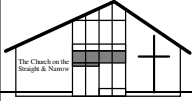


The Straight & Narrow Way



A Newsletter for OUR SAVIOUR LUTHERAN CHURCH

January/February 2007

Comfort on the Journey

This poem, translated from German, is found on the baptismal certificate of a little girl born to a Lutheran family in 18th-century Pennsylvania.

I have been baptized—even if I die
How can the cold grave do me harm?
I know my homeland and my inheritance
Which I have with God in heaven.
After I die, there is prepared for me
The joy of heaven and robes of glory.

I have been baptized—I stand in covenant
through my baptism with my God,
So say I always with glad lips
In crosses, tribulation, trouble and need:
I have been baptized, and I rejoice in that—
The joy remains forever.



Charting the Course

Last week I traveled to Fort Wayne, Indiana to attend the annual symposium on the Lutheran Confessions. Among many stimulating and informative lectures that were presented, I found the presentation of Dr. Phillip Cary to be extremely accessible and profoundly important. What follows is a digested version of his presentation. If you are interested in reading the entire lecture, you can find it online at <www.ctsfw.edu/events/symposia/papers/sym2007cary.pdf> or you can link to it from the congregation's web site.

By Faith Alone

The difference between Luther and Calvin is that Luther is a sacramental thinker in a deeper sense than Calvin but this means that in certain very

important respects he is more medieval and more Catholic than Calvin.

*Protestant *Sola Fide**

There's a distinctively Protestant structure of the doctrine of justification by faith alone that he shares with Calvin—indeed, Calvin learned it ultimately from him—and that provides a large area of common ground between the two of them, giving us a backdrop against which to locate the disagreements and differences. So let's start with this common ground. First of all the obvious point: both Luther and Calvin teach that we are justified by faith alone—*sola fide*. Slightly less obvious: both of them teach that faith alone justifies because Christian faith is fundamentally belief in the promise of the Gospel, and you don't receive what is promised by doing good works, but by simply believing the promise.

Where the disagreements begin, I think, is with exactly what the words of the Gospel promise are. It's striking how little is said about this, how much is left implicit. Of course there are many promises in Scripture, and Luther and Calvin both appeal to many of them. But I think when the rubber hits the road, it's a question of how we stand before God. Luther typically thinks of a different set of Scriptural promises than Calvin does, a set of distinctively sacramental promises, which have a different logic from the kind of promises Calvin and most other Protestants think about when they speak of the promises of the Gospel.

Let me start with the more Protestant kind of promises—the promises that come to mind for theologians who are, in my terms, quite Protestant. They belong to a larger pattern of thinking that I will call:

"The Standard Protestant Syllogism"

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.

Minor Premise: I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: I am saved.

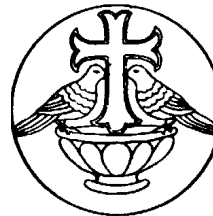
"Syllogism" is just the standard form of argumentation in Aristotelian logic, which both Luther and Calvin learned at school: it's the natural way for them to think when reasoning carefully. The major premise in a syllogism is a kind of general principle or foundation. In this case, it's the promise of the Gospel, derived from Mark 16:16, "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.*"

Now here's where the logic becomes important: in order to get from the major promise to the conclusion you need a minor premise, which applies the principle to the particular case in hand. How do I get saved? Well, by believing, of course. This is an explicit condition of the promise. For the major premise is logically equivalent to the conditional statement: "if you believe in Christ, you are saved," where the if-clause states the condition. So the logic follows from this condition: you are saved on condition that you have faith, so if I am to know I am saved I must know I meet the condition.

Indeed, because the content of the promise is conditional, explicitly making

everything conditional upon faith, I am in no position to say the Gospel promise is about me until I can say, "I believe." For most Protestants, this is a really big deal. "The hour I first believed," the moment when I can first say "I truly believe

in Christ" is the moment of my salvation, of my conversion and turning from death to life. What matters is that moment of conversion, not the sacrament of baptism, because everything depends on my being able to say "I



believe.” For only if I know that I truly believe can I confidently conclude: I am saved.

Notice what this requires of us: not just that we believe, but that we know we believe. I call this the requirement of “reflective faith.” Protestant faith has to be reflective in that it’s not enough just to believe; you have to believe you believe, maybe even know you believe. That’s a pretty hefty requirement for those of us who are weak in faith, or who believe that all sin is rooted in unbelief and we are still sinners at heart (*simul justus et peccator*, both justified and sinner still). It discourages us from confessing our unbelief and encourages us instead to profess our belief. This actually becomes a technical term in English Calvinism: the Puritans spoke of those who were “professors of religion,” meaning that they professed to know that they had been truly converted and regenerated by faith in Christ, whereas those who were not professors might be baptized Christians, able to confess the creed with all sincerity but not able to profess that they had true, saving faith. Those who thus could sincerely confess the faith but not confidently profess faith were taught to believe they were not truly regenerate or born again. A peculiarly Protestant agony of conscience lies here, as Calvinist ministers realized, and they devoted much of their pastoral practice to dealing with it, addressing the problem they called “the assurance of faith.” The problem was to attain assurance that you really had true faith. If that’s your problem, then you are quite Protestant.

