

Faith is Nothing

Faith is nothing. Really, it is. In fact, one way to ensure missing the gospel is to think faith is something. But it's not. It's really nothing at all. Faith is a negative concept that opens up space to speak about something else. It has what John Webster calls a 'rhetoric of indication', one which is 'self-effacing'. In other words, faith couldn't care less about itself. Faith wants you to stop thinking about it, too, because in thinking about it, you are thinking about how you have (or don't have) it. And so, you're really just thinking about yourself.

I spent the whole day talking Luther with students a couple weeks ago. Luther, the theologian of faith, and faith alone. That 'alone' makes all the difference. It was not Luther's way of saying 'this human action, not that' but instead 'God's action, not ours'. So 'faith' serves as shorthand for 'faith in the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ' or, simply, 'faith in the Word of God'. And, 'faith alone' (*sola fide*) and 'grace alone' (*sola gratia*) are ways of saying 'Christ alone' (*solus Christus*) and 'the glory of God alone' (*solī Deo gloria*).

Faith, as Karl Barth puts it, is a 'relative concept', which 'lives by its object'. Phil Cary puts Luther's view nicely in writing that 'to believe Christ's word is to be uninterested in the fact that I believe but captivated by what Christ has to say to me. Even apart from its character as word of address, the gospel is good news *for me* because it is Christ's story, not mine... I appear in Christ's story as object, not subject – not the doer but the one on the receiving end of the good things Christ has done.'^[1]

Trouble is, we ever so subtly undermine the logic of faith when we too glibly exhort a person to 'have faith'. It's not so much that these exhortations must run counter to faith's rhetoric of indication as it is our own recalcitrant tendency to smuggle in works. We relapse, again and again – and if you've been around addiction, you know relapse seldom happens once – into creative, but vain attempts to justify ourselves. We pay lip service to grace and then call people to drum up faith, to work with all their might to squeeze out enough of it to make their lives worth saving. We convert faith, in other words, into a work.

Then faith becomes curved in on itself (Barth's term) and reflective (Cary's), something which for Luther it can never be. If one were to ask Luther how she ought judge her faith, he would flatly reply that she should do no such thing, instead looking to the one judged in her place. Rather than getting caught up in diagnostics of faith (note the clinical expertise with which we can say 'you don't have enough faith!'), Luther would have us simply re-direct our attention to the object of faith, Jesus. Jesus is the mirror in which, by faith, we see ourselves, those women and men dead and raised to new life by the power of the Spirit.

My students have a lot of questions about assurance of salvation. Can we have such assurance? How do we know if our salvation is sure? Can we lose it? I don't know the answers to all these questions, but I do know that most of them are doomed from the start. Where they pose the problem anthropologically, it needs to be looked at christologically. In other words, if I'm wondering if salvation is mine, the last place to look is me. The place to ask the question and hear the answer is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is to hear the word of forgiveness and reconciliation spoken there as a word for us.

The problem with thinking faith is something is pretty soon we begin to find faith rather interesting. This is exactly what's happened to some of Luther's intellectual descendants. A cluster of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Lutherans turned their attention to faith itself and looked at it so long and with such devotion that its own native indicative logic was lost. The object of faith moves to the periphery, then out of sight entirely, and faith's subject – me – dominates the field of vision. (*Observe the person of faith in his natural habitat!*)

In the process, Luther's own sense of what it means to be a Christian is lost. For Luther has read his Paul. What's more, he's followed his advice and does theology as one who 'seeks the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God', believing Paul when he says that 'you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God'. If my life is located in someone else, in the object of my faith, what reason could I possibly have to become preoccupied with myself and my faith? Faith is, after all, nothing at all.

Endnotes

[1] Phillip Cary, 'Why Luther is not Quite Protestant: The Logic of Faith in a Sacramental Promise' *Pro Ecclesia* 14/4 (Fall 2005) 447–486.

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