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Faith and
Life

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FAITH AND LIFE

"The righteous will live by faith."
Romans 1:17

There's no question that the explosive impact of Martin Luther's hammer blows brought new life to millions.

No movement can achieve the wide spread success of Luther's movement unless people recognize in it the possibility for life enrichment on the deepest level.

I use the term *Luther's movement* - actually this is improper. What Martin Luther did when he set the Reformation in motion was to rediscover and reemphasize the biblical teaching that tells how the life of God enters our lives. The Reformation was God's movement.

This same teaching had given the church its great leap forward when Christianity was born. The apostle Paul had gone throughout the Roman empire preaching the message of salvation through the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus Christ. Some people were hostile to the message then, but many sensed that the salvation offered through Jesus' finished work was exactly the salvation they needed in their lives. The Holy Spirit accompanied the announcement of this exciting good news,

and millions of people acknowledged Christ as their Savior.

So this biblical message of salvation compelled Martin Luther to nail ninety-five theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. Across the river from Wittenberg, John Tetzel was busy selling forgiveness of sins for money. And Tetzel's sales pitch was crass. "Listen now," he said, "God and Saint Peter call you. Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your loved ones departed. Consider that all who have confessed and made a contribution will receive complete remission of all their sins. Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends beseeching you and saying: 'Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment, from which you can redeem us for a pittance.' Do you not wish to? Open your ears. . . . 'Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?' Remember that you are able to release them, for as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.' Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive the letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul into the fatherland of paradise?"

Tetzel's pitch represented the depths to

which religion had fallen. Hearing this dismal, mercenary tirade, Luther felt compelled to take issue with what was happening. So he posted his statements on the church door, and, as people discussed them, these statements set events in motion that changed human history.

The far-reaching consequences of Luther's call to return to the Bible's teaching of salvation came about because Luther's message breathed life into millions of dry bones. Nothing is more deadening than false religion, and in that day false religion was firmly entrenched. False religion causes despair. It makes the swift-approaching future terrifying. Such religion had driven Luther himself into anguished and futile attempts to earn his own salvation. One day, however, the truth of the gospel had finally dawned on him. He had found it in many places in the Scriptures-like Romans 1:17, which says: "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.' "

For Luther and for countless others at that time, the discovery of life through faith was like having dark storm clouds pass and the splendor of the sun flood the landscape. Luther, John Calvin, John Knox,

Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and all the rest who carried the Reformation along emphasized that faith is central in the Christian scheme of things-faith first, last, and always.

As we look back to the Reformation and celebrate the rediscovery of God's amazing grace, it is beneficial for us to review this revolutionary idea regarding faith. If we understand this idea, we will be safe, regardless of denominational label, regardless of background, regardless of the magnitude of guilt and remorse we carry. Faith is the key to life-faith and life go together. By faith we respond to the holy Scriptures, by faith we receive God's way of salvation, and by faith we are united with Jesus Christ. Faith does all this-that is, God does all this within believers through faith.

The important thing about the Reformation is that the gospel that was rediscovered and proclaimed far and wide is also necessary for us today. We have to accept this gospel that brings life, for we are as much in bondage to death as the people of the Reformation era were. All kinds of misshapen and corrupt forms of religion confront us today-from cults that teach escapism to nearly faithless forms of secular humanism. You and I, being assailed

by hundreds of messages each day that promise life, can very easily be caught up in the frantic search for life just as our forebears were centuries ago.

Now, the faith that brings life is first of all a positive response to the contents of the Bible. At the time of the Reformation, the Bible was removed from its hiding place and returned to its rightful position as the primary authority on matters of religion. And there was a terrific power struggle at that time. We might think of this struggle as the conflict between Martin Luther and the ecclesiastical authorities who tried to force him to recant his teaching. But the struggle was not between groups of men; it was between men and the Bible.