Luther’s *Sola Fide*

Now, of course Luther had his own agonies of conscience, but they were not quite the same as this distinctively Protestant agony. And that’s because the Gospel promise which was the foundation of his faith was different. When

he wanted to know whether he was regenerate and saved, he turned to the promise made to him in baptism. So we get:

Luther’s Syllogism

Major premise: Christ told me, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth.

Conclusion: I am baptized (i.e., I have new life in Christ).

The major premise here is based on a Scriptural promise (Matt. 28:19) but is also a sacramental word, spoken at a particular time and place under very particular sacramental circumstances. This makes it profoundly different from the standard Protestant understanding of the Gospel promise, a difference that is subtle but makes a huge logical difference in the outcome. To get at these differences, we have to begin by noting the crucial but (I hope) familiar point that it is Christ who speaks the baptismal formula through the mouth of the pastor, so that this is nothing less than the word of Christ spoken to me in particular. What I want to dwell on is how we get to this “me in particular”—what

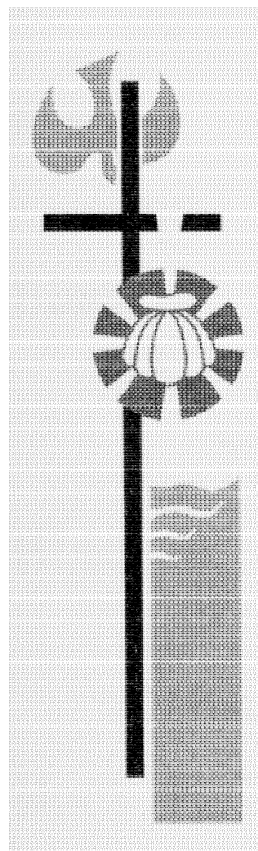
Luther calls the *pro me* of the Gospel. I suggest that what makes this possible is that this sacramental word of Christ is an external word in a deeper sense than the major premise of the standard Protestant promise. For it is tied to external circumstances, a particular place and time of utterance (e.g., the baptism of baby Martin in Eisleben in 1483, or my baptism in Buffalo, New York in 1958, and so on) in such a way that the word “you” it contains means me, or Martin Luther, or some other particular person—depending, of course, on when it is said and to whom—which is to say, depending on whose baptism it is.

Notice how very different the baptismal

formula is from the major premise of the standard Protestant syllogism. Logically, it’s not a conditional statement. It lays down no conditions about what I must do or decide or even believe in order to make sure the promise applies to me. The promise applies to me because it says so: Christ says “you” and he means me. So the promise of the Gospel, on Luther’s reckoning, is inherently, unconditionally, for me. Faith does not make it so but merely recognizes that it is so, a recognition that happens because we dare not call Christ a liar when he tells us, on that one momentous occasion, “I baptize you...” That is why the minor premise is not about my faith but about the truth of Christ. This is absolutely essential, and Luther makes a very big deal about it. Have you noticed how often Luther talks about the truth of God? It is hard to find an important passage about the doctrine of justification in Luther’s works which does not hammer at these points: God is true, faith acknowledges God’s truth, and unbelief calls God a liar (Rom. 3:4, “let God be true and every man a liar,” is a favorite verse hovering behind these discussions).

Now to say that God speaks the truth is, of course, to make a kind of profession of faith—but not in the Calvinist mode, because it is not reflective. We’re not required to talk about our faith, to know we have faith, to profess, “I believe.” We are required, of course, to believe. We must believe that what God says is true, and we must stop calling God a liar (and furthermore, not incidentally, we must believe that Christ who makes the promise is God). But that, of course, is what faith essentially does: it believes in the truth of the Word of Christ. The problem with reflective faith is that it must do more: if reflective faith is required, then believing in God’s Word is not quite enough, because we must also believe that we believe.

Here’s where I think Luther’s got it fundamentally right. What faith says, fundamentally, is “God speaks the truth.” Only secondarily, and not fundamentally, faith may also say, “I believe.” But faith may also say, “My faith is weak” or “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief” or “I have sinned in my



unbelief and denied my Lord, like Peter the apostle.” Faith may confess its own unbelief. What it cannot do, if it is to remain faith at all, is stop clinging to the truth of God’s Word. For faith does not rely on faith, but on the Word of God. Christian faith, if Luther is right, does not have to be reflective.

