

Faith Alone—Still a Minority Opinion?

Colleagues,

FYI, here's a slice of recent correspondence.

One of my good friends in the American Society of Missiology is Dana L. Robert, Professor of World Mission. Boston University. School of Theology, since 1984. She is one of the superstars in the field. Her publications list is loooong. At discussions arising at the annual meeting of the ASM (coming up again next weekend) she and I are often on the same page. A lifelong Methodist, she frequently draws on Lutheran Reformation theology when at the mike. So last time I asked her: How come? "Well," she said, "my doctorate is from Yale. George Lindbeck and Jaroslav Pelikan, Paul Holmer were my teachers. What else would you expect?"

Last week Thursday (June 3) Dana gave the opening address at the 100th anniversary celebration in Edinburgh, Scotland, commemorating the pioneering 1910 World Missionary Conference held in that city. [You can find it on the web. Just Google her name.]

But that is not where I wanted to go with this one. Maybe next time, or after our own ASM meeting next weekend. Dana and I occasionally post each other via email. Not long ago I sent her this:

Dear Dana, In yesterday's weekly print edition (May 17, 2010) of the Christian Science Monitor, we have this quotation from "Stephen Prothero, [who] is a professor of religion at Boston University, specializing in American religion."

“In Christianity the problem is sin, the solution (or goal) is salvation, the technique for achieving salvation is some combination of faith and good works.”

If that quote is accurate, Prothero’s “specialization in American religion” needs remedial help, possibly from a BU course in Reformation Theology 101. Or just a brief Kaffeeklatsch with you.

Even if one doesn’t read Latin, Luther’s “sola fide” for salvation is easily translatable into the English of “American religion.” And it is not a faith-and combination.

Despite the shrinking numbers, there are still millions of USA Lutherans who decry the “combination” model that your colleague proposes. Often so daring as to cite St. Paul (Galatians) as their ally, they even go so far as to designate the combo model an “other ” gospel. Taking their more immediate cues from the Augsburg Confession’s 1520 protest contra the semi-pelagianism of late medieval church life, some of them still are “protestant” when faith-and-works-salvation pops up again in more modern versions.

Sounds like Prothero needs some help. Isn’t this a case, Dana, of Esther 4:14B? Seems so to me. And you are THERE! And so is he!

Peace and Joy! Ed Schroeder

Dear Ed, He’s at the Boston University’s Religion department, not over where I am in BU’s School of Theology. But he was my student. I tried.

Dana

So I wrote to Prothero myself.

Dear Stephen, I don't know you, but I do know Dana Robert. She told me that she was once your teacher. Your recent prose in the Christian Science Monitor caught my attention, and I sent Dana this note:

[And then I copied to him my letter to Dana printed above.]

And he responded.

In a message dated 5/18/10 11:58:27 AM, prothero@bu.edu writes:

If you read my Christianity chapter in my book I don't think you'll be upset. That said, I stand by what I said, though I would never stand by your reading of it. Note first of all that I am trying to sum up the purpose/goal/technique of Christianity in one sentence. So there has to be some generalization going on. Second, I am describing CHRISTIANITY, not Protestantism or even Lutheranism. In the Christian tradition, Christians fight as you well know about what combination of faith and works is required for salvation. Some Protestants of course go the faith only route, though as Nancy Ammerman of BU has discovered MANY Protestants today are "Golden Rule" Christians who believe you are saved basically by works. Catholics of course have typically said you need both. But the broader point is that Christians debate what combination is necessary. Finally, I would add that I don't believe even "sola fides" Protestants really think the mix is 100-0. Most will go for at least 99% to 1%, which is still a combination. The faith of the axe murderer is suspect only because the "works" work against him.

This won't satisfy you, of course, but it may explain what I was doing in that particular sentence.

Steve

So I responded:

In a message dated 5/18/10 11:58:27 AM, prothero@bu.edu writes:

Second, I am describing CHRISTIANITY, not Protestantism or even Lutheranism. Steve, Ay, there's the rub.

Just as there are many DIFFERENT world religions, as your CSM page so rightly claims—and they are NOT going up the same mountain—so also there are many different Christianities (plural)—also not going up the same mountain. Sola fide Augsburg confessionalism and semi-pelagianism (or full-force pelagianism) are not scaling the same mountain. These are two different mountains each claiming to be authentic Christ-grounded responses to what happened on Mt. Tabor and Mt. Calvary. Any “combination of faith and works for salvation” is de facto semi-pelagianism. In its pure form a millennium and a half ago in the time of Augustine it was officially declared to be heresy. That negative verdict (even if mistaken) says: You and we are not climbing the same mountain.

