

I FOUND THE ANCIENT WAY

By

MANUEL PEREZ VILA

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH there were no images at all. Only a little embossed cross behind the pulpit and the design of its arches and the pointed arch form of its doors gave the place a religious appearance. But the lack of images was made up for by well-distributed Bible texts written in Gothic letters and with initials that imitated those on old parchments.

Each text seemed to me like a living message from the Almighty to those who attended. **"What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."**

But the ones that attracted my attention the most were **"The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth,"** and **"By grace are ye saved, through faith . . . not of works, lest any man should boast."**

I had heard so much about the Protestant theology of faith without works that, even at the time that I was convinced by my reading about the doctrines I have explained in the previous chapters, and this conviction had given me the courage to break my vows without fear of falling into condemnation, it seemed to me like Protestant audacity to adorn a church with the statement that salvation is **"not of works . . . lest any man should boast."** Wasn't this like inviting those who attended to despise good works, which are so pleasing to our Lord?

I soon heard a sermon about this saving faith, for it is the favorite theme in Evangelical churches in the principal services that they call evangelistic meetings.

Beginning with comments on a passage from a Gospel, the Epistles, or some story from the Old Testament, Evangelical preaching consists simply of showing the hearers that they are sinners under condemnation, and that they need to turn to GOD with real sincerity, that they ought to know JESUS CHRIST as the sufficient Saviour of their souls and accept Him as such.

The plan and purpose of GOD for the redemption of those who accept the death of CHRIST as a ransom for their souls is set forth with dazzling clearness. GOD couldn't lightly forgive sin, so as not to be untrue to the principles of His eternal righteousness. But when JESUS CHRIST as man offered Himself as a victim, He made a complete propitiation for sin that allows GOD in righteousness to forgive the sinner who repents (Hebrews 9:28; 10:14).

Every man must experience conversion to GOD, for the merits of CHRIST's sacrifice can't be applied by any outward ceremony but by a living faith that takes hold of the Word of GOD and, trusting in it, claims for itself the fulfillment of the divine promises.

The mere fact of belonging to a Catholic or Protestant church does not save. Only this real and living faith in CHRIST JESUS as personal Saviour produces what the New Testament calls the "**new birth**." GOD is ready to receive the sinner who is converted, filling his soul with the Holy Spirit, who transforms his thinking and his living making him a new creature in Christ Jesus (II Corinthians 5:17).

This seemed to me to be only a plausible theory when I read it in the postscript to the book by Luis Padrosa and in the seven sermons of the American pastor, D. L. Moody, at the time that I returned from Madrid with the two books in my hands; but I never dreamed of seeing the theory worked out in a living and tangible reality.

Then I took notice that Evangelical Christianity does not care to lean on good works or boast in them, so as not to take away from the glory of the One they proclaim as the only and sufficient Saviour of their souls. But I saw that love and gratitude led them to serve CHRIST with much more fervor than the best Catholics, and in ways that were generally more effective and practical.

This helped me to understand the declarations that the great reformer Martin Luther makes in his book *Christian Liberty*, which I had read with admiration when I was still a Catholic priest in the Diocese of Barbastro.

Allow me to say that when I set my eyes on them the first time, I couldn't believe that these were the words of a historical person whom until then I had been considering as a sort of devil incarnate. Still I read it and other books that belonged to a collection of classical works of the Reformation that were published in Buenos Aires.

Note: The collection "*Classical Works of the Reformation*," published by La Aurora bookstore, Corrientes 728, is composed of the following books:

Christian Liberty, by Martin Luther
The Lord's Prayer, by Martin Luther
The Smalcald Articles, by Martin Luther
Justification by Faith, by P. Melancthon
Recollections (2 vols.), by Francisco de Enzinas
Dialogue on Christian Doctrine, by Juan de Valdes

I wish the readers of Spain and Latin America who have been filled with ideas as erroneous as those that I had about Protestantism could breathe the religious atmosphere of an Evangelical church as I was able to do when I came from my parishes in Aragon. But since this probably seems impossible for many, I should like to acquaint them with the true theory of justification by faith, just as the real religious leaders of the sixteenth century proclaimed it. Later I became convinced that this theory is in agreement with the teaching of Augustine and even of Thomas Aquinas in its main features. Here are the words of Luther in his book, *Christian Liberty*.

"Returning to the subject which we had begun, I think it is made clear by these considerations that it is not sufficient, nor a Christian course, to preach the works, life, and words of CHRIST in a historic manner, as facts which it suffices to know as an example how to frame our life; as do those who are now held the best preachers: and much less so, to keep silence altogether on these things, and to teach in their stead the laws of men and the decrees of the Fathers. There are now not a few persons who preach and read about CHRIST with the object of moving the human affections to sympathize with CHRIST, to indignation against the Jews, and other childish and womanish absurdities of that kind.

