The doctrine of salvation of the Catholic Church against which Luther revolted held that salvation was through knowledge and the Sacraments. But mere intellectual belief in a metaphysical God and a religious system which turned the Gospel into a philosophy made no appeal to Luther. He rejected the whole system of abstractions, and instead of beginning with the logical concepts of the Schoolmen, he began with a living Person of Jesus Christ, in all His tenderness and mystery, and through Him turned his eyes to the Father revealed in Christ.

This was his faith, that man attains to knowledge of God only through Christ, for it is in Him that God is revealed. As Luther developed this idea, he came to the conviction that salvation was a present, living experience, not something in the future. His primary concern was how he as an individual could feel the assurance of salvation. Thus he developed his doctrine that salvation is by faith alone, a faith which did not mean holding certain things true, but a faith which meant an immediate and personal relation with Jesus Christ. This idea of faith is largely dependent upon Luther’s own religious experience, for it is directed toward finding that certitude which Luther craved. Thus Luther states that “Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart, that is to say, a true and right opinion of the heart as touching God.” It is the answer of the heart, “an assured confidence which apprehendeth Christ.”

Salvation for Luther, then, depends upon this deep, personal relationship of the individual to Christ through faith. This is a mystical faith akin to that of Paul, from whom Luther probably largely derived it. “Christ therefore thus joined and united unto me and abiding in me, liveth this life in me which I now live. Wherefore Christ and I in this behalf are both one. Now Christ living in me abolisheth the law, condemneth sin, and destroyeth death;”… “This union… then is the cause that I am delivered from the terror of the law and sin, am separate from myself, and translated into Christ and his kingdom, which is a kingdom of grace, righteousness, peace, joy, life, salvation and eternal glory”. “Now, because Christ liveth in me, therefore look what grace, righteousness, peace, life, and salvation is in me, it is His, and yet not withstanding the same is mine also, by that inseparable union and conjunction which is through faith; by the which Christ and I are made one body in spirit. Forasmuch then as Christ liveth in me, it followeth that as I must needs be with Him partaker of grace, righteousness, life and eternal salvation: so the law, sin and death can have no place in me.”

Thus salvation for Luther comes about through a mystical faith in Christ, in the risen Christ, present here and now, with Whom man becomes conjoined through faith and saved through His Spirit.