Faithful Teaching, but Religious?

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This tribute to Gerhard Forde is prompted by a reminiscence. The two of us were flying back from a meeting of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, where the theme – and the controversy – had been justification by faith. But now on our way home thoughts turned forward to Monday morning's classes. By way of last-minute homework Gerhard was rereading the book he had assigned for his seminarians' reading, Karl Barth's commentary on Romans. On this much of Barth he and I could both agree, Gerhard more Barthianly than I: religion is the enemy. But what, the reader may ask, does that have to do with justification by faith, a subject which was hardly a favorite for Barth though it is for Forde and many others of us, only some of whom are Lutherans? Let us see.

Gerhard Forde, blessed by God, is a faithful teacher. What makes his kind of teaching faithful is that it teaches faith. Surely that is what Paul the Apostle means by "teaching" (*didache*) in his Letter to the Romans.(6:17; 16:17) And one of Forde's favorite samples from that epistle, Romans 3:19-28, is a classic instance of such faith-constraining *didache*. Let that pericope serve as the source of this essay. Given Forde's preference for preaching, this "essay" will not hesitate to wax sermonic. But

the test of the essay's faithfulness will be not only whether it agrees with the pericope (that at the very least) but the same test which the pericope itself must meet: What it does for our faith.

What makes teaching faithful is that it teaches faith. It teaches unbelievers to believe. What makes teaching faithful is not, or not most importantly, that the teaching itself is "faithful" to a doctrinal norm. It is that, too, but only as a matter of course, in the course of doing one's teacherly duty. Faithful teaching is not ultimately a mark of the teachers, namely, that they are "faithful" to, i.e., in compliance with Scripture and confessions. That, at the minimum. But ultimately the faithfulness of their teaching characterizes *those whom* they teach. Thanks to their teaching the learners believe, are "full of faith." Paul tells his Corinthians that the only letter of reference he will ever have to show any future employer, presumably including God, is the Corinthians themselves. Therefore, if only for his sake, they had better believe.

Even if the opposite should happen, God forbid, if instead the hearers should reject the teaching, then in that case too the teaching may still have been faithful if what it caused the hearers to reject truly was faith. For even in that case the teaching still characterizes *them*, the audience, though now as unbelievers conscious of their unbelief. Yet the very fact that we, the church's teaching apostolate, try every possible means to postpone and avoid such an explicit rejecting on the part of the learners only confirms the point. Faithful teaching is teaching which effectively is "faithing" the learners. ("Faithing" is my own coinage, derived from sixteenth-century use of "faith" as a verb.)

It is as the Lutheran confessors said about the biblical Word: their testimony is "normed" by that Word, the way a two-by-four

has to square with a plumb-line, side by side, externally. But the deeper function of the Word is not to “norm” but to “form,” internally. The confessors claimed to have been “formed” by the Word, that is, they were themselves recreated into believing it. If so, it is hardly surprising that the teaching of the Word which first “formed” them would then be echoed back in their own teaching, thus squaring them with the original, the “norm.” What else was their confession but that prior formative Word now meeting itself coming back, meeting the norm? Where forming precedes, norming is almost anticlimactic. Conceivably, my public teaching may be faithful in the canonical sense of being obedient to the normative tradition, whether any of my students ever came to believe that teaching or not. But who would call that teaching? Faithful teaching is teaching that first and last is faithing the learners. How is this so in the case of Romans 3: 19-28?

The opposite of faith is what Paul calls “boasting” (3:27), boasting in “the works of the law.” (20, 27,28) That is the enemy against which faithful teaching has to contend, our boasting in the works of the law. However, the antagonism between these two opposites, between faith and boasting, can be very subtle and hard to spot. For one thing, what Paul calls boasting often does not appear to be boastful; often it appears as despair. And as for the opposite, faith, it might very well look like a kind of boasting. Paul calls it “the glory of God.” (23) That is, faith is *our* “glorying” in *God*. Still, isn’t glorying not a kind of boasting? Yes, except that now our boasting has been transmuted into our boasting in Christ. Faith is the christening, the Christ-ening of boasting. What begins as the diametric opposite of faith, namely, boasting in the works of the law, ends up under the gospel as a new and radical form of boasting, our glorying in the God of Christ Jesus – in short, faith.

