

Those “Solas” in Lutheran Theology

Colleagues,

There’s a group of Lutheran clergy holding regular meetings—“tell it not in Gath”—here in St. Louis. Half are from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, the other half from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I’m not involved in those gatherings, but I did get invited—by the LCMS chair—to be a guest at the last meeting a couple of months ago.

The speaker for the event was Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, recently dis-elected from his presidential office at this summer’s convention of the LCMS. With only throw-away lines about his move into unemployment, Kieschnick addressed the topic of the future of Lutheranism. He focused our attention on the three “solas” [“sola” in Latin = “only,” or “alone”] of classical Lutheranism: sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura. Salvation by faith alone and by grace alone. Authority is scripture alone.

At the end there were questions and comments. After a few had been made, one came from me. And when it was all over, I went home and sent him this email. Today I pass it on to you.

Peace and joy! Ed Schroeder

Dear Jerry,

You doubtless guessed that I had my own answer to my question to you at the LCMS/ELCA pastors gathering this noon. I think I said something like this: Although the three solas are what we Lutherans always have said, and the folks on all sides of the

divides within the LCMS and ELCA affirm all the solas, that doesn't bridge the gaps. So you got dis-elected this summer for not being Lutheran enough—as John the Steadfast was—with YOUR three solas. And in the ELCA there now is Word Alone, CORE, NALC, etc.—all of them convinced that the ELCA is not Lutheran enough with its three solas. So what do we do?

Here's my thought.

1. We need to remember that in the Book of Concord only one sola ever gets mentioned. Sola fide. There is no debate on the sola gratia nor on the sola scriptura when the Lutheran Confessors are wrestling with the Roman theologians at Augsburg. In fact the RC response to Augsburg (The Confutation) does more hyping of sola gratia and much more scripture-quoting than the Augsburg Confession does. It's only the sola fide in the Augsburg Confession that the RC theologians can't tolerate. It is the hot potato—as we see when Melanchthon addresses it directly in Apology IV. [And here he starts out with a (first ever?) proposal for a “Lutheran” hermeneutic for reading the Bible.] Sola scriptura has consensus between the two conflicting parties. No debate there. But THE issue is: HOW you read the Bible, with what lenses? So that's where Melanchthon starts in Apology IV. If you don't read the Bible with the proper lenses, you'll never get to the “sola fide.”
2. I think the same is always true in every serious controversy within church history. It's always the sola fide. That's what's dividing Missouri now, also the ELCA. But no one is saying that out loud, so far as I know. If for no other reason than that all sides recite the “sola fide” mantra as their own. So there can't be any disagreement there, they would say. But what is the “fide” in sola fide? That is where the parties separate.
3. Granted, the RC critics of the AC wanted to scrub the

“sola” but that was because they had a non-Biblical notion of the “fide.” Melancthon often label it “fides historica”—believing that the facts of the faith are true, they really happened—when he addresses the topic in the Apology to the AC. “That’s not what the word ‘faith’ means in the NT,” he says. That’s true today in USA Lutheranism. The super-purists in the ELCA and in the ones unhappy with you in the LCMS are afflicted/infected with “fides historica.” Though they would dispute that, I’m sure, that is a valid diagnosis.

4. Which brings into focus just what the object of faith is in Christian faith. You spoke of that (though not directly linked to what I’m saying here) when you spoke about the “satis est” this noon [“satis est” in Latin, “it is enough, it suffices”]. When we understand faith to be “trust” – but not trust in the fides historica sense (=trusting that all the historical statements in the Bible are true)—namely, trust in Christ’s promise of forgiveness for sinners, then you bump into the Confessors’ statement about “satis est.” That promise-trusting is all it takes, that suffices, to make someone 100% Christian.
5. Faith, as the Confessors insist in their “sola fide” formula, is ALWAYS a faith that trusts this promise. And the only way that this promise gets transferred from first century Palestine to us today is via Gospel-preaching and Sacraments administered. [There is an implicit “sola” about that too. ONLY through these media does the promise get passed to people—in oral or ritual format, as RC theologian William Burrows likes to say.] These media are the carriers (the pipeline) for the promise. That is why they are “satis est.” They suffice, they are all it takes, to get the promise offered to folks, and when trusted, that’s all it takes to make Christ’s promise come true for me and you.

6. The fight about your “loose” Lutheranism in your denomination (for over half of my life my denomination too) and the fight about the gay issue in the ELCA is “fides historica” vs. “sola fide.” For sola fide in the AC always means faith-in-the-promise. And that always raises the “satis est” question. Is “faith-in-the-promise” ENOUGH to transform a sinner into God’s fully beloved child? If that is so, and it is, then what is sufficient (satis) to get the promise to people? The media of grace—Word and sacrament. And here in the Confessors’ language (and Luther’s too) “Word” [Word of God] never means Bible. When referring to the Bible the 16th century Lutherans regularly said Heilige Schrift or Die Bibel. When they said “Wort Gottes” they were always talking about the proclaimed word of the Gospel. Wort Gottes = God’s promise, God’s Gospel, the Good News from God. The Bible is never included in any list of the “means of grace” in the Book of Concord. Even when Luther expands those means to five in his paragraph on “The Gospel” in the Smalcald Articles, the Bible is not one of them.
7. There may well be no “rescue” for Lutheranism in the USA. We may all have squandered our inheritance, and as Luther sometimes said: “God is moving the Platzregen of the promise to other places [Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mainland China] and departing from us in judgment.” We may be facing (a phrase from Amos) “a famine of the Word of God,” where Wort Gottes means what the Reformers meant when they used that term. If there is to be any attempt on our part to cope with the famine and possibly turn things around, it will (as always in church history) be with fresh articulations of the Promise, offered orally and ritually, and then promise-hearers responding with trust to that offer.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder