The virtue of faith, in all of its simple beauty, can be quite challenging to define. Many say that once you have faith it is no longer difficult to explain. A passage in the book of Hebrews states: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”.¹ One monk, loyal to his own conscience, in the name of faith defied the Church he knew and belonged to. For the anxious and pious Martin Luther, faith is God’s changing work within us.² Living by faith and not by works distinguishes Christians from the rest. Luther further explains in his treaty, The Freedom of a Christian, the risk of the Christian life losing its dignity by following one of two extremes; when man loves no one except his own faith, or when he disregards faith entirely, attempting to rescue himself by empty works.³ The purpose of this essay is to explain the reasons behind Martin Luther’s belief of ‘faith alone’ and why he went so far to defend it. Luther’s main reasons for arguing for justification by faith alone come from his personal experience as an Augustinian monk, his lack of faith in his own troubled conscience and finding freedom in a loving God he once loathed.

Although Luther’s desire for reform is derived from his strong disapproval of indulgences, what pushed him to propose such an extreme and unparalleled method of salvation was the fear of his own sinfulness and God’s judgment. Once he discovered

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freedom in Christ, indulgences became a direct attack on this freedom, and they almost acted as a reminder of his dark past in the monastery where he spent hours at a time in the confessional. His spiritual guide, Dr. Johann von Staupitz, urged him not to take religion so seriously and to love God and not be angry with Him. Nevertheless, Luther felt alienated from a God so powerful and mighty. In response to the writings on predestination found in St. Augustine’s works, Luther felt so isolated from God that he said, “I myself was more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated Him!”

Luther was consumed by man’s inevitable sinfulness, and began to lose faith in penance, a sacrament he once treasured dearly until it appeared to be ineffective. Every confession seemed insincere, and he was terrified of his own ego intentionally hiding sins. Even prayers, fasting and any other good work in which he sought reconciliation brought him no peace but only more stress. Roland Bainton’s A Life of Martin Luther, explains Luther’s frame of mind:

“There is, according to Luther, something much more drastically wrong with man than any particular list of offenses which can be enumerated, confessed, and forgiven. The very nature of man is corrupt. The penitential system fails because it is directed to particular lapses.”

In short, Luther’s conscience was extremely sensitive and at times hopeless, as he could not understand why God did not hear his agonizing cry. Luther was convinced that his entire person was in need of forgiveness, but his own humanity was an obstacle. Pardons given in

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5 Ibid., 41.
Penance were under conditions that Luther thought humans could never achieve. Because of this conviction, he fell into despair. The indulgences proposed by the Church at the time were not enough to calm his mind. Perhaps, the one opportunity that saved Luther’s heart was when Staupitz eventually stopped trying to console his pupil and sent him to teach the Scriptures at the university. Staupitz had hoped that studying the Bible would save Luther from both his self-hatred and fearfulness of God. This however, is where Luther’s largest conversion begins, and where ‘sola fide’ takes root.

Martin Luther’s third major treaty, *The Freedom of a Christian*, explicitly outlines his newfound belief that faith alone is what allows a person to become fully righteous, justified and one with Christ. In the treaty, Luther strives to make clear a number of issues that he struggled with, specifically matters of salvation, the sinful nature of man, freedom, and justification by works. Luther states that the Christian is saved from all sin and punishment by faith alone and performs good works not to become justified or to earn favour with God, but out of love for God and for their neighbour. The entire letter is centered on Christ and it is evident that Luther at some point in his studies discovered the saving mercy of Christ’s love by studying the Gospels and the Letters of Paul for his attitude is one of hope and gladness:

“To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God.”

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7 Ibid., 598.
Luther states that his main wish is for Christ to be preached more than merely 'The Christ', but as Christ “for you and for me”, signifying a personal God rather than a superior Judge.\(^8\) This new perspective is completely different from the wrathful God Luther once feared. When Christ became the incarnate Word, He identified with humanity and even experienced Luther’s feeling of isolation from God when He died on the cross. Learning this from the Gospels made Luther realize he was not alone. He was now no longer intimidated by the cross but embraced it, and wanted others to experience the liberty he had experienced. As Bainton so eloquently puts it, “the Judge upon the rainbow has become the derelict upon the cross”.\(^9\)

Another important point Luther tries to emphasise is the sinful nature of man. He urges the reader to understand that doing good works, no matter the amount, cannot contribute to your salvation, for man is corrupt and, thus, cannot be saved. He states that the moment you begin to have faith, “you learn that all things in you are altogether blameworthy, sinful, and damnable...”\(^10\) Because of this terrible permanent human condition, Luther proposes that the commandments given to us by Christ during His time on earth demonstrate that we cannot keep them. We are not given the power to accomplish any of these tasks perfectly and must therefore rely on Christ to save us. Therefore, faith in Christ is the perfect fulfillment of every law.


\(^9\) Bainton, *A Life of Martin Luther*, 47.

This view of obedience can be traced back to Luther’s years in the monastery where piety was an increasing burden to him and seemed to even isolate his soul from God. This is reflected in the following statement: “...it is a blind and dangerous doctrine which teaches that commandments must be fulfilled by works”.\(^{11}\) It is possible that Luther states this out of his own personal experience. Goodness and piety driven by will-power alone nearly drove him mad: “He [man] needs neither laws nor good works but, on the contrary, is injured by them if he believes that he is justified by them”.\(^{12}\)

Finally, in his treaty, Luther stresses the freedom of a faithful Christian; freedom from sin, freedom from the law and freedom to love. For Luther, this is the epitome of Christian life. He is now justified in the eyes of God and can now do works out of spontaneous love rather than for righteousness. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, he writes:

“A Christian has no need of any work or law to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely.

He seeks neither benefit nor salvation...because in his faith he now seeks only to please God”.\(^{13}\)

However, Luther makes it clear that Christians are not ‘excused’ from the law and that they should not do good works based on the false hope of achieving salvation and labouring futilely without faith. Ceremonies and traditions are excellent tests of faith, and will always be very important, so long as one believes that he is not in any way saved by them. Luther

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12 Ibid., 610.

13 Ibid., 613.
urges Christians to trust in the Word alone, for if works become necessary for justification, freedom and faith are destroyed.

The works and ideas of Martin Luther continue to influence Christian thought as they did centuries ago. While many topics of discussion about him focus on indulgences, sacraments, purgatory and other doctrinal disputes, the unique person of Luther resounds throughout them all. His experiences as a monk and teacher are found underlying all of his arguments, and his only remaining hope is that faith should be valued more than it was. Although his position on the role of works and faith in salvation can be extreme, his special passion for faith is evident throughout his writings, for it was primarily by faith that he was finally set free and at peace with God.
Works Cited