Pastoral Consequences

This is a point of enormous pastoral importance, I think, so let me dwell on it. For Luther, the doctrine of justification by faith alone does not mean we rely on faith. For faith itself does not rely on faith. Faith does not rely on itself but rather on the truth of the Word of God. Luther is particularly clear on this point when he argues, against the Anabaptists, that we should not baptize people on the basis of our knowledge of their faith, and we should not even come to baptism ourselves on the basis of our own faith. For we can be certain of the word of God, but not of our own faith, as Luther says: “the baptized one who receives or grounds his baptism on his faith...is not sure of his own faith.” The reflective belief in your own belief is not required, for as Luther adds, “he who doesn’t think he believes, but is in despair, has the greatest faith.” That is of course a description of *Anfechtung*, Luther’s particular agony of conscience. The demand that we know we believe would only make *Anfechtung* worse, undermining our faith in the Word of God by turning us back on our own resources and demanding that we find it in our hearts to believe. If you want to build people up in faith, you have to direct their attention to the Word of God, not to their faith. But don’t direct them to some general principle—direct them to their baptism, and remind them that when they were baptized it was Christ himself who, through the mouth of the minister, said “I baptize you” and he meant you in particular.

The logical distinction we must observe, then—and it is a crucial pastoral distinction—is between having faith

and relying on faith. “There is quite a difference between having faith, on the one hand, and depending on one’s faith, on the other,” says Luther. “Whoever allows himself to be baptized on the strength of his faith is not only uncertain [because he doesn’t know for certain whether he believes] but also an idolater who denies Christ. For he trusts in and builds on something of his own, namely a gift which he has from God [i.e., faith] and not on God’s Word alone.” So Luther’s *sola fide* does not mean we rely on faith alone, but rather that we rely on the Word alone. For that’s what faith does: it relies on the truth of the Word, not on itself.

This contrast between faith looking at the truth and faith looking at itself is crucial to the very nature and logic of faith. Faith is the heart taking hold of the truth, not the heart taking hold of its faith. This is true of every kind of belief. If I want to find out whether I believe it’s snowing outside, I don’t go looking into my heart to find out whether I truly believe this. I try to find out whether it’s true that it’s snowing outside, and once I’ve found that out, I’ve settled the question of whether I believe it. Likewise, once I’ve realized that God wasn’t lying to me when he baptized me, then I know enough about whether I believe. And every time my

weak faith drives me into something like Luther’s agony of conscience, some kind of *Anfechtung*, then I can turn back to that truth, the truth of my baptism, when Christ who does not lie made a promise to me in particular.

Don’t you agree? Isn’t it much easier to confess, “Christ is no liar” than to profess, “I believe”—especially if what that is sup-

posed to mean is: “I have true faith in my heart, I truly, really trust in God,” etc. For this reflective faith, faith relying on itself, is how faith becomes a work, something we must do and accomplish in order to be saved. And then it has exactly the same problems as justification by works. You can always wonder if your works are good enough, and if you’re honest, the answer will be:

No, they’re not good enough. In exactly the same way, you can always ask: Do I trust God enough? Have I really, unre-servedly, surrendered my whole heart in faith to Christ? Is my faith strong, sincere, un hypocritical, un-self-serving? And the proper answer to all these questions is: No. My faith is never good enough, and thank God, I am not justified by such works of faith but by the truth of the word I believe in. My faith is not good enough, but the one I have faith in is.

This is especially apparent in times of doubt and *Anfechtung*, when holding on to the faith is really a lot of work—a great deal of work which we are not good at. For we find it very hard to trust God, very hard to hold on to the faith, and when pressed by our doubts and sin and weakness, Luther says, all we can do is sigh and groan. Yet that turns out to be the strongest faith of all, not because we have a strong sense of trust in our hearts—the whole point about *Anfechtung* is that we don’t have that—but rather because we find we have nothing at all to hang on to but the bare truth of God’s word, which we scarcely feel we believe, and indeed we mostly feel we don’t believe. And the only comfort is that this word is true, despite our desperately inadequate faith. Let God be true and every man a liar—including myself. Let me recognize as clearly as I may that my own heart is full of lies and unbelief; nonetheless God speaks the truth. That I can believe, even when I don’t believe I believe.

So I’m thinking: if you have to make a choice between the standard Protestant agony of conscience, where you must come somehow to the conclusion that you have true saving faith, and Luther’s agony of conscience, where the only question that really matters is whether God is telling you the truth—well, take Luther’s agony of conscience. It’s the right agony to have. And in one form or another, it is the agony you’ll inevitably struggle with if you start with Luther’s premises about the nature of the Gospel. Honestly, in the end the only question that really matters is whether Christ is telling the truth. And there are indeed many, many times we find that hard to believe. Every time we sin, in fact.