[You might be interested in my review yrs ago of S. Mark Heim's SALVATIONS (accent on the plural). <https://crossings.org/thursday/2001/thur0125.shtml#book>]

Ditto for different mountains in the several different versions of ISLAM. That's true, I'd say, even if they were not at times eliminating their opponents for being too “other-ish” about

what the mountain really is.

And might this also be true about Buddhism vis-a-vis what's going on in Bangkok these days?

Long time ago our pastoral conference here in St. Louis listened to a Reformed Jewish rabbi take us through a new translation of the Hebrew scriptures done by Jewish scholars. Somewhere along the line someone asked him: "Would an orthodox Jewish rabbi agree with this exegesis you've just given us of this passage?" Answer: "No. That's a different religion."

Even if these 3 world religions do have more commonalities among their various denominations, amongst Christians it's patently a corpus mixtum.

My suggestion for a definition of the abstraction "Christianity" is to say: Except for Jesus being central in some way, thereafter things get fuzzy. First of all, in what way is Jesus central? New Moses? Guru? Suffering Servant?

Already in the NT documents there is conflict about the meaning of following Christ. The common denominator among these conflicting groups was their claim to be doing just that: following Christ. But from that agreed-upon traffic circle the roads went off in different directions. In the 2000 years of church history since then, that traffic pattern hasn't changed.

Then as now, all Christians are not going up the same "Christian" mountain. From Mt. Calvary they go off in different directions to climb denominationally specific mountains. Some of these individual denominational mountains are more patently Calvary-congruent (theologia crucis) than others (theologia gloriae). But that debate continues. It was always so.

Perhaps it's your chosen term "COMBINATION of faith and works"

that caught my attention. Fundamental in the Augsburg Confession (1530) and Melanchthon's defense thereof [Apologia (1531)] is his exegetical sortie through the NT for the [in Latin] "particulae exclusivae," those "little words" (particles) in the NT Greek text that "exclude" all attempts to add something to faith alone. I.e., any attempt to propose "combinations" of faith and something else as the basis for salvation. In his rhetoric "combination" is a dirty word. He claims to have NT support in these exclusive particles in the Greek language. And he was a super-pro in Greek. So he might be right.

Does CSM ever publish op ed pieces? You're in Boston. That's their home base too, right? Why don't you check.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

So far, no rejoinder.

Another item about faith alone.

In the kerfuffle about faith in St. Paul's theology—is it the faith OF Jesus, or faith IN Jesus, that rescues sinners—one of the major players on the "OF" side is Douglas A. Campbell (Duke University professor) with his 1000-page "The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul" (2009).

In an interview that I found on the web, there was this:

How does your understanding of the nature of the Christ-event differ from standard Evangelical-Reformed and Barthian approaches? I would want to suggest fairly firmly that it doesn't, although a lot depends on what you mean by the word

“standard” here. I view my understanding as a thoroughly Evangelical (particularly in the broader, German sense), Reformed, and Barthian construal of the Christ event that draws directly on theological work that stands squarely in these interpretative traditions-especially Irenaeus, the late Augustine, the Cappadocians, Athanasius, Calvin, parts of Luther, McLeod Campbell, Barth, and the Torrances. (Some of my colleagues at Duke insist that Aquinas and/or Wesley, rightly understood, belong here as well!) Indeed, I see myself very much as attempting to clarify and affirm this set of traditions as clearly as I can. But I hope that my understanding is also thoroughly catholic as well, not to mention Catholic in the best sense.

I view Ernst Käsemann as wonderfully insightful, but also deeply ambivalent. Although associated with apocalyptic, and clear-sightedly opposed to any foundationalist salvation-history, much of his reconstrual is still quite Lutheran, and that makes him something of a mixed bag for me.

So maybe it's NOT “just exegesis,” but confessional commitments, that are the deep center of this debate.

Notice this: “PARTS of Luther,” but no such “parts” on the list of recent Reformed theologians. And that Käsemann reference! “Still quite Lutheran, and (therefore) a mixed bag for me.”

Sounds like another verification of Bertram's axiom: “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology.” [RSV: “How you read the Bible is at no point separate from how you think people get saved.”] Faith alone is about how people get saved. It's also the Lutheran lens for how to read the Bible.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder