, that Christ suffered in our place, for our sins, and that when He was raised from dead with the power of eternal life, we were raised with Him. All of Christ is given to all of you and the life that you live now you live by faith, trusting in Him, as His Holy Spirit dwells in you to the end. This is not good advice; it’s good news, an objective salvation wrought by God in Christ and applied by His Spirit. We are justified by faith alone, and not by believing in justification by faith alone. We are saved by faith alone, but that faith does good works because it is living and active (Jms. 2:18). The thief on the cross could probably not give a great definition of justification but we see his faith by his works, his complete reliance on Christ. The tax collector who went home justified could only say, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). This is why God can save people in corrupt late medieval Roman churches, lousy Presbyterian churches, and everywhere else. His grace is not restricted to any sacramental or doctrinal system. Grace then drives solid doctrine and the obedience of faith, but we’re saved by Christ alone. This doesn’t excuse compromised churches or corrupt pastors and teachers who will be judged more strictly (Jms. 3:1).

## Freedom in Christ

The flesh says, “You are condemned. You must do this, this, and this to save yourself. And you are free to sin however you please.” Condemnation, the hamster wheel of self-salvation, and misery of immorality all go together: feel bad, pedal harder, and indulge the flesh. The freedom of the gospel says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1). Be forgiven, rejoice in Christ, and love your neighbor, just as the law describes (v. 14), all as an expression of the greatest commandment, to love God. We don’t become children of God by obeying; we obey because we are His children. Because of the gift of Christ, you are freed from sin, free to worship, free to love your neighbor as yourself, and free to celebrate All Hallows’ Eve and All Saints’ Day (or not).