

Depth in the Faith

Co-missioners,

Last week we promised to send you an essay by Robert Bertram on the topic of faith. Here it is.

Bob wrote this in 1994 for the fall edition of the LSTC Epistle, a publication of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago where he had taught from 1983 to 1991. As you read, you'll notice that he seems to be talking chiefly to seminarians—pastors-in-the-making. He also has his eye on a forthcoming observance of the annual Reformation festival on October 31st.

We think you'll find his reflections equally suited for people who pursue their living in other fields. They're also inordinately useful as preparation for the Holy Week that starts this coming Sunday. May the Holy Spirit haul us to the depths as these days go by.

For the record, we copied this piece from a digital reprint in our Crossing library, where it landed "with permission" some years ago.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Depth in the Faith

by Robert W. Bertram

Nobody's faith can afford to be skin deep. So I'm not saying that church professionals need faith more than other folks do. But I'm tempted to. Nor is that what the ELCA means when it

declares in the report on theological education that, first of all, pastors and lay leaders need “depth in the faith.” Who doesn’t? Still, when it comes to a faith that is rooted merely in our topsoil or in the tops of our heads, I do think we church professionals are particularly vulnerable.

Why? Not just because this is the season for celebrating the Reformation, when it took a priest to rediscover that our “first imperative” (shall we say) is sola fide, “altogether by faith.” Not just because the Reformation epistle lesson (Romans 3:19-28) was written by a recovering Pharisee who had learned the hard way that he had only one boast: faith. Then why?

Well, because church professionals like Paul and Luther tend to be particularly religious. And, being religious, as Paul notes in this Romans text, makes it harder than ever to have faith.



From Canva

The best people, I suppose, know best that they are not the best people. The better we become the better we realize that we are not better after all. Realizing that, though, takes the enjoyment out of our betterment.

Well, you say, that figures. If we truly are not better, then what’s to enjoy? Isn’t that only 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 are the juvenile gloating and swagger. Isn't that the mark of mature religion—to give all credit no longer to ourselves but now solely to God—*solī Deo gloria, sola gratia*?

Trouble is, as the gloating diminishes so does our glowing, our radiance, our “glorying” (Paul's word), literally our glow-rying. No longer can we glow-ry in how our lives impress God, knowing that they don't. No longer can we revel in how tickled God is with us. No longer can we bask in how our performance delights the Creator, because it doesn't. 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 fun of “Mommy, daddy, watch me dive in without holding my nose!”

Still, isn't that what life is meant to be all about—being able to exult in how we thrill the fatherly-motherly Creator and letting that show in how we glow? For good reason we can't do that anymore, seeing who we truly are. We know better now, thanks to the sobering truthfulness of our religion—what Paul calls “the law.”

Of course, we could always lie. But that too, is one of the very things we're trying to get better at—not lying. So as we succeed, we discover all over again how even that, not lying, can be a form of kidding ourselves. Most seminarians have learned that much by their second year—that, and the sobriety (really the cynicism) that comes with it.

The more religiously knowledgeable we are about ourselves, the more we, as Paul says, “fall short of the glory of God.” Luther perceived this to mean that we fall short of glorying in God. We

have ceased glowing, adults that we now are. That happens routinely to folks who are conscientious, mature, truthful, self-aware—for instance, to us clergy.

When it comes to glorying in the divine favor, we clergy fall flat on our faces, thanks to the crippling candor of our religiousness. The more religious we are the more critically honest, but also the more we dance before the Holy of Holies like klutzes. Good dancers, like children, never watch their feet. Religion encourages watching your feet. And so we fall.

There are whole cults among us who try pathetically to “feel good about ourselves” and grimly work at that new “work of the law,” only to feel bad about that in turn. About what? About the fact that trying so hard to feel good about ourselves somehow leaves us feeling worse, though we know we oughtn’t. Still, honesty keeps breaking through.

Frank Sinatra once said he was “in favor of anything that will get you through the night, whether it’s booze or religion.” We’ve got news for Old Blue Eyes: you’re at best half right; don’t count on religion.

As with the law and so with religion, you cannot live without it but neither can you live with it. Nor were you meant to. But if it’s all you have, it’s a killer. What we are meant to be is plausible—literally, pleasing—and confident that we are plausible. That is what Paul calls faith: confidence that we have the Creator’s applause. However, no amount of religion will get you that. Of course, neither will booze.

Moreover, if you don’t believe God finds you plausible, Luther discovered, God doesn’t. That is why conscientious, religious, law-aware people like clergy are not good at believing. For good reason they’re not. What makes the pastorate such a killer is not the hard work—which, as my mother taught me, never killed

anyone—or the stress or even the conflict, but the religiousness of it all, “the law of God.” That law, with its mortifying truthfulness, is standard equipment, not optional, in the ministry.

The trick is not to evade this killer and certainly not to deny it, but to make the most of it, to parlay our dying into a cross, the Cross, and thus into resurrection. Wasn't it Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer who claimed that the one miracle which Christians can still perform is to convert any adversity into prosperity, to change sow's ears into silk purses?



Thomas Cranmer – leader of the English Reformation and Archbishop of Canterbury, Samuel Freeman, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The other day a student of mine, J.Z. Haller, quoted her Jewish friend as saying, “You Christians treat death like a promotion.” That must be what Cranmer had in mind. Dying, especially at the hands of the law—death by accusation—is for trusters just the beginning. That much it is, or can be.

