

Altogether By Faith

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ABSTRACT

The theme of the 1967 (New York) LCMS convention, "Justification by Grace," with no mention of the sola fide ("faith alone"), reveals a problem far more broad than merely the LCMS'. As the Fourth Article of the Apology argues, by minimizing faith, the Reformation's other "solas" (at least "grace alone" and "Christ alone") are distorted too. Then the counter to "grace" is cast merely as "our sin," as if sin and grace could be equated with "law and gospel," ignoring the chief problem sinners have: not just to be saved from themselves but, far worse, from God. It is from no less a problem than God's legal wrath that God's gospel must be good enough to free us. It is to that gospel faith is directed and boldly trusts, endearing itself to God as only faith can do. As the sola fide is rediscovered against the contemporary solipsism (the theory that only the self can be known) of varying fideisms (where the self trusts in its trusting), the sola fide's more serious christologies may also make a welcome comeback. (Stephen C. Krueger)

Consider this parable. The scene was the New York Hilton, the forty-seventh convention of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, July of 1967. The theme of the convention, emblazoned on an enormous banner behind the podium in the ballroom, read "Justified by Grace." "By grace," mind you. There was not a word about faith, not even in the biblical motto on the convention logo, "They are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Any halfway attentive reader who opens to that text in Romans 3, a standard reading for The Festival of the Reformation and a "regulative" passage for the Reformers, cannot help but note that if there is any one word which sums up Paul's point it is "faith"—and "grace" and even "Christ" only if "by faith."

Recall how Article IV of the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* makes exactly this point, and does so by recourse to Romans 3:25. The opponents had made much of the fact that "we must place our confidence in God's grace." But by minimizing faith, they distort grace as well. The confessors explain, "Whenever ["God's grace and mercy toward us"] is mentioned, faith should be added, . . . for faith takes hold of grace." Similarly, the opponents boast of "the sufferings of Christ." "Well said," the confessors reply, "but why not say something about faith? Christ is a propitiation, as Paul says, through faith (Rom. 3:25)" (IV:381-2). To neglect *sola fide* is to neglect not only faith but grace and Christ, both of which depend upon faith for their efficacy. Indeed, without faith neither grace nor Christ can come true. (*Large Catechism*, Creed:3,38)

Meanwhile, back at the New York Hilton . . . which, come to think of it, was in the heart of *Lutheran Forum* country, cherished by us moderates as an evangelical counterpoise to Missouri's looming legalism. In fact, that probably had something to do with the choice of New York as a convention site, a symbolic last-ditch effort (by hindsight) to stave off the inevitable hostile takeover by the legalists. (In those days we still imagined that legalism meant all Law and no Gospel, scarcely noticing that it was equally short on Law, the really consuming Law of God,

though not at all short on “man-made” laws, by-laws, mini-laws, bureaucratic regs, etc.)

That is, the evangelical counterpoise to legalism, which clearly was sin, was thought by us to be “grace,” the grace in Christ of course, but with relatively scant help from the biblical-confessional *sola fide*. “Sin and grace,” that antithesis said it all, we thought, as if “sin and grace” were synonymous with the old Lutheran twosome, “Law and Gospel.” In truth they are not synonymous. Not even is “grace” the grace of the Gospel, if all that grace is opposed to is “sin,” which after all is merely *our* sin. But the Law is the Law of *God*. And it is up against that which the Gospel of God, the same God, must contend. The opposite of grace is not only sin but judgment, that divine *accusatio* which informs and safeguards the whole good creation.

We, who are problem enough of course, are not our own worst problem; God is. It is from no less a problem than that which God’s Gospel must be good enough to free us. Any gospel that shrinks from such daunting odds is reactionary, inexcusably conservative and not evangelically catholic. As far as “sin” is concerned, it is opposed by the Law, too, no less than by grace. The trouble is, precisely in its opposition to sin the Law simultaneously exacerbates sin. The Law vexes us, and we vex the Creator. That, if memory serves, is called “wrath.” Grace is no match for that, nor even is Christ, not in us they aren’t, unless they are ours altogether by faith. But isn’t that exactly how grace and Christ come into their own—or as we said, come true?

