

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
"Not by Faith Alone"

Holy Scripture says, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." (James 2:24) This is the only passage of Scripture in which we find the phrase "Faith alone." Why then does the traditional Protestant world say differently? Why, when I was a Protestant, did I believe the doctrine of "justification by faith alone" to be the core, the essence of the Gospel, and that all Catholics were wrong to deny it?

This is not an idle question. It goes to the heart of the divisions throughout the Christian world. It is also important for understanding the moral position of the modern, secular west which assumes sharp divisions between rationality, faith, and morality. The Catholic Church, by contrast, teaches that morality is eminently rational and that "it is precisely *on the path of the moral life that the way of salvation is open to all.*" (Bl. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*) The Church teaches that God saves us by opening that path to the moral life through the gift of forgiveness, faith, and the Spirit.

The source of the confusion on this issue is the thinking of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther. Luther read in St. Paul that "a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." (Romans 3:28) To Luther's mind, it seemed that Paul was rejecting good works or morality as an essential part of our salvation. Luther knew this sounded crazy and counter-intuitive. That is why he said repeatedly that we should not trust reason when it comes to matters of faith and salvation.

But Luther was wrong. Today, even many Protestant theologians recognize that Luther seriously misread St. Paul. (On this topic, I recommend N.T. Wright's book *What St. Paul Really Said.*) The key to understanding St. Paul is his historical context. The earliest generations of Christians were understandably concerned with the relationship of Jews and Gentiles. Within that context, nothing was more important than the relationship of gentile Christians to the Jewish, Mosaic law -to the regulations about circumcision, food, and so forth. Paul's answer to this question was no different than Jesus'. True righteousness is not a matter of food and ritual, or the tithing of mint, dill, and cumin. Rather, it consists in love, justice, and mercy.

Paul, like Jesus, saw that the bare letter of the Mosaic law does nothing to transform its would-be adherents. The law, alone, cannot make a man truly righteous. Paul said, "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." (Romans 2:13) The problem is that apart from the gift of God, none keep the law. None practice the love and justice and mercy that sum up the law's commands. What is needed is "a new creation." The solution to this problem is the Gospel: God, through the Spirit, giving us the grace to live the life of love and justice and mercy.

Centuries before St. Paul, the prophet Jeremiah wrote about the promise of the Gospel:

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

Paul saw this promise fulfilled in Jesus. Through faith in Jesus, we can receive that promised gift of the Spirit. We can have the law "written on our hearts." We can become partakers of the New Covenant. According to St. Paul, God sent his only son so that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:4)

Years ago, as a committed Protestant, I was unnerved to learn that Luther had made up his novel reading of St. Paul. No one before Luther ever thought to read St. Paul in any way other than his natural, plain sense. I saw that the Catholic doctrine made more sense out of Paul, but it also removed the "problem" of James 2:24 and, "reconciled" the teachings of Paul and Jesus. (Luther, himself, could never fully reconcile his reading of Paul with the moral teachings of Jesus.) Finally, I realized that on the Catholic view the Gospel was not an offense to reason (as Luther held), but its fulfillment.

The Second Vatican Council urged in its declaration on Christian ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) that we seek understanding between Christian communities. In particular, the council fathers suggested dialogue on the relation of the Gospel to moral conduct. To make progress on this goal, nothing is more important than to understand this chief article of the Christian faith: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."