What Paul calls boasting in the works of the law could as well be called religion. And once *that* is what we mean by religion we do not exaggerate when, following Paul, we see everyone as religious, even the most secular and otherwise irreligious. In that sense of religion, not primarily as religiosity or as belief in god or even as ultimate concern but rather as boasting in the works of the law, Americans as a lot are still quite religious. Sir Thomas Beecham, the symphony orchestra conductor, said about his British people that they did not really like music but they were absolutely wild about the noise it makes. I would say about us Americans that by and large we are not fond of the Christian faith but we are absolutely wild about the religion it makes. We would prefer the Christian religion without its faith. But without its faith, all the religion that is left is what Paul called boasting in the works of the law, that is, a religion of unbelievers. And that, as Paul knew better than we, is fatal.

That being the case, faithful teaching, teaching that is "faithing" unbelievers into believers, must expose and oppose their religion, even their ostensibly "Christian" religion. Yet we must do that not in order to eradicate people's religion altogether but rather to radicalize it, to re-root it in Christ, to transplant it into the new creation. As Irenaeus would say, that religion which is a boasting in the works of the law must be "recapitulated." It must be decapitated but then salvaged by means of a *head*-transplant, the new head being Christ, who is ours only by faith. As Paul says of the law, grace comes not to destroy the law but on the contrary to uphold it (Rom. 3:31). In fact, religion never has it so good as when it is retrieved by the Christ of faith.

The best people are the same ones who know best that they are not the best people.
The better we become the better we realize we are not better

after all. But realizing that takes the joy out of our betterment. Well, you say, that figures: if we truly are not better, then what's to enjoy? Is that not to be expected as part of growing up? As we mature morally and spiritually, we mature also in our self-honesty. We give up our childish, inflated illusions about ourselves. Gone is the juvenile boasting and gloating. Isn't that the mark also of mature religion, religion which gives all credit to God, *soli Deo gloria, sola gratia*? All glory to God, none – any longer – to ourselves.

The trouble is, as the gloating diminishes, so does our glowing, our radiance, our glorying. No longer can we glory in how our lives impress God, knowing that they don't. We cannot revel in how tickled God is with us. We cannot bask in how our performance delights the Creator. Gone are the gratifying divine compliments, gone the Creator's doting on our works and ways which we so need in order to thrive. Gone is the rollicking, shrieking glee of "Daddy, Mommy, watch me dive in without holding my nose."

To put the matter in old Lutheran jargon, precisely as the first function of the law, its *usus civilis*, begins to succeed in us, socializing us and improving our behavior, simultaneously its second function, its *usus theologicus*, takes over and "accuses" us, like a reality check, reminding us once more of how far we fall short. I had a rabbi friend who used to say, only half jokingly, that the law is a Jewish mother. Indispensable as the law is for sustaining life, it is always also a kill-joy. Kill, it does, and on extremely high authority. Those are "the works of the law," civilizing and then condemning. The "works of the law" are not first of all the works which we do, to obey the law. No, "the works of the law" (subjective genitive) are those workings which the law does, perhaps in us or against us, those ubiquitous pressures upon us, driving us to meet obligations but then, all in the same process, faulting us for falling short.

These are works of *God*.

Sometime ago my wife and I were strolling through one of those enormous enclosed shopping malls – the natural habitat, I find, of today's teeny-boppers
and pensioners. There we came upon a scene which illustrates what Paul in verse twenty- three of our pericope calls "the glory of God." Coming toward us were a young father and, clutchinging his hand, his three- or four-year old daughter. She was adorable, as only a grandfather can appreciate. At just that split-second when my eyes took the picture, the father was breaking up with laughter, obviously because of something hilarious the little girl had just said. She, on the other hand, was beaming from ear to ear, pleased as punch at how she was delighting her dad. She was aglow in the confidence that he adored her. Her glow was like what Paul calls "the glory of God," the "glow-ry" of God, that is, the radiance of our glorying in God's good pleasure. That is also what Paul means by faith.