See how it is faith that dramatizes the opposition between the Law, on the one hand, and the promise of grace in Christ, on the other. What the Law says of us is true whether we believe it or not. What the promise says of us is true only, but entirely, in our believing it. Granted, there have been theologies, well-meaning and otherwise orthodox theologies which speak grandly of God’s grace in Christ “justifying” sinners with or without faith, “objectively.” Not only is that monolithic use of “justification” nonsense, biblically and confessionally. Worse, that subverts the very thing these theologies had wished to protect, God’s grace in Christ, which without faith, as the *Large Catechism* reminds us, is “in vain.” Grace, as Paul found, is like a promise of love. It is unconditional in the sense that it is unmerited by anything in the promisee. All the promisee does to receive that love is trust the promisor.

Of course, there is a negative converse to that. The promisor—say, a wife—may promise to love her husband until she is blue in the face, but if he disbelieves her, the poor fool simply is not getting loved. Her promise cannot be kept; he goes unloved. Oh, we might protest that, despite his denials, she for her part still goes on loving him. That would seem to clear her, though it says little for her persuasiveness. Besides, apart from the fact that her love does him no good, indeed it incriminates him all the more, there is a further problem with calling that love: it might suggest, as our age persists in doing, that love is what goes on, privatistically, in a solitary bosom, whether the other is served by that or not. The same solipsism can extend to our notions of grace. It is like kissing solo.

As the *Apology* rejoiced to discover, “Paul...correlates and connects promise and faith.” “Wherever there is a promise, there faith is required. Only faith can accept a promise.” “Paul...contends that the forgiveness of sins has been promised, not because of our works but freely because of Christ, provided that we accept it by faith.” (IV:114,50; 146,264; 216,10) “Provided that we accept it”—ah, there’s the rub. “Faith is required”—there’s the same rub. For doesn’t this confessional preoccupation with faith threaten the unconditional character of grace by introducing a whole new condition, faith?

This nervous question, which has scared even the most confessional Lutherans, and long before the alarmisms of Barth, has had the deadening effect among us of eroding the joy of the confessors, “the joy of our salvation” really, not to mention the joy of our Lord, who did not need to be a Paulinist to exclaim, “Oh woman, oh man, great is your faith, your faith has made you well, your faith has saved you.” But now, instead of celebrating grace and faith as inseparable correlates, we suspect them of mutual subversion. No wonder the convention banner omitted any mention of faith.

One last backward glance at the Hilton, now more than twenty years behind us. Or is it behind us? The reason I referred to that event as a parable is that, in my judgment, it discloses a tragic flaw not only in Missouri Synod Lutheranism. That poor church-body hardly needs any more bashing, least of all from one who has long since lost interest in that and could only revive the energy out of nostalgia. No, the urge to settle for “justified by grace,” usually as a counterpoise to the equally superficial antithesis, “sin,” is an all too familiar temptation for Lutheranism generally, no less for North American Lutheranism, and no less today than previously.

In registering that criticism I do not for a moment want to appear ungrateful for the genuine progress that is being made nowadays in Lutheranism (and not only in Lutheranism) toward a recovery of *sola fide* and of its indispensable corollary, law and promise. Of course their recovery does not depend, thank God, on incanting just those antique shibboleths. One hopeful straw in the wind, only one among a growing company, is a forthcoming book on justification by my dear colleague, Carl Braaten, who in his own way accords new attention to how justification is (and is not) by faith. May I, with pardonable pride, mention also the new historical study by a former student, Nestor Beck, *The Doctrine of Faith?* And of course there is the recent volume seven of the Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue USA, entitled—and what is more, actually characterized by, here and there—*Justification by Faith*. Perhaps only those who were privy to how that dialogue struggled over *sola fide* would dare to reckon its modest gain as the breakthrough it really was.

However, while we may be reappropriating the biblical-confessional, hence the evangelical-catholic emphasis upon faith, an emphasis which Ninian Smart finds peculiar to Christianity, we still tend to regard that emphasis with extreme caution, maybe even grudgingly. Nor is our caution unwarranted. We have all been burned, maybe traumatized as Barth was, by bad faiths. Most of our Christian traditions have in recent memory been ravaged by one or another version of fideism, whether pietist or liberal-empiricist or existentialist or inerrantist. Valid as those reactions might once have been, more or less, and their imitators today are legion, they do harbor the sort of religious narcissism by which faith becomes faith in faith itself. That is a subjectivist form of what used to be called “works righteousness.”

