

Five Pillars of Reformation Truth

By Malcolm H. Watts

The Reformation was one of the greatest events in world history. Essentially, it was a work of God concerned with the truth of biblical doctrine, but it became a mighty revival of spiritual life and a tremendous stirring of intense religious conviction.

Once the Gospel was rediscovered, people began to experience, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the full reality of Christ's salvation. Roman Catholicism was rejected, because it was seen that it was not the religion of Jesus Christ; and New Testament Christianity, in its full purity and strength, was once again restored to the Church of God.

Dr J H Merle d'Aubigné, the historian, wrote: 'Primitive Christianity and the Ref-

ormation are one and the same revolution, brought about at different epochs and under different circumstances.'

Today, we witness high-level attempts to undo the glorious work of the Reformation. Some of us will remember reports of a speech by the Archbishop of Canterbury delivered in 1988 at Rome's San Gregorio Church. In this speech, he intimated that Papal primacy might be acknowledged in the Church of England, and he called upon Christians everywhere to accept the Pope as leader of the Universal Church.

The following day, in an unprecedented display of unity, he and the Pope embraced each other during a Papal Mass in St Peter's Square. This realignment with Rome has been naively and foolishly welcomed by many so-called Protestants. In

actual fact, it is a betrayal of our Protestant faith and a contemptuous rejection of our Reformation heritage.

In view of the prevalent confusion of thought, it is necessary to restate the principles of Reformation truth and to examine Romanism in the light of them. The Reformers struggled to defend a Gospel aptly described by the following slogans:

'Sola Scriptura' - by Scripture alone

The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as inspired by God, are the sole and sufficient authority in all matters of faith and practice. The written Word stands gloriously alone in its majesty. It testifies in God's name.

It demands reverence, unhesitating faith in its doctrines and unfaltering obedience

We reject Rome's authorities, which are 'Holy Mother Church, the Apocryphal books, the unanimous consent of the Fathers, the decrees of Councils, the unwritten traditions, and the decisions of Popes.' 'The Bible only is the religion of Protestants' (William Chillingworth).

'Sola Gratia' - by grace alone

Grace is the unmerited favour of God, or His free love. It presupposes utter unworthiness in its objects, who are viewed as sinful and guilty, deserving of nothing but punishment.

Salvation is entirely of grace. This means it is exclusively a divine work, absolutely sovereign and free, in which sinners play no part and make no contribution.

God is not obliged to save. People have

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to its commands. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect [in every way complete], throughly furnished [fully equipped] unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16,17)

done nothing to deserve it. Grace, and grace alone, is the cause of salvation. "If by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace" (Romans 11:6).

By grace, God elects people to eternal life, redeems them through Jesus Christ, calls them by the Holy Spirit, justifies them by

faith, adopts them into His family, and preserves them unto eternal life (Romans 11:5; Titus 3:7; Ephesians 1:5-6; 2:7; Romans 5:21) - "By grace are ye saved" (Ephesians 2:8).

The scheme of salvation taught by the Church of Rome includes the doctrine of merit -"Good works do truly deserve eternal life; and whosoever holds the contrary, is accursed."

It even includes the idea that a righteous person may accumulate a surplus store of good works, over and above what is required ('works of supererogation'), and these superfluous merits, forming a treasury or fund, can be dispensed by the Pope to less holy Roman Catholics who can then enjoy the benefits earned by others (the doctrine of indulgences)!

But what does the Word of God say? "God... hath saved us... not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:9). This is Reformation doctrine, and Augustus Toplady stated it well: 'The way to Heaven lies not over a toll-bridge, but over a free-bridge; even the unmerited grace of God in Christ Jesus. Grace finds us beggars but leaves us debtors.'

'Solo Christo' - by Christ alone

Christ is set forth in Scripture as a mediator. Now a mediator is someone who stands between two opposing parties in

order to reconcile them. That was what Christ did when He assumed our humanity. He obeyed on our behalf and suffered for our guilt, thus performing all that was necessary for the making of peace (Acts 10:36; Romans 5:1).

