

According to legend on 31st October 1517 Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses on the door of the church of Wittenburg Castle and the Reformation was born. Among his propositions was an attack on the sale of indulgences, whose selling the Pope had authorised to bring in money for the rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica; the affirmation that the Bible was the sole guide as to what a Christian must believe (as opposed to the innovations which the Catholic Church, Luther said, had introduced as dogma based on 'Tradition' and which had no Scriptural foundation); and the belief that salvation, offered to humanity through the death of Christ, could be attained only by faith and not earned by any amounts of good works.

Sometimes in families there are arguments that split brother from sister, or son from father, and the feud lasts for years and sometimes up to the grave. It can be so protracted, and the silence so deep between the parties that, years on, no one is quite sure what it was about and, in so far as any one recalls, it now seems so petty. How, we might wonder, can anyone fall out over that; and make it last so long?

The Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church fell out early in the sixteenth century and the feud lasted nearly five hundred years. The consequences were mighty: Christendom was split asunder; wars were fought with death and devastation widespread; there was mistrust and rivalry, and scandalous failure to bear witness to the love of God, expressed in love of God's people.

The events are well documented and we know precisely why the split developed, and what the arguments were. But looking back it does seem so petty and misguided. As ever the law of unintended consequences came powerfully into force; politicians saw an opportunity for wielding power and gaining more, and positions became entrenched. Truth was a casualty and reasonableness died.

The Catholic Church was wrong to sell indulgences. One cannot buy grace. Luther was right to maintain that faith alone is necessary to gain salvation. There is nothing we can do, nothing any human being can do, to earn salvation. There is no price that can be paid. The martyr whose body is consumed in flames, the hermit who lives in a cave and eats leaves, the holiest Pope cannot do anything which merits heaven. That is a gift only God can give. That argument had been settled much earlier when an Englishman named Pelagius had taught that we can, by our actions, deserve sanctifying grace. He was condemned. He disappeared from history though aspects of his teaching lived on, and continues to revive from time to time.

Luther based his argument on a passage from St Paul's Letter to the Romans. However, James is part of that sole authority that Luther upheld so strongly – the

Bible. But James appears to go against the view of 'faith alone, not works'. Martin Luther hated the Letter of James; 'a letter of straw', he called it and would have removed it from the Canon, the inspired books of the Bible, if he could. Another Lutheran, the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard roundly denounced his church's founder for wanting to shove aside an apostle, thus making himself superior to the Bible!*

One wonders if Luther had not missed the command to love one's enemies and do good to those who persecute you; and the commendations of the Shepherd-Judge to those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked for they were doing it to him.

James makes his point clearly and irrefutably. If I say I have faith but can show you no works which are the fruits of my faith then I am lying. Faith, to be faith, commitment to God in faithful trust, reveals itself in my practical aid given to the poor, the needy, the destitute; in biblical terms the widow the orphan and the stranger. And this is done not in the hope of heaven, but, our primary motive out of love. Love for God, and love for God's people. And God will look after the rest.

After all, all we have comes from God and all we do, however virtuous is from God. In a delightful simile Kierkegaard expresses this truth:

*"It is like a child's giving his parents a present, purchased however, with what the child has received from his parents; all the pretentiousness that otherwise is associated with giving a present disappears since the child received from the parents the gift that he gives to the parents." ***

Too often in history have Christian people fulfilled their religious duties and put money on the plate while their workers lived in hovels and worked all hours for a pittance. This is not faith but a mockery of faith. That was one of the broader points Kierkegaard was making.

In 1999 The Catholic Church and the Lutheran authorities agreed a Joint Declaration of Justification by Faith. The family rift was over. But it had taken far too long and done too much damage. Now we have to show our faith to one another and to all, in our practical love.

*see R. Bauckham, *James*, Routledge, London, 1991, 116

** S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, quoted in Bauckham, op cit.164