Is that not what life is meant to be, our being able to exult in how we thrill the fatherly- motherly Creator, and letting that show in how we glow? For good reason we cannot do that anymore, seeing who we truly are. We know better now, thanks to the sobering truthfulness of our religion. Of course, we could always lie. But it is too late for that, too.

Thus it is with honest religion, not necessarily Christian religion, just any halfway truthful religion – what Paul calls the law. It promotes good work but then, by so doing, it also exposes how we idolize that work, to our shame. This religious law of life pushes us relentlessly to be better – better in our use of inclusive language, better in meeting deadlines, better in our prayer life, better in sticking to our diet, better in taking a joke, better in our political involvements, better in

our concept of better. In a religious gathering like this book's readership, getting better is something we major in to the point of being professionals at it.

But then the same religious force, this law of God, turns right around and blames us for gloating over our betterment, or blames us for disdaining others who are not better the way we are, or blames us for begrudging others who are better the way we are not, and then blames us for feeling so blamed guilty. The very works the law promotes, until it gets us excited about them, it then *demotes*, because we overrate them.

We act as if those works could justify us, as if they were our right to life. As if, given a little more power from on high or a little more time to achieve them, they might just be good enough to live off of. This fallacy honest religion exposes in us, having itself helped to set us up for it. Where we go wrong on the works of the law, says Paul, is that we "boast" of them. That need not mean that we boast of having accomplished them. Usually we have not. No, even when we despair of accomplishing them, we "boast" them. That is, we boost them out of all proportion to their real purpose. We boost them into a salvational significance they were never meant to have. Exactly by despairing over the shortfall of our good works, by pining over the works we don't do, we "boast" a value in those works which they simply do not deserve. *Religion* exposes that "boost-fulness" in us at the same time as it incites it.

Recognizing that we do that will not cure us of doing it. Religion cannot eliminate our "boasting" the works of religion, not even with the most critical self-awareness. Not even the Christian religion, insofar as it is a religion, can eliminate such boasting. How, Paul asks, will such boasting ever be removed? "By the law of works?" Answer: "No." (3:27) All that religion can do, or the law, is to exacerbate such boasting and

then rub our nose in it. Among us today one of the most tempting ways to try outsmarting this law is to concentrate instead on "feeling good about ourselves." I say "concentrate" because that in turn becomes just one more "work of the law," something we must now toil to be good at. Feeling good about ourselves becomes hard work. And why? Because the law, that nimble nag, is just as quick to point out how unsuccessful we are being at feeling good about ourselves. We are never good enough at it. Exasperated, we may try one last dodge: stop worrying about it, be laid back, dismiss it all with "So what?." To which the law need only whisper, Let's see you do *that*. Or as Luther put it, "*Ja, tue es noch*." "Yes, just go ahead and do it."1

That is exasperating. Paul puts it bluntly, "The law angers [us.]" (Rom. 4:15) And when the law does anger us, as Paul also says, it is simply compounding our sin (5:20), so furiously that we can taste it, empirically and clinically. And that, as Paul concluded, is not merely *our* anger but *God's* anger against us. Are you getting the sneaking suspicion, as Paul did, that the works of God's law (what we have called "religion"), whatever else they are meant to do, are not meant to save us? In this sense, as Bonhoeffer saw, there is no such thing as a "saving religion" or a "religion of salvation." Not even the Christian religion can be that, *qua* religion.

But if that is what religion does for us, improves us so as to incriminate us, it hardly provides us what we so sorely need in order to go into life purring, namely, the doting good pleasure of the heavenly Father. If the better you are the better you know you are not better, try frolicking knowing that. With the law, Paul discovered, comes the knowledge of sin. And while the knowledge of sin does well to expose our boasting, it utterly devastates any self-confidence we might have had about how charming we look to our Maker. It stifles altogether any "Mommy, Daddy, watch us dive into Monday without holding back."

