

Reformation by Faith – But Where?

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ABSTRACT

If the Reformation was about anything, it was chiefly about the Romans 1: 17 passage, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” In the language of theology, the Reformation was about the doctrine of justification by faith because, of all the things we humans can do, faith is that one thing of ours which is good enough to clear us of that divine criticism from which we are all dying. Lutherans, frequently forgetting this central Reformation legacy, and Roman Catholics, more recently finding new post Vatican II accents upon faith, can recover faith’s abiding focus together. (Stephen C. Krueger)

The reformation of the Church 450 years ago was a reformation of the faith of the Church. It was not first of all a reformation of her morals or of her worship or of her power structure or of her role in society. Of course, it did affect all these areas as well, for after all they are but the outworkings of the Church’s faith. Above all, though, that faith itself underwent a reformation—the church’s theology, her doctrine, the gospel which she confessed before God and preached in the world and by which her faithful ones lived and died. Not all the Church’s reformations (and there have been many) have been as theological as that one. Nor have they needed to be. But the reformation in the sixteenth century—the one which nowadays is popularly called “the Reformation,” the one which people associate with names like Emperor Charles V and Pope Leo X and Friar John Tetzel and

Wittenberg and Augsburg, with an Augustinian professor tacking to a university church-door an invitation to a theological debate—that reformation was through and through a theological event, a reform of the faith.

Still, it was a reformation not only of the faith. It was more than that. It was a reformation by faith. What do we mean by that, a reformation by faith? Do we mean merely that this reformation required a very daring, heroic faith on the part of little Luther to stand up to the potentates and to demand that mighty Mother Church should reform herself? No, that is not the sort of faith, the sort of reformation by faith, we are talking about—the faith of some mythical religious hero in the face of overwhelming human opposition. As a matter of fact, it is a real question whether Luther actually did have nearly so much of that heroic, world-defying faith as his admirers often make him out to have had. What he, at least, was painfully aware of was what little faith he had of any kind, and of how terrified he was by what he had to do.

What was it he had to do? Not first of all to reform the Church. But first of all, as with any poor sinner, he himself had to be reformed before God. What he had to do was to stand up, not to the potentates of church and empire, but to God—to that God whose fearful judgment calls every man to account and finds him wanting. But who can ever stand up to that God, and live? How could men who are sinners, whose very selves are being mis-shaped by their phoneyess, by their listlessness toward God, by their excessive self-concern, by their dissatisfaction with their lot, men whose marriages and whose friendships and whose communities are being mis-shaped by their own greed and inconsiderateness, in short, men whose lives are being mis-shaped for death by the righteous judgment of God—how could such men ever be so re-shaped as to delight God and thus regain their lives? How could such men ever be re-formed from dying sinners

into living saints? How could they so take on the form of Christ that they themselves could become irreproachable and could get along with God forever? The question seems hopeless.

Yet the biblical answer, as Luther finally discovered—and the apostle Paul before him, and the prophet Habakkuk before Paul—was “by faith.” “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17) Sinners are rectified, they are reformed—that is, they take on the very form of the righteous Christ—by their faith, only by their faith, altogether by their faith. They do not take on the form of Christ in the lives they lead. Not yet they don’t, this side of the resurrection. Not enough they don’t, not enough to clear themselves of God’s persistent criticism. But in their faith they do.

Still, what is so great about their faith, especially in view of the fact that it is the faith of sinners? Simply this: it is faith in Jesus our Lord. With him God is well pleased. Yet not only with him, but also with every sinner who takes on the pleasing form of this Lord. And sinners do take on his form, to God they look like Christ, simply because it is Christ whom they trustingly take hold of. It is he whom they hide behind and in whom they take refuge, and so it is he who gives their faith, gives them, their immense value before God.

The big question is not how well do these believers believe—how fervently, how heroically—but in whom? How well do they believe? Usually not very well at all, usually only falteringly and only with great struggle. But that is not what endears them to God. What endears them to God is the One whom their faith is faith in, Jesus Christ the righteous, the all-valuable Victor who has won out over death and over the divine judgment. And it is Christ’s value which God values in those sinners who identify with Christ.

Faith, Luther used to say, is like a ring. The ring itself, the band around the finger, is nothing special. What is special is the gem which it embraces, the Pearl of great price. But then that gem gives value to the whole ring. The quality of sinners' believing is nothing by itself. By itself their believing is no better and probably no worse than any of the other Christian things they do—their loving, their praying, their decency. All of this is much too paltry, much too fragmentary, to exonerate them before an exacting God. Yet what is not fragmentary but altogether adequate is Christ Jesus. It is he who gives to their faith—gives to the believers themselves—the distinctive form of Christ. These believers' lives and behavior are not yet trans-formed. Not nearly. But re-formed these believers are, when they take on the form of Christ by taking Christ on faith.

So faith takes its form not from the one who does the believing but from the One it believes. This, for Luther, is what explains the extravagant and exclusive claims which scripture makes about faith. And of the biblical writers it isn't only Paul who makes such claims. It isn't only Paul who says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." (Acts 16:31). Peter says as much. (Acts 2:38-41; 3:16). One of the boldest statements about faith is made by John. But then what impresses John is that faith is in Jesus as the Son of God. John says: "This is the victory which overcomes the world, our faith; who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (I John 5: 4,5) Still, bolder even than this statement by John are the ones which are made by our Lord himself. "O woman," he says, "great is your faith" (Mt. 15: 28); or on another occasion, "Your faith has made you well" (Mt. 9:22), or again, "Your faith has saved you." (Lk. 7:50) In every one of these cases what was so "great" about faith was that it was faith in Jesus himself. It may only have been a faith which could cry, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." But even then what commended this faith was

that it could so much as call Jesus "Lord" and could depend on him at all for rescue. And what a man believed about Jesus determined what that man himself became and what he got. "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." (Mt. 9:2) "Go, be it done for you as you have believed." (Mt. 8:13)