"Now preaching ought to have the object of promoting faith in Him, so that He may not only be CHRIST, but a CHRIST for you and for me, and that what is said of Him, and what He is called, may work in us. And this faith is produced and is maintained by preaching why CHRIST came, what He has brought us and given to us, and to what profit and advantage He is to be received. This is done when the Christian liberty which we have from CHRIST Himself is rightly taught, and we are shown in what manner all we Christians are kings and priests, and how we are lords of all things, and may be confident that whatever we do in the presence of GOD is pleasing and acceptable to Him.

"Whose heart would not rejoice in its inmost core at hearing these things? Whose heart, on receiving so great a consolation, would not become sweet with the love of CHRIST, a love to which it can never attain by any laws or works? Who can injure such a heart, or make it afraid? If the consciousness of sin, or the horror of death, rush in upon it, it is prepared to hope in the Lord, and is fearless of such evils, and undisturbed until it shall look down upon its enemies. For it believes that the righteousness of CHRIST is its own, and that its sin is no longer its own, but that of CHRIST, for, on account of its faith in CHRIST, all its sin must needs be swallowed up from before the face of the righteousness of CHRIST, as I have said above. It learns, too, with the Apostle, to scoff at death and sin, and to say: **'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ'** (I Corinthians 15:55-57).

For death is swallowed up in victory; not only the victory of CHRIST, but ours also; since by faith it becomes ours, and in it we too conquer.

"Let it suffice to say this concerning the inner man and its liberty, and concerning that righteousness of faith, which needs neither laws nor good works; nay, they are even hurtful to it, if anyone pretends to be justified by them.

"And now let us turn to the other part, to the outward man. Here we shall give an answer to all those who, taking offense at the word of faith and at what I have asserted, say: 'If faith does everything, and by itself suffices for justification, why then are good works commanded? Are we then to take our ease and do no works, content with faith?' Not so, impious man, I reply; not so.

“That would indeed really be the case, if we were thoroughly and completely inner and spiritual persons; but that will not happen until the last day, when the dead shall be raised. As long as we live in the flesh, we are but beginning and making advances in that which shall be completed in a future life. On this account the Apostle calls that which we have in this life, the first-fruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23). In future we shall have the tenths, and the fullness of the Spirit. To this part belongs the fact I have stated before, that the Christian is the servant of all and subject to all. For in that part in which he is free, he does no works, but in that in which he is a servant, he does all works. Let us see on what principles this is so.

"Although, as I have said, inwardly, and according to the spirit, a man is amply enough justified by faith, having all that he requires to have, except that this very faith and abundance ought to increase from day to day, even till the future life; still he remains in this mortal life upon earth, in which it is necessary that he should rule his own body, and have intercourse with men.

"Here then works begin; here he must not take his ease; here he must give heed to exercise his body by fastings, watchings, labor, and other moderate discipline, so that it may be subdued to the spirit, and obey and conform itself to the inner man and faith, and not rebel against them or hinder them, as is its nature to do if it is not kept under. For the inner man, being conformed to GOD and created after the image of GOD through faith, rejoices and delights itself in CHRIST, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it; and hence has only this task before it, to serve GOD with joy and for nought in free love.

"In doing this he offends that contrary will in his own flesh, which is striving to serve the world, and to seek its own gratification. This the spirit of faith cannot and will not bear; but applies itself with cheerfulness and zeal to keep it down and restrain it; as Paul says: **'I delight in the law of God after the inward man but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin'** (Romans 7:22, 23). And again: **'I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway'** (I Corinthians 9:27). And: **'They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts'** (Galatians 5:24).

"These works, however, must not be done with any notion that by them a man can be justified before GOD - for faith, which alone is righteousness before GOD, will not bear with this false notion - but solely with this purpose, that the body may be brought into subjection, and be purified from its evil lusts, so that our eyes may be turned only to purging away those lusts. For when the soul has been cleansed by faith and made to love GOD, it would have all things to be cleansed in like manner; and especially its own body, so that all things might unite with it in the love and praise of GOD. Thus it comes that, from the requirements of his own body, a man cannot take his ease, but is compelled on its account to do many good works, that he may bring it into subjection. Yet these works are not the means of his justification before GOD; he does them out of disinterested love to the service of GOD; looking to no other end than to do what is well-pleasing to Him whom he desires to obey most dutifully in all things.

"On this principle every man may easily instruct himself in what measure, and with what distinctions; he ought to chasten his own body. He will fast, watch, and labor, just as much as he sees to suffice for keeping down the wantonness and concupiscence of the body. But those who pretend to be justified by works are looking, not to the mortification of their lusts, but only to the works themselves; thinking that if they can accomplish as many works and as great ones as possible, all is well with them, and they are justified. Sometimes they even injure their brain, and extinguish nature, or at least make it useless. This is enormous folly, and ignorance of Christian life and faith, when a man seeks without faith to be justified - and saved by works.