Only through Christ can we have acceptance with God. He is the only way of access into God's presence and the only channel by which blessings are bestowed. "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Rome, however, interposes many mediators. First of all, there are the priests, those indispensable intermediaries who have the exclusive right and power to offer the sacrifice of the Mass and to convey the grace merited by that sacrifice (compare Hebrews 7:24; 10:12-13).

Then, there are those above who mediate, such as the Virgin Mary ('advocate and mediatrix'), departed saints and holy angels. ('We should ask the angels and saints to pray for us, because they are our friends and brethren, and because their prayers have great power with God' - A Catechism of Christian Doctrine, 1971). Is there any scriptural warrant for all this? No, none whatsoever. These things are expressly forbidden (Matthew 12:47-50; Acts 10:25-26; Colossians 2:18; Revelation 22:8-9).

John Calvin, one of the greatest of the Reformers, gave clear expression to the true doctrine of God's Word: 'We can be fully and firmly joined with God only when Christ joins us with Him. If, then, we would be assured that God is pleased with and kindly disposed towards us, we must fix our eyes and minds on Christ alone.'

'Sola Fide' - by faith alone

Of all questions, by far the most important a person can ask is: 'How can I be right with God?' Only revelation can answer that question, and the Bible's answer is as follows: "A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).

This doctrine of 'justification by faith alone' is the central truth of Christianity and the real test of a church's fidelity to the Gospel.

At this point, let me define the terms. Justification is a legal word, properly belonging to the sphere of law and to the law court. It is a judicial verdict, the declaring of someone to be righteous in the eyes of the law.

When God justifies sinners - and that is what He does - He declares them to be exempt from punishment and entitled to reward solely on the ground of what Christ has done for them (Romans 3:24; 5:9). Faith is simply the sinner's personal reliance on Christ as Saviour (Ephesians 1:13).

God only justifies us when, in our desperation, we flee to Christ and place our entire confidence in His substitutionary life and death. "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

No more, my God, I boast no more
Of all the duties I have done:
I quit the hopes I held before,
To trust the merits of Thy Son.

The best obedience of my hands
Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord hath done.

(Isaac Watts)

The Roman Catholic Church denies this. According to Roman dogma, 'The instrumental cause [of justification] is the sacrament of baptism,' and, 'through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith co-operating with good works...' enables people to be - 'further justified'! (The Decrees of the Council of Trent)

The Reformers raised their voices in united protest against such perversion of biblical Truth. Here is Luther's great state-

ment: 'I, Martin Luther, an unworthy preacher of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, thus profess and thus believe; that this article, that faith alone, without works, can justify before God, shall never be overthrown... This is the true Gospel... This is the doctrine I shall teach; and this the Holy Spirit and the Church of the faithful has delivered. In this will I abide. Amen.'

'Soli Deo Gloria' - glory to God alone

The true doctrine magnifies God's grace in the salvation of men and women and causes us to lift high the voice of adoring praise and thanksgiving, so that all the glory is given to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The entire scheme is, as the apostle Paul teaches, "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved". Hence the doxology: "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end" (Ephesians 3:21).

The Romanist doctrine exalts the Pope, the priests and, by its doctrine of salvation by works, believers themselves. It is a man-centred religion, very far removed from the religion of the New Testament. The Truth rediscovered in the Reformation brought the glory back to God.

William Tyndale, the Bible translator and martyr, in his Prologue to the epistle to the Romans, wrote: 'We see that God only, who, according to the Scripture, worketh all in all things, worketh a man's justifying, salvation, and health... God's mercy in promising, and Truth in fulfilling His promises, saveth us, and not we ourselves; and therefore is all laud, praise, and glory to be given unto God for His mercy and Truth, and not unto us for our merits and deservings.'

May God in our day revive these great truths for which many Reformers died, and may He teach His people the impossibility of common ground or union with Rome.