That is how we “fall short” of glorying in God. (3:23) “Fall” is just the right word. Thanks to the paralyzing, muscle-cramping truthfulness of the law, we fall flat on our faces. The more religious we are the more critically honest we are, but also the more we dance before the Holy of Holies like klutzes. Good dancers never watch their feet. Religion compels watching your feet. And therefore we fall. No wonder religious communities – America is a case in point – often resort to such bizarre devices, even intoxicants, to pump up their spirits, to deceive themselves, really to counteract the bitter truth of their own religion. Frank Sinatra is supposed to have said that he was “in favor of anything that will get you through the night, whether it’s booze or religion.” We have news for Old Blue Eyes: Do not count on religion. It is not meant to get you through any nights, least of all the dark nights of the soul. I think more and more Americans are suspecting as much, but without any live options. Religion by itself, without the Christ of faith, is a dead end.

Faithful teaching, teaching which is in the business of “faithing” unbelievers, must brand religion for the dead end it is. I mean that religion of ours which is as yet and continually “unfaithed.” But how about when religion is redeemed, “re-headed” under the Lord Christ for the use of his faithful? Even then, among the faithful, there must still be talk of “dead” – not dead end but dead. The faithful, too, are put to death, but in their case that is for them not the end anymore than it was for their Lord. For them dying, day after day, is only the beginning. Dying is only half of faith, yet that much it is. Faith is dying “to ourselves” or, shall we say, dying out on ourselves? That is something which religion by itself cannot bring off, though God knows it tries. The mortification that is part of every religion – or, in a secular age, the mortification implicit in our whole culture of criticism – that mortification

is still essential to our being justified before God. But for the faithful in Christ dying is always only stage one.

The art of dying faithfully is in the Spirit's restricting our dying (whether that be our dying in the coroner's sense of the word or our daily dying) to only a beginning, not letting it finish us off. When left to ourselves, even our own most religious selves, we can only die *in* our sin; we cannot die *out* on our sin. Henry the Fourth was right, "We owe God a death."2 But how to pay off what we owe and still have anything left to live off of?

Paul's answer, for all its archaic words, is still as fresh as at first: "The redemption [of our debt] is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith." (3:24,25) Notice, the expiation is not presented *to* God. It is presented *by* God, and not only because we could never have come up with such an expiation but because *God* "takes no pleasure in the death of sinners but wills rather that sinners turn from their sinful ways and live." In Jesus, therefore, in Jesus the expiating, sinner-suffering Christ, God puts forth the one adorable Child. Here is the Offspring to rejoice the heart of even the most exacting Jewish Creator: the Child unspoiled and selfless and brave, with breathtaking chutzpah. Here is the one well-pleasing Youngster worth boasting about. And does the Son glow from his Parent's doting? Even in his darkest hour. Then especially!

At this point in the drama Luther has the Father now turning the question to us, somewhat as follows. "Are you also well-pleased with this my beloved Son?" God asks of us. We dare to nod affirmatively. "My, what good judgment you show!" exclaims the proud Father, who then adds, "Any friend of my Child is a friend of mine." And God continues, "Then be our guest. The Child is yours as well. If you are not too proud to have him, his blood

instead of your own, his death – his ‘Eastered’ death – in exchange for your terminal, biodegradable death, then We would be pleased to have you as ours – your sin and your boasting and all. And We’ll call it even. A *froehlicher Wechsel*, a delightful exchange, a sweet swap. Never another word about debts still owed. Redemption, complete! *Schluss*!”

Almost without our noticing, we find ourselves believing. It is better that way, looking toward Christ and not into ourselves. Yet Christ, as the story goes, is not content to let well enough alone. He does turn attention back upon ourselves. “What great faith you have,” Christ exclaims. Presumably he is confident that we can now stand the publicity. We for our part are still inclined to be embarrassed, mumbling instead, “Help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:22, KJV). (Notice, never does scripture cite believers *themselves* saying, “Great is *our* faith.”) The law’s *usus theologicus* still has its place, keeping us humble. Still, Christ persists, trumping the law’s *accusatio*: “Great is your faith” (Matt. 15:24). “Your faith has made you whole” ((Matt 9:22), KJV). “Your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50). “This is the victory which overcomes the world, your faith” (I John 5:4).