"To make what we have said more easily understood, let us set it forth under a figure. The works of a Christian man, who is justified and saved by his faith out of the pure and unbought mercy of GOD, ought to be regarded in the same light as would have been those of Adam and Eve in Paradise, and of all their posterity, if they had not sinned. Of them it is said: **'The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it'** (Genesis 2:15). Now Adam had been created by GOD just and righteous, so that he could not have needed to be justified and made righteous by keeping the garden and working in it; but, that he might not be unemployed, GOD gave him the business of keeping and cultivating Paradise. These would have indeed been works of perfect freedom, being done for no object but that of pleasing GOD, and not in order to obtain justification, which he already had to the full, and which would have been innate in us all.

"So it is with the works of a believer. Being by his faith replaced afresh in Paradise and created anew, he does not need works for his justification, but that he may not be idle, but may keep his own body and work upon it. His works are to be done freely, with the sole object of pleasing GOD. Only we are not yet fully created anew in perfect faith and love; these require to be increased, not, however, through works, but through themselves.

"A bishop, when he consecrates a church, confirms children, or performs any other duty of his office, is not consecrated as bishop by these works; nay, unless he had been previously consecrated as bishop, not one of those works would have any validity; they would be foolish, childish, and ridiculous. Thus a Christian, being consecrated by his faith, does good works; but he is not by these works made a more sacred person, or more a Christian. That is the effect of faith alone; nay, unless he were previously a believer and a Christian, none of his works would have any value at all; they would really be impious and damnable sins.

"True then are these two sayings: 'Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works.' 'Bad works do not make a bad man, but a bad man does bad works.' Thus it is always necessary that the substance or person should be good before any good works can be done, and that good works should follow and proceed from a good person. As CHRIST says, **'A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit'** (Matthew 7: 18). Now it is clear that the fruit does not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruit; but, on the contrary, the trees bear the fruit and the fruit grows on the trees.

"As then trees must exist before their fruit, and as the fruit does not make the tree either good or bad, but, on the contrary, a tree of either kind produces fruit of the same kind; so must first the person of the man be good or bad, before he can do either a good or bad work; and his works do not make him bad or good, but he himself makes his works either bad or good.

"We may see the same thing in all handicrafts. A bad or good house does not make a bad or good builder, but a good or bad builder makes a good or a bad house. And in general, no work makes the workman such as it is itself; but the workman makes the work such as he is himself. Such is the case too with the works of men. Such as the man himself is, whether in faith or in unbelief, such is his work; good if it be done in faith, bad if in unbelief. But the converse is not true - that, such as the work is, such the man becomes in faith or in unbelief. For as works do not make a believing man, so neither do they make a justified man; but faith, as it makes a man a believer and justified, so also it makes his works good.

"Since, then, works justify no man, but a man must be justified before he can do any good work, it is most evident that it is faith alone which, by the mere mercy of GOD through CHRIST, and by means of His word, can worthily and sufficiently justify and save the person.

"And that a Christian man needs no work, no law, for his salvation; for by faith he is free from all law, and in perfect freedom does gratuitously all that he does, seeking nothing either of profit or of salvation - since by the grace of GOD he is already saved and rich in all things through his faith - but solely that which is well-pleasing to GOD."

The doctrine of justification by faith explained here doesn't produce any decline of moral practices and it does give an assurance and a peace in the believing soul that is wholly impossible to explain or even to understand for one who hasn't experienced it.

I listened to the exposition of the Word of GOD in the "Protestant" or rather, the Christian church. I saw how it was put into practice by the believers, unostentatiously, with marvelous naturalness.

Little by little, in an imperceptible but real way, the heavenly light entered my soul. I can't say when nor how, but my heart accepted the message, my soul became enamored of CHRIST as never before, and it was then that I realized that He is my perfect Saviour such as I had never dreamed.

I spent some difficult days looking for work and in financial straits. Some nights I went to bed without supper because I didn't have enough to pay the cost.

But attendance at Gospel services, and the peace that my soul felt grew more and more as that transformation which is the new birth was taking place in it, were a more-than-sufficient compensation for all of my trials and material suffering.

I have tried as clearly as possible to explain the process that brought me out of Romanism to the Gospel, from those Romish doctrines such as the worship of images, the intercession of the saints, transubstantiation, and so forth, that are so condemned by GOD in His Word, to the doctrine of salvation by faith, which is so clearly expounded in it and which I only came to understand after I left the Catholic Church.

GOD grant that this simple but heartfelt testimony may be like a new Ariadne's thread, having power to lead some soul sunk in the darkness of doubt, in which I know the vast majority of Roman Catholics are, to the glorious light of the Gospel of CHRIST; from the tormenting uncertainty of an apparent yet empty religiousness to the glorious assurance and the immeasurable peace that the true sons of GOD enjoy.

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