The one redeeming feature of faith is the Redeemer whom faith trusts. It is this feature alone which prompted the Reformers to make the bold and exclusive claim they did for faith: "by faith alone, not by works"—altogether by faith. There is nothing wrong with a Christian's good works. Indeed, these works of service to God and the neighbor are the very goal for which men are saved at all. The trouble is, these good works are never good enough—not even the best of them. For that matter, faith itself is also a kind of good work. But that is not what distinguishes faith. As an activity at work in the believer, it too is not good enough. No, what is so good about faith is that One whom faith is all about, the God who in Christ is merciful. He is good enough. For now he will do quite nicely. He does for faith what believers cannot do, not by their loving or by their believing or by anything else. He dignifies their faith, and so dignifies them, with his own worth. *Dignus est Agnus*, worthy is the Lamb. That is the exclusive dignity, the unique worth of faith.

Of all the things we do, faith is that one thing of ours which is good enough to clear us of that divine criticism from which we all are dying. May I repeat that, please? Of all the things we do, faith is that one thing of ours which is good enough to clear us of that divine criticism from which we all are dying. Of course, this does not mean simply that faith is our own doing. Really, it is not. Faith is a gift from God. Still, that is not what is unique about faith. Everything Christians do—their loving, their serving—are all the doing of God, as his gift. That much is true of faith, too. Whatever there is of it

is from God, though usually there is not very much of it. Still, however little there is of this God-given faith, however piece-meal and tentative it may be in us, it is nevertheless faith in the whole Christ. He is never piece-meal or tentative. And as whole as he is, so, by faith in him, are we whole, too. Faith, even feeble faith, grasps him entirely. But only faith does.

“He who through faith is righteous shall live.” But that assumes something. It assumes that in order for a man to live he must be righteous. Unless he has a righteousness of his own, he has no life. To live at all- in any truly human, truly godly sense of the word “live”-a man must have something to show for himself before God. He must count for something. He must qualify for that life which only God can give. He must be worth the life he gets. And what do men long for more than for life? But life presupposes righteousness. And to be that righteous a man must be righteous altogether, totally, in everything he is and does, from birth to death—heart, soul, strength and mind. Still, who can ever achieve a righteousness like that? But then who can ever live? “He who ... is righteous shall live.” Ah, but I omitted the crucial words. “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” And what else is faith, the Reformers asked, except living off of the righteous deed of Another, counting on Christ to count for us? What is so right about faith is that it depends upon him to be right for us. It trusts that he has righted our wrong. And in trusting that, the trusting sinner himself is right, as righteous as Christ himself. Having that righteousness of Christ— and faith is the very having of it—the sinner has righteousness enough to live off of. And what a life that is! And not for this world alone.

Now see what I have done. I have spoken at such length about a single aspect of Luther’s conception of faith—namely, that what is justifying about faith is its object, Jesus Christ—that in the process I have used up all my time on this one theme. That

is not altogether a loss, considering the flagrant misconceptions which surround Luther's meaning of faith, also among Lutherans. Most all of these misconceptions commit the same fallacy: they subjectivize faith and come near to reducing faith to faith in faith itself. This misconception has afflicted not only those theologies and pieties which have more or less espoused such fideism-pietism, the "religious experience" strains in Protestant liberalism, Christian existentialism—but also those more orthodox traditions which, in horror at such fideism, flee to the supposedly opposite extreme of an objectivist imputationism. Both sides assume much the same mistakenly subjectivist view of faith. Really, even if there had been time in this lecture to explore other features of the Reformers' meaning of faith—for example, faith as a "having," faith as the "good" of "good works," faith as "the truth of the gospel," faith as the only proper safeguard of Christ's mediatorship and of grace's promissiveness—these features would have been only additional variations on the previous theme, *fides Christo formata*.

"He who through faith is righteous shall live." That passage from Romans, I suppose, comes as close as any to being the motto of the Reformation. If the Reformation was about anything, it was about that. It was, in the language of theology, about the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The question was not—not in the first instance—whether sinners are justified solely by God's grace. And the question was not—not in the first instance—whether they are justified solely by Christ. Those questions were never really in dispute, at least not in so many words. In so many words, the Roman Catholic Church, too, has always taught that sinners are justified by God's grace alone on account of Jesus Christ. What was in dispute, the issue of life and death, the rock of offense—then and, I believe, still today—was whether a sinner can hope to have the grace of

God, can hope to have Christ, entirely by faith, irrespective of the works his faith is struggling to perform. If the answer to that question is Yes, then that in turn influences mightily what all is meant by “grace alone” and “Christ alone.” And if the answer is No, then, too, both grace and Christ play quite a different role in a sinner’s destiny under God. That is how decisive the doctrine of “faith alone” was for the very gospel itself.

In the sixteenth century both sides recognized the seriousness of that issue. And in recognizing its seriousness, they were both right, although in the way they resolved the issue they could not both be right. They recognized that, too. That is our common anguish. In the centuries since that time, the immediate descendants of the Reformation, the Lutherans, have often failed miserably in sustaining this glorious reformation by faith. That in large measure, I am embarrassed to admit, is the sorry case within Lutheranism today, and not only among the so-called liberal Lutherans but also among the so-called conservative Lutherans. On the other hand, within Roman Catholicism, especially since Vatican II, there has been a new and unprecedented accent upon faith. It is still, in my estimation, a far cry from what the Reformation re-discovered about faith. But the emphasis upon faith is there, within the Roman Church, and the emphasis is growing. Reformation by faith, but where? We both need to recover it. And who would begrudge God the joy of our recovering it together?

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