When it comes to religion, the question of authority is always uppermost. Where do we go for the final word when it comes to learning our duty toward God and toward our fellowman? That is the question. Do we seek out some guru, possibly one who will favor us by riding by us in his Rolls Royce twice a day? Do we expect that such a personage will provide us with the truth by which to live? Do we seek out some church? Everywhere we turn, we see people emphasizing that true religious authority is vested in a church of some

kind with its robed functionaries. A church's authority, however, if it is to be real, must be founded on the Bible.

It's no coincidence that the Reformation spread at the same time that the Bible was being translated into the languages of the common people. Luther himself spent months translating the Bible into German. And the printing press was coming into its own. The Bible, the Bible, the Bible-it was lifted to the pulpit and was circulated freely. Luther's messages came straight from its pages; so did Calvin's and the other Reformers. Preaching flourished as thousands of people came each day to hear the Word of God proclaimed.

The people's response seems to have been simple enough, but it is easy to overlook. Their increase in faith came in response to the Bible, for the Bible alone supplies the story of Jesus and His love. 1st Romans 1:17 says, "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last "Yes, this is the Bible's message: man cannot save himself; if he is to be saved, God will have to do the job. And the Bible shows us that God has done exactly that. God has sent His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world to pay for human sin.

At the center of God's heart is a cross, for the cross was born of His love for humankind. And at the center of the Bible is a cross. There is no other place we can go to learn about salvation. If left to themselves, human beings will always dream up a way of salvation that involves works. They will always try to make a deal with God. But the Bible says no, no, a thousand times no. The Bible reveals a righteousness that comes from God alone. He has achieved this righteousness for us through the crucifixion of His Son. Our sin has been paid for. There are still many problems around, but the problem of payment for sins, thank God, doesn't exist anymore.

The faith that brings life is also the faith that accepts the message of salvation. It is one thing to agree that the message of salvation is the truth; it is another to reach out for it yourself and to ask God to grant you that salvation personally.

I know a man who has a recurring skin problem. He has gone to his doctor, and his doctor has diagnosed it. His doctor has given him medicine that he can use to treat the problem. His doctor can also give him a shot that helps even more. But every once in a while the man lets things get out of hand. He runs out of his medicine.

And he does not find it convenient to go to his doctor for a shot. So his skin problem flares up. It's not terribly bothersome, so he sometimes lets it go for quite a while. Then, finally, he says to himself, "I have to go to the drug store and get my prescription filled, and perhaps I should get a shot as well."

Many people are this way about the Lord's salvation. They think it's enough that they know the cure for their most fatal illness. But they should also do what they must to receive that cure.

It's necessary that you and I call out to God in faith and ask Him to apply Jesus' finished work to our lives. This involves humbling ourselves before God. I don't know how a person can do this without getting down on his knees in prayer to confess that he is a sinner and to call out to God for salvation.

This humbling is a very important element of faith. People can be members of churches in which the true way of salvation is stressed over and over again. In these churches children can be taught their catechisms and prepared for confirmation. They can be taught everything they need to know about salvation. They can be asked whether they are able to save themselves, and these children will du-

tifully reply, "Oh, no; only Jesus can save me from my sins."

But that's not enough. People must also humble themselves before God and plead with Him for salvation. Jesus Himself told the story of two people who went to the temple to pray. One was a religious leader who thought he had the teachings of religion pretty straight. The other was a member of the despised tax-collector group. The tax collector simply cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Jesus went on to explain that the man who called out for mercy and confessed his sin returned home a saved man while the other was just as unsaved when he left the church as when he entered it.

The apostle Paul, whose record of work for the Lord is unsurpassed, also made sure that, when he spoke of God's salvation in Jesus Christ, it was clear to all who listened that he himself knew he needed this salvation desperately. He said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). I am the worst-I need Jesus-yes, I do. Not someone I know, not another member of my family, but me. This is the language of the saving faith that Martin Luther reemphasized at the time of the Reformation.

