

Becoming a Christian by Listening

by Dr. Matthew Phillips¹

My pastor has been teaching on Paul's epistle to the Galatians for the past several months in Bible study. As a good Lutheran pastor he has used Luther's lectures on Galatians to supplement our study. Luther gave these lectures to students in 1531; however they were published in 1535. In my view these lectures represent the most significant publication in Luther's career and his most definitive statement on the doctrine of justification. When our Bible class discussed Galatians 3:1-6, Paul's contrast between hearing God's word by faith and doing works of the Law (and Luther's comments on this contrast) particularly interested me. Commenting on verse 2 specifically, Luther emphasized Paul's strict delineation between justification by faith through hearing the Gospel or justification by works of the Law. In so doing, he established a clear order for receiving the Spirit and producing His fruits: hearing the Word with faith then doing good works. (*Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26:202-204)

Since, according to Luther, St. Paul was referring to the manifestation of the Spirit in the early church, he turned toward the Book of Acts. Dr. Luther states unequivocally that Acts teaches that the Holy Spirit comes by the hearing of the Gospel and not through the Law. He asserts that numerous sermons from that book demonstrate this truth. Examples include Peter's preaching by which the Holy Spirit converted thousands (Acts 2:41) and Cornelius' and other Gentiles' reception of the Holy Spirit through Peter's preaching (Acts 10:44). Paul and Barnabas also preached to the Gentiles with similar results (Acts 13:6-12). Luther summarized: "Therefore in the entire Book of Acts, taken as a whole, nothing is discussed except the Jews as well as the Gentiles, righteous men as well as sinners, are to be justified solely by faith in Jesus Christ, without Law or works." (LW 26:205)

Luther bolstered his arguments with examples of Gentiles' faith in God and then he contrasted this teaching with his papal opponents' doctrine. Since scholastic theologians and Erasmus had pointed toward Cornelius' good works as evidence of partial merit of forgiveness, Luther focused on proving Cornelius' faith in Christ intently. However, he also pointed toward Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5:15-18) and the repentant people of Nineveh (Jonah 4:5) as examples of Gentiles hearing God's word and receiving faith in His promises. Luther explained that these Gentiles received the same faith as the Hebrew patriarchs through hearing with faith and not by following the Law. (LW 26:209-12)

According to Dr. Luther, human reason finds it very difficult to grasp the truth that people receive the Holy Spirit through hearing with faith and not by doing something. The devil encourages a false opinion toward the faith and works as we struggle to believe God's promise. The magnitude of the gift makes it difficult for sinners to receive it freely without earning it. This also causes some to despise it. Therefore, Luther asserts that believers must learn that God's gives them the Holy Spirit, Christ, and forgiveness freely through hearing with faith. They must not listen to reason that exhorts sinners to strive toward righteousness and salvation by their own powers. Paul rejected this notion. Jesus commended Mary, Martha's sister, for sitting at his feet and simply listening to His teaching. (Luke 10:41-42) Luther concluded,

Therefore, a Christian is made, not by working but by listening. And so anyone who wants to exert himself toward righteousness must first exert himself in listening to the Gospel. Now when he has heard and accepted this, let him joyfully give thanks to God, and let him exert himself in good works that are commanded in the Law; thus the Law and the works will follow hearing with faith.

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(LW 26:214-15. I slightly changed the translation based on the Latin text in WA 40/I:345).

In his concluding remarks on Galatians 3:2 Luther emphasized the struggle within the godly between the hearing of faith and the works of the Law. The conscience constantly berates the believer because of the supposed easiness of salvation. Luther attributed this internal fight to lack of understanding and weak faith. However, he taught that as faith increased then the Christian's estimation of the Law's righteousness decreased. Faith only increases through listening to God's word.