

Faith as Surrender (Revisited)

Colleagues, ThTh 328 [Sept. 23, 2004] challenged the claim in the September issue of the ELCA magazine THE LUTHERAN that one fundamental facet of Christian faith is surrender. That posting elicited some response which went out last week as ThTh 329. One of those responses was this:

6. From a Lutheran University prof (math and English lit.)— One context for “surrender” is war: we fight and fight, until we can’t fight any more and either we die or we surrender. [cf the sonnet, John Donne I think but wouldn’t bet on, that begins, “Batter my heart, three-Personed God,” which I admit I don’t really like all that much but he’s got this sense of surrender.] In that way, we fight and fight against grace because we want to do it ourselves (we want to be really, really good and earn God’s favor thereby) or we want not to have to be graced (we’re not really all that bad, are we?). But ultimately we can’t do it ourselves and we can’t get by without grace, so we die or we surrender to a God who never was fighting, just offering, just promising, only we couldn’t see it until we exhausted ourselves to the point of despair .

Comes now this:

“I have struggled with what seemed to me to be Schroeder’s assertion that there is no ‘surrender’ taught in Scripture. The response from ‘a Lutheran University prof (math and English lit.)’ encapsulates my thinking. Donne’s sonnet has seemed to me to express well the truth of our absolute inability to respond to God. Even though we might think we desire surrender, our surrender is only because God ravishes us. He must act forcefully against our self will or we can/will not respond. It may not be expressed in ‘Lutheran phraseology,’ but how is that

not Biblical?"

Which prompts this from yours truly:

John Donne (1572-1631) was an Anglican priest, for the last ten years of his life dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He grew up as a Roman Catholic and moved to Anglicanism by conviction in the midst of the Roman Catholic vs. Anglicanism hullabaloo of the English monarchy during that time. Called "leading poet of the English Metaphysical school" (Encycl. Brit.) his poetry and sermons—about which I am just a commoner—reflect the brightest and best Anglican theology of his day. So it seems to me, although on this slice of theological history too I'm no expert. His word-smithing in that poetry and those sermons is brilliant. They also are patently autobiographical, reflecting his own life's "Sturm und Drang."

The statement above favoring surrender focuses on the will—human will vs. God's will. That antithesis, I suggest, is central to the Anglican paradigm of faith. So Anglicans have a prominent place for surrender when talking about faith. (See parallels in C.S.Lewis, a 20th century convert to Anglicanism—not from Rome, but from scientific atheism.) Seems to me that this is so because Anglican theology—even in its manifold variations—holds to a monolithic notion of God's will. God's will is by definition a "good and gracious" will. It is not critically parsed, not differentiated into God's will as Law, and God's will as Gospel. Here is indeed a fundamental difference between the Reformation in England and that in Germany. Here is a fundamental difference from Luther—not simply "Luth. phraseology." Which pushes the question back to the Bible and to hermeneutics, those lenses used for reading the Scriptures: Is surrender central to the Biblical paradigm for faith—or even "one possible" Biblical paradigm for faith?

If all of God's will is fundamentally "God telling us what we should be doing [viz., our believing, our behaving, our praying], but aren't doing because of our own self-will," then faith as "surrender" to the divine will is plausible as the proper response of faith. "OK, three-personed God, batter my heart—ravish me." I surrender: Thy will, not mine, be done.

But if God's will needs to be distinguished as twofold—law and promise (and these two finally contradicting each other: "Sinner die!" vs. "Good cheer, your sins are forgiven")—then surrender doesn't fit for forgiveness-trusters. God in Christ never "batters" human hearts, least of all, batters them into surrender. "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven" is hardly a call to surrender. Can anyone name one NT text about faith that signals surrender?

The issue about faith as "surrender" is not whether or not it is "Luth. phraseology." It's about the Bible's way of talking about faith and what Christian faith is "in," what faith's object is. Since the Bible never once—from cover to cover—uses the word surrender (or its synonyms) for faith, doesn't that signal something?

"Surrender" was central to the monastic piety of the Middle Ages, surrendering to the will of God (all of it understood as law, God's laundry-list of "you gotta's," specifically the three super ones of poverty, celibate chastity and obedience). Luther knew it well from his many years as a monk. But if faith, according to the NT, is always faith in Christ's promise of forgiveness, what sense does it make to talk about "surrendering" to a promise? Promises, as good news, get trusted, not surrendered to.

Unless the other party in the faith-transaction is some sort of opponent, only then, it seems to me, would surrender talk make

sense. But in Christ God is friend of sinners, not the sinner's opponent. Christ is on the sinner's side, dying for sinners. So what sense does it make to "surrender" to Christ's fabulously friendly offer?

Closer might be to say that Christ "surrenders" his life to the fate of sinners, the cross and death, and then offers us his surrender "for us" to that law of sin and death, along with his invitation: Trust me for it. What do Christ-trusting sinners surrender in this transfer-process, this sweet swap of Christ's righteousness for our sin? Surrender is the language of power and law. It signals the "servile obedience" the law calls for, as Melanchthon says in Apology 4. Clean contrary, so Melanchthon, is faith's "filial obedience" coming from the language of promise.

God does indeed "act forcefully" against persons and nations with his legal left hand, but with his promissory right hand—and the One who since Ascension now sits there—never. Yes, never is God's good and gracious will in Christ a forceful act. That's why it's such Good News. No coercive force at all. It's an offer. It's an open-handed invitation. You can take it or leave it. You don't "hafta" trust it. But when you do trust the offer to make it your own, you are not saying: I surrender. Faith is a "jumping for joy" Aha! When it happens, you sing Easter hymns. About Christ's Easter and your own.

And shouldn't this be a clincher for all Bible-serious Christians? "If the Bible never once—from cover to cover—uses the word surrender (or its synonyms) when it's talking about faith—doesn't that signal something?" Surrender-faith is a different faith from faith in Christ. Ask any Muslim.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

