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The Irony of the “God Fearing Man”

Writing Process

In this essay, my class was required to summarize Martin Luther's idea of justification by faith and then agree or disagree with his argument. I disagreed with Luther; then, I concluded my essay as to how his ideas still exist today in my hometown.

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The Irony of the ‘God Fearing Man’

Melina Durham

Martin Luther was a German monk who was widely known for his *95 Theses*, which were (as legend has it) nailed to the door of the Gutenberg Church on October 31, 1517. Due to its controversial comments about the Catholic Church and the Pope, many historians believe that his work was a major “spark” to the Protestant Reformation. While Martin Luther is known for his many ideas regarding the corruption of the Catholic Church and the Pope, he is also famous for his idea of justification by faith. Luther’s ideas of justification by faith are evident in his work, *The Freedom of a Christian*, written in 1520. In his doctrine, Martin Luther argues several ideas about righteousness and faith, claiming that righteousness is not achieved through works, but by believing in and following the word of God. In this essay, I will disagree with Luther’s case, arguing that his ideas and his arguments are ultimately ineffective for specific readers.

In his doctrine, Luther presents several claims, grounds, and warrants to prove his idea of justification by faith. Luther first claims that one’s soul is responsible for justification. When explaining this idea, Luther utilizes the “inward man” and contrasts it with “the outer man” (2). The inward man is comprised of the soul; the outer man is comprised of flesh. Luther claims that the inward man is how a man becomes justified, free, and a true Christian. Because the inward man is comprised of one’s soul, there is absolutely nothing from the outside world that can harm it. For example, ill health, bondage, hunger, thirst, or any outward evil do not have the ability to influence the soul (2). Luther uses the same reasoning to explain that doing good works will not result in a positive impact. For this reason, it will do no good to fast, abstain from certain meats, or to clothe one’s self in “sacred” vestments. For these are all outwardly things or “works” that have no influence on the soul (2). Further along, Luther claims that those who focus on outwardly things can become hypocritical because they are so entangled with practicing works that their actual faith and practice of believing God’s Word are forgotten. In other words, one who calls themselves a Christian cannot be if they only practice works and not faith (3). Therefore, the soul does not care if one is

clothed in profound raiment or dwelling in sacred places. There is no reason to pray aloud, or to show one's neighbor sacred objects; one's faith in God is enough (3).

Luther makes another claim saying that one thing is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty: the Gospel of Christ or God's Word. Luther uses several biblical texts to support his claim. In John 11. 25, God says that whoever believes in him shall not suffer eternally (3). Therefore, God's word proves that the soul can do without everything except for the Word of God. Luther cites Apostle Paul: "To Preach Christ is to feed the soul...[f]or faith alone and the word of God bring salvation" (3). This further proves the necessity of believing in the Gospel. Luther cites many other biblical texts concerning the belief and God and the liberty it brings that support his argument (3). Luther's point is now clear, that the soul needs the Word alone for justification of faith, and not works. He finally explains that if faith could be justified by any other means (such as works) there would be no need for the Word or faith.

In addition, Luther questions: How can it be a fact that faith alone justifies when so many works are prescribed to us in the scriptures (4)? To answer his own question, Luther explains the differences between precepts and promises. The precepts teach us what is good, they show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power or the instructions to do it (4). Luther notes that the Old Testament is filled with precepts (4). Luther explains the precepts by utilizing a well-known commandment from the Old Testament, "Thou shall not covet" (4). However, Luther explains this statement is contradictory because it is impossible not to covet; all men are sinners; therefore, it is impossible to follow this precept. Additionally, Luther explains that precepts in the Old Testament are proof of man's own impotence because all men are sinners; therefore they must covet (4). As a result of their impotence, they cannot successfully follow through with the laws (4). After explaining precepts, Luther introduces the idea of the promises of God, which declare the glory of God. As previously stated, the precepts of God declare one to do impossible things while the promises say that if one believes in Christ, one is promised grace, justification, peace, and liberty (5).

Luther claims that the highest worship of God is to accept him as true, righteous, and whatever qualifications we associate with what we believe (5). To explain, Luther introduces a paradox: one is free, but one also becomes a servant to God (1-5). By this Luther means that man has free will, and they are free to do whatever they want in their actions; however, they are bound by their obedience and faith in God (1-5). Everything wrong that one has dealt with is now given up and surrendered to God (5-6). Doing so is proof of one's faith in God. Once one surrenders their soul and becomes servant to God, there comes the realization that

there is not one commandment or law that does not surpass the Word of God, and that is why the word of God is the most superior (5). It is impossible for one to follow the works of the law which are many, yet useless, because we are all sinners, but one shall fulfill one's soul through faith (5-6).

