

JUSTIFICATION IS RECEIVED THROUGH FAITH

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Justification is received through faith

We believe that God has justified, that is, declared all sinners righteous in his eyes for the sake of Christ. This is the central teaching of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends. It is a message relevant to people of all times and places, of all races and social strata, for “the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (Romans 5:18). All need justification before God, and Scripture proclaims that all are justified, for “the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Romans 5:18). We believe that the individual receives this free gift of forgiveness through Christ, not by works, but only by faith (Ephesians 2:8,9).

This We Believe, p. 11

As This We Believe affirms, faith has a central position in all Christian teaching. Through faith Christ reestablishes the lost union between God and man. This union is proclaimed in the gospel. This gospel is accepted by faith. Faith is, thus, the bond between the sinner and God.

In view of this importance of faith, the essays at this conference emphasize the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. We who gather here call ourselves not only Christians but Lutheran Christians. We are a part of the Lutheran church. We call ourselves after the name of that man Martin Luther. The question might be asked, “What is a Lutheran Christian?” Why do we choose to call ourselves by the name of Lutheran? Why did we join in fellowship with this body of Lutheranism? What makes a Lutheran church “Lutheran”? It seems today that fewer and fewer people know why they are part of a certain church or denomination and still fewer know what their church stands for and why it stands for something. Fellow Lutherans, let us not forget that we are gathered here because of the common faith we share. We believe that the only way to eternal life is by faith alone—*sola fide*. This is the discovered truth of the Reformation. Unfortunately, many Lutherans today have also lost sight of the vital importance of justification by faith alone. But as we shall see, the Bible teaches it. Our Lutheran Confessions reaffirm this. This is what each one of our church bodies united in one true fellowship teaches. As confessional Lutherans, let us constantly review this important teaching lest we lose this only truth to life eternal. In this essay, let us rediscover the truth of

Saving Faith—The Hand That Receives God’s Forgiveness

To rediscover this truth today, we shall be seeing how the Bible and our Lutheran Confessions answer three vital questions:

1. What is saving faith?
 2. How does saving faith happen?
 3. How does saving faith save?
1. What is saving faith?

The English language can pose problems on the subject of faith for those learning English. The noun “faith” is completely different than the verb “believe.” And yet in the New Testament, both the Greek noun and the verb are in the same family: noun *pistis*, verb *pisteuoo*. *Pistis* means trust, having confidence in a message or promise. The writer of Hebrews 11:1 defines the noun faith as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” The Apostle Paul has the same thought when talking about the verb *pisteuoo* as he writes in Romans 4:19-21, “Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through

unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God has power to do what he had promised.”

Faith always has an object. We see an example of this in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” A person can believe in, or have faith in, many different things—friends, parents, government, etc. But saving faith always has as its object the words and promises of the Bible. St. Paul points out the object of saving faith when he says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes . . . for in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it written: The righteous shall live by faith” (Romans 1:16,17).

Faith, however, includes more than just trust or confidence. Faith requires knowledge. And saving faith requires knowledge of what God through his Son Jesus Christ did to forgive our sins—that he suffered the punishment of all sins of all people of all time. Paul points to the fact that there can be no faith without knowledge when he says, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:14).

More than trust and knowledge, faith is also agreement (traditionally called “assent”) with what has been heard. Saving faith is believing what we hear from God’s Word. The Lord Jesus spoke of this necessity of agreeing with what the gospel says when he told Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony” (John 3:11). The Apostle John points out the positive when he speaks of people who do accept what has been told them in 1 John 5:10, “Anyone who believes in the Son has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him into a liar, because he has not believed [i.e., accepted] the testimony God has given about his Son.” The Apology to the Augsburg Confession focuses its discussion of faith on the word “acceptance” as well, “The forgiveness of sins is a thing promised for Christ’s sake. Therefore it can be accepted only by faith, since a promise can be accepted only on faith” (IV, 84, p. 119).

To complete our study of what the Bible says faith is, it should be noted that sometimes the Bible uses faith in a slightly different sense. Paul says that Judean Christians had heard this message about him after his conversion, “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:23). Here the word “faith” means “the faith which is believed” (traditionally termed *fides quae creditur*, from the Latin for that phrase) rather than the trust itself—“the faith by which it is believed,” (traditionally termed *fides qua creditur*).

2. How does saving faith happen?

It is God the Holy Spirit who creates a relationship between God and fallen mankind by putting his claim upon the sinner through his Word as he does in Baptism. This relationship grows in man as he hears God’s Word of forgiveness and life and as he gains more information about Christ through that Word. Faith cannot comprehend everything, “for faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). And since faith, although it is something that man does, is entirely the work of God—there is no room for boasting. “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians. 2:8,9). Thus, while faith is an act of man—it is man who believes—it is a work of God, that is, it is God who causes a man to believe.

The Formula of Concord (S. D. III, 9, pp. 540,541) expresses the same idea that faith is a free gift from God, that all boasting should be ruled out. “Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe . . . that a poor sinner is justified before God without any merit or worthiness on our part . . . by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.”

