

What Is So Great About Faith?

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What could possibly be so important about my faith that I should now be asked to publish it like this “for use in discussion forums?” What is there about my faith that is all that interesting? Certainly not the fact that this faith is mine. That is hardly what makes it important. Then what does? Is it the fact that, being a pastor and teacher, I am in a position to impose my faith on others? True, that influence upon others, which is why I need to be controlled by the church’s ordination, does render what I believe a matter of public concern. Still, all this only pushes the question back farther yet. If what is important about my faith is that it might influence the faith of others, then why is the faith of these others so important in the first place? Why is the faith of any Christian important?

If Jesus our Lord could say to His converts, “Great is your faith,” what

was it about their faith that was great? How could He say about their faith that that was the thing which “made you well” or “saved you”? Why do we say of our own faith that it is that and that alone, quite independently of the good things our faith does, which endears us to God?

What is so great about faith? Is it the fact that our faith is not our own doing but God’s by grace alone? But that is not unique with faith; that much is true also of our loving, our forgiving and all the other gifts of the Spirit we receive. If that has been our big reason for extolling faith, namely that it is the work of God, then no wonder we sometimes sound so Reformed, emphasizing sola gratia in a way which deemphasizes sola fide. Unless the Augsburg Confession is mistaken, the only way truly to say sola gratia is to say sola fide.

Why is faith special? Is it because faith believes what God says and that way is sure of being right? Of course, that is what faith believes, God’s Word, and His Word is always right. But merely agreeing with Him does not make us right. For one of the things God says is that we are all wrong. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands.” “All men are liars.” It is tempting to want to disprove that judgment upon us – of

all things,
by agreeing with it. For then wouldn't we at least be right
about that:
about how wrong we are? But God does not fall for tricks like
that. Nor
is He impressed with how right we are about Bible history. So
what if I do
believe (as I do) that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea dry-
shod or that
Jesus was born of a virgin or that He rose from the dead? That
much, says
God with a shrug, the devils also believe. So then that could
hardly be
what distinguishes faith as great, namely, how right it makes us
to believe
what God says.

But there is one thing which God says, one Word of His, which is
different:
not His word as law but His Word as promise. That promissory
Word does
change us from wrong to right if and as we believe it. That,
finally, is
what is great about faith: in our faith God's promise comes
true. He
promises to forgive us, but only in trusting that promise do we
get
forgiven. If His promise goes unbelieved, it goes unfulfilled. A
man can
promise with all his heart that he loves his wife, but if she
disbelieves
him, she is not getting loved; his promise is thwarted. With
God's other
Word, His judging Word, faith makes no such difference. His

judgment that we are sinners applies whether we believe it or not. But not so with His promise. That depends on being believed. Not that faith creates the promise. The promise is not something subjective, man-made. The promise is as real as God and it simply stands independently, the way a man's Baptism does or the Body and Blood in Christ's Supper, whether it is accepted or denied. But if it is denied, it stands as judgment and no longer as promise. Still, its original purpose is promise, and the promise is meant to be enjoyed. That is what faith is, enjoying the promise.

The one trouble with faith is not that it isn't great but that it is so scarce, even in the staunchest believers. But isn't that a criticism of us? It is. Then does judgment have the last word after all? Not really.

The dear God, bless Him, takes our scarce faith and "reckons it to [us] for righteousness." Not that our faith isn't already righteous or that God first has to pretend that it is righteous. Our faith, in what there is of it, is indeed righteous. The trouble is, our tiny faith is more than outweighed by its opposite, our unfaith – for example, our worry, which

Jesus equates with faithlessness and, in turn, with hatred of God. Yet God "reckons" that tiny faith to me, to all of me, including the unbelieving me, as wall-to-wall righteousness. Which is enough righteousness for a man to live off of for the rest of his life. That is, forever. God treats believing sinners as whole righteous persons, but propter fidem. Because of our faith, timid and paltry thought it is, God is delighted with us whole and entire. But why? Ah, there at last is the question by which all theology and all theologians are to be tested for their biblicalness. Why does God count us meagre believers as altogether right when in fact we are still desperately wrong? What is it about our faith, even our faltering faith, which prompts Him to pay us such sweeping compliments?

The reason, quite simply, is the one whom our faith is faith in, Jesus the Christ. Either He is the Christ, and in that case our faith in Him is vindicated. Or He is not the Christ, and then we are of all men the most miserable. If it should turn out at the end of history, in The Last Analysis, that Jesus is not Lord after all, then our faith in Him, no matter how sincere, will be exposed as the very opposite of "great."

It will be an everlasting reproach to us. All the more so with public teachers and pastors like me, who have in addition led others into this same faith, including our own families. Yet trust Him we do, as the Christ of God and our very Lord, and stake our lives on Him. Because it is in Him that we believe, and not for any other reason, we dare therefore to hope that God finds our poor faith, finds us ourselves, a joy to behold.

This Jesus, whom we believe to be the only-begotten Son of God, is the only man among us who has been truly right. But He has been right for us, in our stead and on our behalf, even to the point of being made wrong for us – He who knew no wrong. Because He is for us, we believe that the One whom He called God is the only God there is and, being the Father of Jesus, is therefore a Father to us as well. Though we do not deny that there are other spirits, even spirits who may heal and who impel men to superhuman activity, we do believe that that Spirit by whom the risen Christ and His Father have spirited the Christian community is the only Spirit deserving the title “Holy.”

Because Christ Jesus is “for us men and for our salvation,” we do by

believing in Him so identify with Him that we take His death to be our death and His resurrection our resurrection. And we believe that God concurs in that identification and will see it through. Believing this, we are liberated as never before to take also the criticism of God's law, killing though that is, and actually have found such dying profitable for living. We call that the "joy of repentance" or "the dear holy cross."

In fact, since Jesus Christ is pro nobis, for us, we who believe in Him (though we are originally from many different races and traditions) now take on the very history out of which He came, the history of an obscure and oppressed people, and take the Scriptures which explain that history. That is, we now take that history, though it does not appear to be ours, as having happened for us, and the Word of God which is there recorded as having been recorded for us. All this, again, for one reason only: the great promise which that biblical history shows is finally kept, for us and for all nations, by Jesus Christ. Accordingly, all biblical history, even the history of God's law, is subordinated to and read in the light of God's-promise-kept, Jesus our Lord. Our one rule for doing that

is the
writings of Jesus' own apostles who, like the prophets before
them, were
inspired by the Spirit of God but who, unlike the prophets, now
recorded
the history of a new covenant, rendering the prior covenant
"old."

It is into that New Covenant and its ongoing history that we
believe
ourselves authorized to invited all the peoples of the world,
who, since
Christ was Brother to them, are our brothers as well. Because of
our
faith, seeing that it is faith in Him, we are confident that
none of all
those who believe in Him will be put to shame when He comes
back.