At this point, Luther claims that it is easy to understand why the Word of God is the most important power, and why no good works can compare with it (6). Finally, Luther explains that faith and the Word of God are the ways to righteousness through use of metaphorical language. He explains that just as iron exposed to fire glows like fire once it has touched and emerged itself in fire, the soul is touched with salvation once merged with the Word of God and belief in God. This helps justify his reasoning by saying that once one immerses themselves in their faith with God, they too will be enlightened with grace and righteousness.

While Luther raises important discussions about authentic faith and the corruption of the Church, his argument is confusing and includes many holes. For this reason, I disagree with Luther's claims. For example, according to Luther's logic, one can just believe in God to be saved. There is no need to be a good person or to do good actions. Although Luther cites the Bible, saying that "we should not be careless or lead a bad life, but no one should need the law for justification or salvation." (5) This example fails to justify his reasoning. If Luther is claiming that the only things that matter are the word of God and faith in God, then doesn't that allow us to lead bad lives? If works and the teachings of the Bible do not matter, does that mean that we can put our morals to the side? As a general rule of morality, any action that harms others is seen as morally wrong. According to Luther's logic, as long as one believes in God, they could be a murderer and still be saved. For this reason, Luther's argument is invalid.

It is also important to mention that the basic foundations of Christian beliefs are central to the entire Bible, and not just bits and pieces. One could argue that Martin Luther did talk about the "precepts" of the Bible, but he really only talked in depth about one of them: for example, he explains the commandment that "thou shall not covet." He claims that because we are all sinners, these laws are impossible to follow, but by saying this, he is calling a majority of the Bible irrelevant, considering the Bible's main focus is teachings. So, saying that Luther includes many arguments about the teachings of the Bible is not true, especially since it is clear that he ignored certain verses of the Bible. Additionally, throughout his entire essay, Martin Luther does indeed cite Biblical evidence, but he only chooses what he wants to see. For example, he cites many "promises" that God gives, but fails to note the importance of the rest of the Bible. Considering Martin Luther is a Christian, he needs to address the entire Bible in his argument.

The Bible is filled with moral tales and laws to abide by, and Martin Luther is saying we should ignore these because “we are all sinners;” therefore, it is impossible to follow these rules. While we are indeed all sinners, it does not mean that we should just give up and be bad people. The very reason the moral tales and laws are placed in the Bible is to make one closer to God. It is also important to note that there are Biblical justifications that prove that actions are indeed relevant for justification that Martin Luther ignored. For example, Romans 2:13 includes a moral law that says that “the doers of the law . . . will be justified.” It is now clear that the Bible claims that final justification is judged through both works and faith, and not just faith like Martin Luther claims. The Bible notes that both faith and good deeds bring one closer to salvation, and since the Bible is central to Christian belief, and since Martin Luther is a Christian, he needs to consider the whole Bible to support his argument, not just bits and pieces.

Luther’s ideas are thought provoking, but rather familiar. My entire life I have grown up in a rural area of southeastern Kentucky where Protestantism deeply affects the culture of my community. The majority of religions in southeastern Kentucky were derived from Martin Luther’s ideas. While hundreds of years have passed since Lutheranism was founded, Lutheranism has circumvented time and is engrained in the area where I grew up. From my experience, I have noticed a certain negation of crime and immorality, justifying one’s immoral actions through religion. It is not uncommon to hear the relatives of the man who abused his wife, for example, claim how they know that he is a “God fearing man” and how “good he is on the inside.” It is not uncommon to see pictures of many Bible verses posted on social media from those who do not practice what they preach. However, attendance to church on Sunday does not negate the fact that one has caused pain upon another human being. Claiming to believe in and be faithful towards God means nothing if one’s actions are immoral. Religion should not be used as means to negate one’s immoral actions. Many people in my community are an exact reflection of the idea that one’s immoral actions are irrelevant if one is faithful in God. The statements of Martin Luther are a direct result of the hypocrisy throughout my community. Moving forward, it is imperative to know that Luther’s argument is invalid if we want to begin to change the mindset of many Christians today. Luther’s Doctrine was very controversial and known as the forefront of the Protestant Reformation, and many of his ideas still remain true in modern Christianity and Protestantism. Luther’s idea of justification by faith still remains true for many which can and have led to the justification of many immoral wrongdoings in my community and others.

Works Cited

Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*, edited by Mark D. Tranvik, Fortress Press, 2008.