The mortification which is part of every religion or, in a

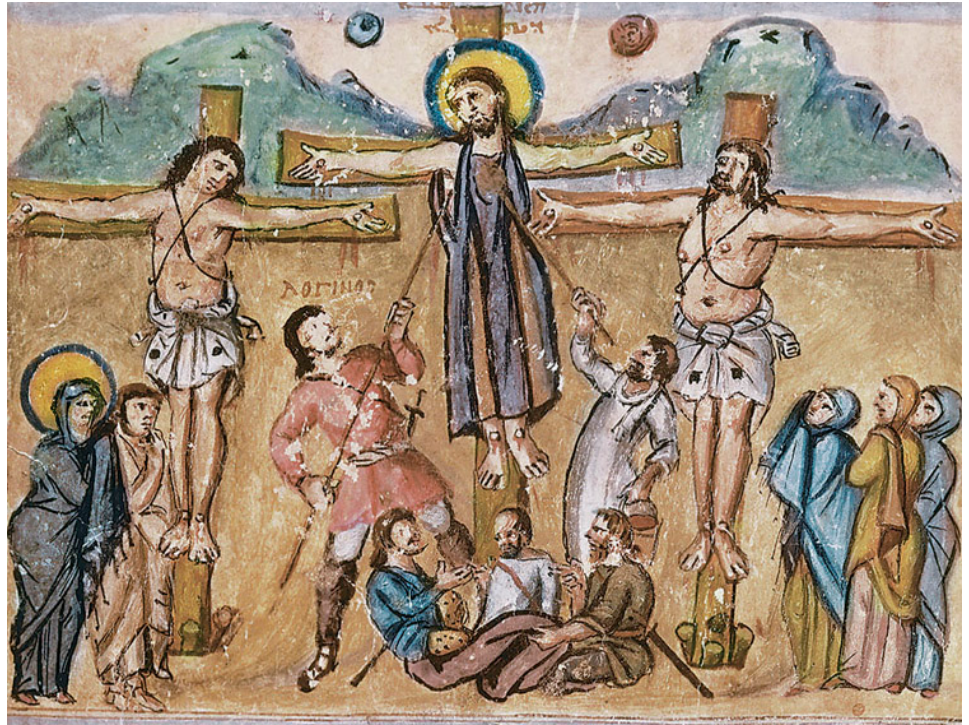
secular age, the mortification which comes with our “culture of critique,” as Deborah Tannen calls it, can be one step toward our justification. True, that is also all it is, merely the initial phase. The trick is, as Paul says, not to die in our sin but to die out on it.

Henry IV was right, “We owe God a death.” So how do we pay all we owe and still get it all back, and then some, to live off of? The answer to that nervy question—nervier than most parishioners would dare ask—is the answer for which the church trains pastors.

The answer comes in the earthy terms our parishioners do understand. “The redemption [of our debt] is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

Notice, the expiation is not presented to God but by God. Notice especially who the expiating One is, that most plausible Child who goes diving into death, our death, without holding his nose, suffering our doom and suffering it out of existence, all the while trusting his Parent “who judges justly” and is so manifestly “well pleased with him” as to raise him promptly from the dead.

Clearly this Christ Jesus has grounds for glow-rying. And who, of all people, should know more about him, have more opportunity for knowing, than his messengers, the church’s professionals? As well they might, considering the special occupational hazards they have to brave, being religious: the hazards of their own un-faith.



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It is exactly for their unfaith that Christ is the great antidote, he who “is received by faith.” He is received not by their religious exertions, not by their working feverishly to “feel good about themselves,” not by their trying to keep their eyes off their two left feet but by their faith—which to all appearances is the most stumbling, tenuous thing about them.

Yet, what is it he says about them, these oligopistai, these “little-faiths?” “Oh man/oh woman, great is your faith.” “Your faith has made you well.” “Your faith has saved you.”

“Our faith?” they gasp dumbfoundedly. “What’s so great about that?” they ask, these professionals who major in pious, unsparing self-critique.

After all, isn’t our faith, for all its timidity, just a subtle variation on our old boasting and not really all that different

from that earlier, childish cockiness which the law of religion has been trying so hard to eradicate in us? Yes, psychologically, I suppose, there isn't all that much difference between the old boasting and this apparently very similar boast called faith. The only difference we can see is what or whom the boasting is boasting in: formerly, our "works of the law," now "Christ Jesus."

Exactly, says the gospel. That is indeed what makes all the difference. That is what suddenly gives our boasting class, validity, plausibility or, if you prefer, "righteousness," namely, the plausible Child whom we count on instead as we go diving into our church vocations without holding our noses, "glow-rying" as we go. He is what makes our faith, even our poor faith, great. Talk about making a sow's ear into a silk purse!

"The depth in the faith," to quote the ELCA term, is what? It is not how deeply we trust or how profoundly we understand, though those are the things we work at, religiously. No, the depth in our faith is the One who works for us. Depth in the faith is Christ, that plausible Child whom God put forward to be received by us, for our glorying. As if that weren't enough, imagine on top of that being called to do that for a living. I might as well admit, brothers and sisters, it is wild, this churchly calling. Paul would have called it "hilarious," something like bungee jumping.

It is for that kind of depth that believers fall, and ministers first of all. I would not advise your falling for it unless you are prepared to commit Reformation. And there's no telling where that will end.

Or is there?

RWB

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Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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