At this point, Dr. Cary goes on to an insightful discussion of the doctrine of conversion and predestination in Calvinism and Lutheranism. I hope your interest has been piqued enough to read the rest of his paper online. But in the interest of space, I will skip to some concluding remarks.

Today's sacramental faith is sufficient for the day. Today you can believe that God is not lying to you. Tomorrow's faith will have to wait for tomorrow. The sacramental promise of your baptism will still be there, and the struggle to believe it (against worries about predestination, the weakness of your own faith, and so on) will still be there to be fought. That's just how Christian faith goes, a continual struggle against unbelief in which—as we experience in *Anfechtung*—unbelief is in fact stronger than the faith of our own hearts, and we have no hope at all except the truth of God's promise in Jesus Christ. But that's enough. For precisely the experience of the inadequacy of my efforts to believe is what convinces me that I must put my trust in Christ's word alone, not in my ability to believe it—and precisely this strengthens true faith. So *Anfechtung* is the right agony of conscience to have, rather than the distinctively Protestant struggle to come to the belief that I truly believe, and to experience my own inward sanctification and righteousness because of the work of the Spirit in me, and so on. Save me from such inwardness, I say. Give me Word and Sacrament instead.



Excursions in Faith

♦ Lenten Midweek Services

Wednesday, February 21st, marks the first day of Holy Lent. On this day we will observe Ash Wednesday with the *Divine Service* preceded by the imposition of ashes celebrated at 7:30PM

Then, on each Thursday of Lent after that, we will gather for a service of preaching and prayer at 5:30PM. These services will continue our meditations

begun during Advent and will focus on the Second Tablet of the Law (4th through 10th commandments. These meditations should prove to be beneficial to our lenten devotion and the full appreciation of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ His Son.

♦ Lent Daily Devotions

One of the traditions of Lent is the practice of daily family devotions. I would encourage you to let the season of Lent be an opportunity to renew your dedication to this blessed practice. Devotional booklets for Lent will be available on the back table of the church at the end of the month.

♦ Speak Up for the Voiceless

Right now, the Wyoming legislature is in session and one of the bills up for discussion is HB 144 "Woman's Right to Know." This bill is designed to pass judicial muster and provide medical and emotional support information for women seeking abortions. This kind of legislation is very important and effective in the saving the lives of babies and preventing unnecessary emotional for many women.

The Speaker of the House has promised his support if the churches in Wyoming come out in support of it. Please call 1-866-996-8683 to support this bill. You may also wish to contact your state representative and the members of the judiciary committee. For more information, ask Pastor Lange.

♦ New Hymnals

On Sunday, February 4th, we plan to dedicate the new *Lutheran Service Book* [LSB] for use in the *Divine Service*. The congregation decided to institute a hymnal replacement fund drive at their November meeting. And your response met our goals for the purchase of 40 hymnals for the pew and an additional sixteen personal copies. Because of this outpouring, we have also been able to purchase all the necessary supplemental materials such as Agenda, Altar Book, Organist Editions and even the computer Software edition which will enable us to legally reprint the order of service and make large copies of hymns etc.

LSB is the first hymnal that the LCMS has ever adopted in convention. It has been seven years in the making

with great attention to detail and sensitivity to the person in the pew. I am confident that on the day you take it in hand, you will feel like you are coming home to an old friend who has become more interesting by traveling the world.



Down the Path

The month of February features a season of the Church Year which is unique to the One-Year Lectionary. This is the season of Pre-Lent, or, the "Gesima" Sundays. These three Sundays are named in Latin "Seventy, Sixty and Fifty" respectively. Each refers to the approximate number of days until Holy Week and Easter. These weeks give opportunity to transition from the heights of the Mount of Transfiguration to the Journey to Jerusalem and crucifixion.

♦ Septuagesima - February 4

Psalm: 18

Old Testament: Exodus 17:1-7

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 9:24—10:5

Gospel: St. Matthew 20:1-16

♦ Sexagesima - February 11

Psalm: 1

Old Testament: Isaiah 55:10-13

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 11:19-12:9

Gospel: St. Luke 8:4-15

♦ Quinquagesima - February 18

Psalm: 77

Old Testament: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Gospel: St. Luke 18:31-43

♦ Ash Wednesday - February 21

Psalm: 130

Old Testament: Jonah 3:1-10

Epistle: 2 Peter 1:2-11

Gospel: St. Matthew 6:(1-6) 16-21

♦ Invocavit - February 25

Psalm: 91

Old Testament: Genesis 3:1-21

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 6:1-10

Gospel: St. Matthew 4:1-11