“By faith the people of old [‘of whom the world was not worthy’] received divine approval; that [namely, their faith] is why ‘God is not ashamed to be called their God’” (Heb. 11:2, 38, 16). And who was more emphatic about faith than Paul? Of course, says he, grace is sheer “gift.” But the gift is never fully given until it is “received.” And it *is* “received by faith” (3:25), our faith. Does it not just kill us to have to accept such compliments? But *this* is a killing we can live with.

We may still demur: What is so great about faith? Indeed, as we warned at the outset, is faith not just a subtle variation on our old “boasting?” Is Christian faith really all that different from that ambivalent, fatal boasting which the law of religion

incites us to and then condemns? These are the skeptical questions which religious folk, especially the secularly, atheistically religious folk are right to ask. And are they not correct? Empirically there doesn't seem to be all that much difference between the old legalistic "boasting" and this same old thing in Lamb's clothing called "faith." The only conspicuous difference is what the boasting is boasting in: formerly our "works of the law," now our elder Brother's works.

Exactly, says Paul. That is what makes all the difference. That is what suddenly justifies our "boasting" or, better, our glorying: the One who is the object of our faith. Our faith rises or falls by him. Either the claims for him are wrong, in which case "we are of all people the most miserable," or he is vindicated and in that case so are we, his believers. Either way, rise and fall we do, continually. Everyone does, whether believer or unbeliever. But is it a rising and falling under "the works of the law" or a falling and rising with Christ? That, we believe and teach and confess, is what decides whether it is a dying "unto grief" or a dying "unto life."

Note, Paul explains, how the old "boasting" is eliminated. It is eliminated, "excluded" not by that paralyzing preccupation with our own improvement and our own self-honesty but rather by what amounts to a substitute "boast," by the substituting of One who is really Someone to boast about. Our old trusts and mistrusts have been refitted with a new Trustee, Jesus our Lord. And because in faith we are identified with him, all that we do, including our dying, even our despair, is done in the confidence that it delights the Creator. "So that all our doings and life may please Thee," as Luther's Morning Prayer puts it, and all on account of our Vast Connections.

The whole idea can be dizzying. We should not advise disbelievers to venture into it unless they are prepared to

commit reformation. And there is no telling where that will end. For believers, on the other hand, that is exactly the glory of faith: there is no end that, with Christ, cannot be resurrected into a beginning. That is the constant miracle which Archbishop Cranmer claimed every believer still performs, even though The Age of Miracles is supposedly over: “Faith converteth adversity into prosperity.” Faith makes sow’s ears into silk purses. Faith, being itself a reformation which begins at home, is given to reform, not glumly but glowingly.

Now it is time to get down to some serious frolicking, especially on this occasion of celebrating one of the church’s faithful teachers. And the way to do the frolicking (Bach called it *frohlocken*) is with all the resources (note well!) of *religion*. For as we noted, even the old wet blanket, religion, is redeemable by Christ. Through him the law, once so dead-ended and futile, comes into its own. All its works, its “good-doings” and its mortifyings alike, are at our disposal. Therefore in full view of the watching God, we dare to dive into the thickest religious ambiguities – ceremony, denomination, priestcraft, finance, bureaucracy, controversy – without so much as holding our noses or even our breath. For we are plunged into the deeps with Christ, baptismally, where we breathe from His Spirit and are “faithed” with the assurance that his resurrection is always at hand. Even religion’s intoxicants and opiates are transformed in the The Holy Communion by the blood of Christ, with whom his believers are now aglow. And what they “glow-ry” in, using, of all things, religion to do it, is the Father’s good pleasure, who gives them the Kingdom. Is not that the *didache* “to be received by faith” (3:25), whose catholic teacher Gerhard Forde is? And we his catholic learners?

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1 WA 40/1:425; LW 26:272

2 Henry the Fourth, Part I, act 3, scene 2.

FAITHFULTEACHING (PDF)