

Carl J. Peter, Jr. (1932-1991): A Tribute

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Vividly I recall the stern admonition I once received from the later Father Carl Peter, now asleep in Christ. What brings to mind that admonition of eleven years ago is the sermon which his brother recently preached at his funeral. “Carl used to say often to me,” said the preacher, “Val, I call them as I see them.” That is true, he did. How Carl Peter saw things, never trivially, was already a gift. But the greater gift was that what he saw he called – by its name, without fear or favor but also without rancor. Indeed, in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialog USA the rest of us knew that if, as rarely happened, Carl was not “calling” them, we could expect one of two things: he soon *would* call them once he had found a non-destructive way to word the call or, failing such words, he would say nothing. From him such silence was itself a deafening call.

Blessedly for me, the warning I got from Carl Peter in 1980 was the sort he could verbalize, hence constructive. Even so, because it implied a criticism, he took me aside privately so as not to embarrass me before the others. The scene was Gettysburg, not the battleground but the seminary. Our dialogue group was already in its third year of meetings in “Round Seven,” on “Justification” – eventually retitled “Justification by Faith.” Thereby hangs this story. Some few of us (others were to follow) had been arguing, tiresomely no doubt, that the chief point of controversy between Roman Catholics and Lutherans was not and never had been, at least at the level of words, “by *Christ* alone” or even “by *grace* alone.” If that were the brunt of the issue, then yes, we by contrast now have consensus, at least terminologically. However, so we maintained, the deeper difference has always lain elsewhere – certainly in the Reformation it did – and it did so in so many words: “by *faith* alone.” Any other differences about grace and Christ ought to be faced in the *sola fide*. Some of us dared hope the issue *could* be so faced, even resolved, at least alleviated.

Carl Peter saw things differently and said so, at first privately. His caution to me was firm but brotherly: If you persist in emphasizing *sola fide* you will drive our dialogue to an impasse, a “dead end” and reduce it to a “dinosaur.” I hasten to add, and with the profoundest gratitude, the fact that in conscience I had to forego this dear brother’s advice he himself never reproached. He may even have understood. In any case, what he did do was the following. Given the direction that the dialogue took, namely, toward conceding the importance of *sola fide*, Father Peter then made the most of what might have struck him as a bad situation. With his exceptional gifts as a controversialist he turned what he understood by *sola fide* to what he hoped would be lasting, ecumenical advantage – the opposite of a “dinosaur.”

It struck Carl Peter as inconsistent of Lutherans to speak of God’s saving grace as “unconditional” if at the same time they insisted that grace must be received by faith. For then doesn’t grace depend for its effectiveness upon faith as a “condition?” But on

second glance, Peter perceived in this Lutheran inconsistency an opportunity for ecumenical agreement. After all, Roman Catholicism celebrates the profusion of “conditions” through which grace takes effect, beginning with the Incarnation itself and extending to such human embodiments as means of grace (through which grace is “mediated”), also good works, certainly faith. Then why not allow Lutherans their “unconditionality” of grace, even if need be as their “critical principle,” so long as Catholics can balance that anti-idolatry “Protestant principle” with another, incarnational affirmation?

Granted, to make his case Carl Peter needed Tillich’s antiseptic reducing of *sola fide* to “the Protestant principle.” But it isn’t as though Lutherans had never bought into that Tillichian reductionism. Nor did Peter have to look far for Lutherans who provided him his foil, “unconditionality.” He enjoyed citing insiders like Jenson and Lindbeck. Forde did as well as any of us in pulling our chestnuts out of the fire: the only way faith is a condition of grace is the way it keeps grace unconditional. And true, Peter, who knew his *Book of Concord*, knew full well that the Apology carefully restricts conditionality to conditions of “merit.” But he felt safe in hiding that reference in a footnote. Why should he make it easy for Lutherans to find their own sources? He has left us with a piece of unfinished homework. In *The Last Analysis* expect to be asked for a progress report by this sibling we knew affectionately as “Second Peter.”

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