We receive life when we humble our selves before the cross of Calvary and ask Jesus to come into our lives with His saving power. You will not be saved simply by hearing the gospel and agreeing that it's true. You will be saved only if you ask Jesus to be your Savior. Life-giving faith is faith that drives us to our knees in repentance and confession. This is why it is so unpopular. We are all such proud people. We want to protect our egos. None of this groveling before God in confession and repentance for us, we say. Well, look at the cross. There we see that the only way God could establish righteousness and pay for our sins was through the death of His only begotten Son. And in this astonishing sacrifice, we see the depth of our sins. Surely at some point in each of our lives we must cry out in near agony as we realize the full extent of our sinfulness, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Now, when the faith that gives life brings us to our knees and causes us to beg for the salvation that only God can provide, it also unites us with the Lord Jesus Christ.

"The righteous shall live by faith"-this is what the Bible says. And when it says "live," it means full and abundant life-in fact, eternal life. When a person believes

in Jesus Christ and receives Jesus' righteousness as his own, that person receives much, much more than the righteousness of Jesus. That person actually becomes united with the Lord Jesus Christ. The life that believers possess through faith in Jesus is, in essence, the very same life that Christ Himself possesses. This is why, once you are united with Christ, death has no power over you-none whatsoever. Christians still die, to be sure, but in reality death has no power over them. They are alive forever in Christ, and just as Christ lives, they live.

Jesus talked about this during His ministry on earth. "Because I live," He said, "you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you (John 14:19,20). When we believe, we are sustained by the very presence of Jesus in our lives. His life becomes our life.

(John R. W. Stott, in a book titled *Understanding Christ*, helps to convey some of the richness of this teaching through his study of the prepositions used in the New Testament in connection with Jesus.)

What an exciting vision was rediscovered at the time of the Reformation! At that time the unrelenting pressure of man-made religion was thrown off. Man-made

religion always succeeds in erecting barriers between ourselves and God. It always succeeds in making us nervous and tense as we try to do what we can to insure our salvation. The true religion of the Bible, however, calms our troubled souls as we place our trust in Christ alone. It lifts us from the miry clay of despair and sets us on a mountaintop.

It does you and me little good, though, simply to look back to the time of the Reformation and to perhaps thank God that it happened. The important thing is that each of us recognize anew the essential importance of faith. Let there be no mistake: you cannot save yourself. Your works will not save you, no matter how noble they are. Your works are flawed. But "a righteousness from God" has been revealed, and it is "by faith from first to last." This means that you must believe. And so must I.

Faith is the most important thing about any person. If a person has faith, that person is out of danger. If he does not have faith, no matter how wealthy, how successful, how healthy, how personable he is, he is in extreme danger. Faith and faith alone makes the difference.

If you do not believe, if you have never fallen before the Lord in repentance and

confession and asked Jesus into your heart, do that now before it is too late. We who prepare these messages are praying for you. How we plead with God that your life will be changed if you do not yet know Jesus as your Savior. There is no other hope in the world. Jesus and Jesus alone can save us. He has become the righteousness of God through His finished work on Calvary, and we must believe in Him.

The discovery of this gospel brought life and peace centuries ago. It can do the same today.

PRAYER

Almighty, sovereign God, ruler of all history, we thank you today that many years ago events were set in motion that brought about a rediscovery of your magnificent grace. We thank you for the righteousness that is by faith alone. We thank you for providing it through the suffering and death of your own dear Son.

Now, O God, grant that the gospel brings hope to those who need it today. Take this message and deliver it to those who need to hear it most. Grant that many who have never confessed their sins and asked for your salvation may do so.

We thank you for the life that can be ours through Jesus Christ. Help us who believe to live by faith. May we not be intimidated by life's troubles or even by persecutions. May we go forward in your strength that the eternal life earned by Christ is now our everlasting possession. In His name, Amen.

This message, prepared by Dr. Joel Nederhood, was heard over The Back to God Hour, which is broadcast every Sunday in co-operation with the Christian Reformed Churches of America, in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, and by shortwave throughout the world.

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