Still, that is not the worst thing about fideism, namely, that believers trust in their own trusting rather than in God. That would be reproach enough, but if that were all, the problem might be alleviated by some new insistence upon *sola gratia*, reminding the subjectivists that salvation is never our doing but always gratis and “prevenient” and that we ought to render “all glory to God.” For that matter, that humbling reminder they could get, and do get, from any robust version of the Law. Indeed, isn’t that what a good bit of *sola gratia* talk boils down to, particularly when it waxes macho, namely, thinly disguised Law or, worse, legalism?

Why not call fideism what it is, what Paul calls a “work of the law?” As such, as a religious

response evoked by God's law, fideism might boast a kind of proximate value. (Frank Sinatra has been quoted as saying, "I'm in favor of anything that will get you through the night, whether that's booze or religion." For "religion," read fideism.) But judged by that same law's unsparing critique, fideism is never ever valuable enough. Why not? It is never valuable enough to endear itself to God, as faith does. Fideism is unable not only to give all glory to God. What is more, it cannot glory in how pleased God is with us. Understandably it cannot. Even fideists must regard such glorying as presumptuous, as in that case it would be.

For faith, on the other hand, such glorying is not presumptuous. On the contrary, that is exactly what faith is, glorying in how we delight the Creator. To the Law that sounds like "boasting." And of course it is that Law's very critique, so we confess, which only faith—like Christ himself—can stand up to and survive. Fideism cannot. Fideism, at least conscientious fideism is inherently uncertain. In fact, most fideism (like Erasmus') makes a virtue of uncertainty, calling it humility and calling the opposite presumption.

Fideism, as we said earlier, inspires cautiousness, and not only in its critics but in its practitioners. Both of them, the one like the other, mistake *sola fide* talk with boasting. So instead of letting faith take its chances and audaciously prove itself against the Creator's full criticism, they trim back its bold claims and bashfully list *fide* as always the last of the three *solas*, assigning it the weak preposition "through"—only Christ gets "because" and grace gets "by"—and construing faith as merely (sic!) "the hand that receives" and, in the bargain, forfeiting Scriptures' best lines about faith to, of all people, the Pentecostals or the "New Age" religionists.

To return to the Romans 3 reference with which we began, it is from that confident, well-founded glorying in God's approval of us that fideism—like its flipside, "solagratiatism" and like all "works of the law"—"falls short." (v. 23) Admittedly Paul's term, "the glory of God," is here being construed in what Luther told Erasmus is its Hebraic sense, namely, as that glory "which we have in God and before God and which might be called 'glory in God.'"

People glory in God when they are certain that God is favorable to them and deigns to look kindly upon them, so that the things they do are pleasing in God's sight, or if they are not, are borne with and pardoned.

Luther challenges Erasmus to produce just one of the latter's kind of religious person "who can sincerely and honestly say with regard to any effort or endeavor of his own, 'I know that this pleases God.'" (WA 18:769)

But isn't that the glory of faith, to so say? And why? Ah yes, why? That is the question over which every theologian, every confessing Christian must surely exult, We thought you'd never ask, The Why of *sola fide* is nothing less and nothing else than *propter Christum sola gratia*. That has been the central challenge to Christian theology at least since Abelard, how to necessitate Christ. But if the Augsburg Confessors were right, there is nothing in all the gospel that so "shows the need of Christ" as does the gospel's *sola fide*. And if I may play the prognosticator, I predict that the recent efforts at recovering classical Christianity's *sola fide* will quickly be followed by concomitant re-investigations into that same *sola fide*'s radical christologies.

One promising sign to that effect is an emphasis I've noticed in *Lutheran Forum's* recent editorials, an emphasis upon the public office of preaching. One of the boldest tasks of the preachers surely, right along with their calling the communion *to* faith, is their calling *faith* what it is, "Great," well-making, saving, justifying, and thus doing what the very Word from God does, reckoning the believers' faith to them "for righteousness." The believers, so far as I know, never do that reckoning themselves, and probably would be too modest anyway to construe their faith so gloriously. But God does so construe their faith, hence so do God's apostolic messengers. Their divine office is the New "plausibility structure," rendering not only the gospel but also its believers plausible, and plausible not only in the sense of credible but also in the sense of pleasing, winsome.

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