

Faith/Works Responses

Conundrum

Dear Folks,

Thanks so much to those of you who responded to my query last week. You offer us all some great insights about a topic that obviously is still alive and well even this long after the Diet of Augsburg.

I give them to you in the order I received them.

Enjoy,
Robin

Robin, the “conundrum” about faith and works is relative to how we get justified—set right—with God. It is not, however, a conundrum of Christian existence—though that is a commonly mistaken sense among both Lutherans and Catholics today. At the JDDJ Workshop this past Saturday, there were some Catholics at my table who did not think that Lutherans valued good works at all. Luther never separated the two—only distinguished them. Apology IV does the same—and notice how it begins, where Melancthon says that he has more than a response to AC IV in mind—also V, VI and XX. VI is about the new obedience, and XX is about good works!

For more, read the fourth chapter of my book, The Faith that Works.

*Peace and Joy!
Mike Hoy*

Robin,

A few thoughts... Thanks for the prompt... always "in Christ"... for me, us, that is key: faith and works, works and faith; faith shown in works; works showing faith is more than in the brain; etc... It is "in Christ..." for others... and we are blessed in the giving, serving, receiving again.

I like to start with 2 Cor 5:14-15... and Eph 2:8-10 (most Lutherans leave off v 10, unfortunately) ... and 1 Pet 2:9-10 & 4:10-11; & Gal 6:1-10; and the life of Joseph, Gen 32ff; and even James 2 (esp 17)... if I need to...

There is a response that is "of God"... Holy Spirit given; Christ honoring and emulating,... like Paul in 1 Thess 1 ff (2:14)... and it shows itself in service, witness, care to the people around us... all kinds of people... not just "churchy" ones... "in the name of Christ"... and this is where we "get to" serve our Lord as we meet him in the eyes of others... it's not a matter of "have to"... but "want to"... and it's fun... satisfying, fulfilling... and when it gets to be too much: retreat, rest, spend some more time with Jesus Christ, and the grace of gratitude will grip us again... and we serve again, anew...

Well, for me, it's something like that... trust in Christ for here and for eternity shows itself in love for others HERE and NOW... because this is the world of people we know God sent His Son to love, to serve, to save... Keeping our eyes on eternity earth is thrown in a place to do good along the way... focus too much on earth and we miss the Cross that points us to eternity. There is something about faith showing itself in love, in good works, in that reality (Gal 5)

Dave Belasic

Robin,

I have had some thoughts about JBFA these days that may coincide with your piece. Nothing major, but I started reading James Barr's "The Scope and Authority of the Bible" recently for my MA Thesis, and he pointed out something that I've always taken for granted. He's speaking specifically about a movement during 1945-1960 that he calls "Biblical Theology", which was a "reaction against the liberal theology and against the way in which biblical scholarship had behaved in the era of liberal theology. Many of the things that biblical theology maintained had an adequate relative justification when seen against the older liberal position (and equally against the older conservative positions), ... But it was not properly observed that such things, though relatively justified when set against the liberal theology, were not thereby absolutely justified; nor were they made free from internal tensions which would later damage or destroy them" (page 2).

In other words, confessional statements that arise out of conflict are not necessarily universally applicable to all contexts. The Nicene Creed seems to have remained valid, but given how many times we Lutherans have to answer people who think we disparage works because we insist on sola fide, I have begun to wonder if at the very least we need a new way of expressing the central core of Lutheran teaching that is so precious to us. Even Bertram in the Lutheran Confessional Heritage class I took struggled with a new way of saying it, something like "Justification altogether by Faith" or something like that. But even that doesn't immediately help when our critics seem to have James 2:24 on their side. In short, I am suggesting that we need to find some way to promote works without harming faith. After all, if as we keep having to insist, faith never is alone, then at the very least works are related to our justification and deserve our attention theologically, ecumenically, and pastorally.

Justification by Faith Alone was a necessary stand to take in the 16th century, but in the heat of the moment, one is focused narrowly on a specific heresy and uses arguments that attack it without giving much thought to how they will fare when the ecclesiastical war is over. Unfortunately, we tend to assume – improperly, as Barr points out – that such statements can be just reused as is in any new situation, with no need to reinterpret or reexamine such statements in an entirely new context. I don't know that this isn't one Missouri Synodism we might have taken with us into the AELC.

Well, those are my thoughts.

*Yours in Christ,
Jim Squire*

My first thoughts in response are really questions, viz.:

- 1. Is it so? What about the more languid cultures of the tropics, where people are in little danger of over-working themselves? Come to think of it, there are subcultures right here at home in the USA where there does not appear to be any fear of the Conductor. Maybe that fear is not general to humanity, but only to folks like us.*
- 2. Is the busy-ness always in fact a sign of unbelief? Could it also be a sign of faith, VERY active in love? Perhaps the surface symptom, the lack of quiescence, is not univocal any more than honoring one day as better than another, or eating and not eating, but one really needs to ask the next question, "Why are you working so hard?" before impugning motives.*
- 3. The third commandment is REALLY interesting. Yahweh: "Sit down. I MEAN IT!" Maybe, after all, it is SIMPLY sin to work too much!*

I doubt this helps, but here I stand.

Todd Murken

Robin,

Yes, we define ourselves by what we do.

Ask someone, 'How are you?' They will respond, 'I'm busy.' Then they will tell you how busy they have been, and they really have been. But 'how I am' depends on how much I do. Therefore, the more I do the better I am. When told how busy someone is, we will respond with admiration at how much they do, and even feel a bit of shame or guilt that we are not doing as much.

This being busy is finalized in obituaries, where the list of a person's being busy is listed. And the more that is listed, the more worthy the person.

Listen to people at the visitation hours in a funeral home. What will they say about the deceased? 'He was a good person. Yes, never said a harsh word. Always there to help a neighbor.' Only nice things are said about the deceased, for we do not want to condemn them by mentioning something they did wrong.

When asked, 'How was your day?' people will answer in terms of how much they got done. The day is good according to what got completed. 'I got a lot done.' How contrary to Paul's idea that no one can boast.

Never is the answer to such questions something of faith, 'I have been forgiven today. I am feeling in faith. "I look like this (+)." (from Bertram's prayer of a child) The day has had mercy.'

Here is a member's thoughts on God and my response. The idea of

greater life forms is the same as those who have achieved more, done greater works.

2. In regards to your science and faith question. I guess I would have suggest that the image of God as a "clockmaker", i.e. one who makes the machine, winds it up, and lets it run on its own accord, is more easily reconciled with the Big Bang Theory and the Theory of Evolution than the biblical accounts of creation and the Garden of Eden. Here's the rub. Can we be satisfied with a distant God, a God who created it all, including the laws that govern the universe (some quite chaotic)? This would be a God, who wouldn't meddle in the course of human events. Or, as the Bible describes, do we believe in a God who is intimate, who does care about the daily lives of humans? From a scientist point of view, we humans have existed for only a mere blip in geologic time. We live on a planet which is just one of nine revolving around a very average star, in a galaxy of billions of stars, which is just one of many more galaxies. I find it unbelievable that we are the only life in the universe that has had, or will have intelligent life. The Bible records the stories of man's relationship on Planet Earth, with a Judeo-Christian God over a several thousand year period. This is like a nano-second in the life cycle of a universe. I find myself envisioning God as much older and much bigger than described in the Bible. This God has had to be many things to different worlds and life forms over a very long time. I imagine, more advanced lifeforms will envision and need a different kind of God or life force, than what we have described in the Bible. In the perspective of geologic time, the Bible is very contemporary, because people really have not evolved much over the several thousand years it describes. But I think the Bible describes only a very limited view of God, as seen through the lens of human eyes

(which is all we've got at the moment!)

Linda,

Sir Newton rendered the world to work as a machine. There was order and dependability. Even morals were thus firm and stable.

Einstein theorized relativity. Now there is no order, rather chaos and unpredictability. Even morals are now relative and there is no universal truth.

Yes, God could be much bigger than our faith descriptions in the Bible, though the Bible would agree that God is from the beginning of creation, from before the Big Bang. 'More advanced life forms will envision and need a different kind of God or life force,' you say. To put this in Lutheran vocabulary, from the Big Bang to Newton to Einstein, the universe functions by laws. Even our relationship with God is based on Law (laws that demand good and are against evil). If the universe is all governed by the same laws, would even an advanced life form have something else instead of law by which to live, by which their world worked, by which they relate to each other and to 'God'?

Our human experience is limited to law, though in different forms from the king's will to tradition and custom, to constitution.

If all we have is law by which to relate to God, then we feel the law's (God's) judgment against evil and its demand for good. We do not meet those demands.

Jesus, by death and rising, created a new way of relating to God. That new way is FAITH. (This past Sunday described all this as the letter of the law versus the Spirit. Jesus calls

the sinners (those who do not meet the law's demands for good) to become God's new goodness. Faith is the new Big Bang. It does not have law, but instead Christ and the Spirit of Christ by which to live and relate to God and to each other. The new kingdom of Faith is not yet fulfilled, but one day will be.

Would such a new Big Bang be good news for advanced life forms who are also in this universe of law?

*Peace,
Pastor*

Why doesn't the question of 'How was your day?' get translated not to a law response (I got a lot done.) but to a gospel response (I have been gospelled today. I have received forgiveness today.

*Peace
Timothy Hoyer*

Last but not least is a response to the ST this past week. As I said on Saturday, I figure at this time of year we need all the preaching help we can get. RJM

I have always been troubled by the somewhat outer space view we have of Jesus and his ministry. Anders Nygren in Agape and Eros points out that Christians seem never quite to get it that Jesus is both man and god. We opt for one or the other. Actually only recently have Crossan and Borg begun to earth Jesus.

But an urban ministry in New York and St. Louis long ago said

to me that unless Jesus is with us, for us, in our daily struggle to live on this earth in all its strife, then what does the gospel mean to us – pie in the sky by and by?

But years ago (1954-57) in seminary I came upon a wonderful book by Vladimir Simkovitch, professor of economic history at Columbia University – *Towards an Understanding of Jesus*. In it he posits that the temptations are to take political leadership, his choice being Zealot, Pharisee, Sadduccee.

The temptation to turn stones into bread is the temptation to political revolution. And indeed the people do need bread, a fact none of us must ever forget. But he replies Man/woman does not live by bread alone. Indeed.!(See Dorothee Soelle, *Death by Bread Alone*)

To jump off the pinnacle of the temple is to be a Pharisee, hating the Romans, but unwilling to act, waiting for God to act. But that is to tempt God. We are called, all of us, to work for justice and peace, as through the eyes of Christ we see them to be.

The final temptation to take rule of the nations is to serve Satan for whatever reason, sometimes apparently good. The Sadducees clearly saw collaboration with Rome as good for their country. And that I suppose is the temptation to realpolitic. The answer is to serve God alone. And never to compromise our service to God.

This makes total sense to me. It is not esoteric. I see no sign in scripture that Jesus was esoteric. And everything I have read of late, especially Crossan says that the great issue of the time was the Roman occupation of Israel and all the spiritual fall out of it.

Simkovitch has no real answer to what Jesus chose. That is

instead for us to work out. But I find Crossans' understanding that Jesus in feeding and healing was undermining the whole structure of society and thereby proclaiming the kingdom. That makes sense to me.

J. C. Michael Allen