Regrettably, many individuals and churches have fallen away from this biblical truth that God and God alone is responsible for the faith that is in a person's heart. Pelagianism (common in many African churches) declares that man is morally neutral and able to choose good or evil and thus earn his way to heaven by good works. Semi-Pelagianism (in the Roman Catholic Church) says that man is deprived of the ability to perfectly love God and do good works, but that God gives man final ability, through infused grace, so that he is able to earn his way to heaven by good works. Synergism (common in Reformed churches) teaches that man is depraved, but with a spark of good in him by which he can choose to believe. At least such churches teach that a person attains heaven through God's forgiveness rather than his own works. The Formula of Concord points out the error of all three teachings in Article II, paragraphs 75-77 (S.D., Tappert, p. 536). Finally Calvinism (found in the Church of Central African Presbyterian) says that man is totally depraved, with no spark of good—so far, so good. But they go on to say that God creates faith in him through irresistible grace which he does not use with all people.

What is the Bible's teaching (and thus ours as confessional Lutherans) about how saving faith happens? The Bible's teaching can be summarized as follows:

- All people are spiritually dead.
- God's call to repentance is the same and goes out to all.
- Some reject this, and it is their own fault.
- Some by God's grace do believe.
 1. The law brings contrition.
 2. The gospel brings faith.

The Bible very clearly tells us that all people are spiritually dead. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (2:1). Being spiritually dead, all people by nature are enemies of God, unable to obey his commands. "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). More than this, Paul says that the spiritually dead person cannot understand or respond to the message of the gospel. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them" (1 Corinthians 2:14). That is why Martin Luther explains the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed with the words, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him." The Epitome of the Formula of Concord likewise teaches, "In spiritual matters man's understanding and reason are blind and . . . he understands nothing by his own powers."

The invitation of God for people to repent is the same and goes to all sinners. When the Lord commissioned his disciples with the gospel, he commanded them to go to every nation with the gospel. He sent them out with the words, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. . ." (Mark 16:15,16). The gospel is meant for all—black or white, brown or yellow, children and adults. As Peter declares, "[The Lord] is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

But why are not all people saved since the invitation goes to all people universally? It is unbelief—"whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). It is not that God chose some to go to hell and some to eternal life. That is not what Scripture says. It says, "[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). From these passages we see that the invitation to repentance goes to all and that those who do not repent have no one to blame but themselves. They are like the people of Israel, who "always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51).

By God's grace, there are those that believe. These will be the people who will form so great a multitude in heaven that no one will be able to count them. They will come from "every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9).

God uses his law to make sinners aware that they are sinners and deserve eternal punishment. “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3 :20). The law works fear or contrition in the heart of the sinner. The Augsburg Confession thus defines contrition as “terror smiting the conscience with a knowledge of sin” (XII, 4, p. 34). When the sinner has been crushed by God’s law, he sees the need of a Savior who will forgive his sins. And the gospel shows the sinner who the Savior is. The power of the gospel creates faith in the heart of the contrite sinner. The sinner then is converted. The unwilling is made willing. He is now a child of God. He lives for God. Again the Lutheran Confessions point to the work of both the law (in creating contrition) and the gospel (in creating faith) as being necessary in conversion. “The chief function or power of the law is to make original sin manifest and show man to what utter depths his nature has fallen and how corrupt it has become. . . . Thus he is terror-stricken and humbled, becomes despondent and despairing” (S.A. Part III, II, 4, p. 303). “To this office of the law the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace in the gospel” (S.A. Part III, III, 4, p. 304).

Other synonyms for conversion are: repentance (John 1:13), enlightenment (1 Peter 2:9), regeneration (John 3:3-5) and illumination (2 Peter 1:19). These are not to be viewed as steps to becoming a child of God. They are different pictures to show us what the Holy Spirit does when he makes a believer out of an unbeliever, so that we pass from death to life (1 John 3:14).

3. How does saving faith save?

The Bible tells us that faith does many things:

- “Your faith has healed you” (Matthew 9:22; Luke 8:48). “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done” (Matthew 21:21).
- “Your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50).
- “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25).
- “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28; see also 5:1, Galatians 2:16).
- “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8).
- “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Romans 4:5).

Faith is not a condition or cause of forgiveness or any of the other blessings listed in the passages above. Faith is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). A sinner is not saved because he has faith. Otherwise faith becomes a good work. Salvation is by grace alone. The way the holy writers connected faith with justification in Greek points to this. They either use the preposition ek with the genitive or dia with the genitive or an instrumental dative. They never use any form (such as dia with the accusative) which would indicate that we are justified because of faith.

The current New Testament translation in Chichewa has a big problem because it often translates such passages inconsistently. For example Romans 5:1 is rendered,

“Mulungu	watilungamitsa	chifukwa
God makes us righteous		because of
cha chikhulupiriro	chathu.”	
the faith	ours	

Obviously the “makes us righteous” is also a problem about which the LCCA—Malawi Conference has written to the United Bible Societies along with the “because of” problem and we are happy to report that our suggestions on both issues have been accepted and will be incorporated into the new Bible which will be released next year.

Quite possibly such faulty translations result from inaccuracies that appear in the UBS Translator's Handbooks. For example in the Romans volume (commenting on 3:28), it says, "In some languages means such as are expressed by the phrases through faith . . . may be expressed more specifically as cause—for example, 'a man is put right with God only because he believes. . .'" (p. 70). In Ephesians (commenting on 2:8), "through faith" may be expressed as "this was possible because you trusted" (p. 47).

The true teaching of the Bible pictures faith as a receiving hand. God makes his promise to all and the promise becomes ours through faith. The blessings of salvation come through faith and never because of faith. In the words of the Solid Declaration, "Faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy gospel" (III, 13, p. 541).

In July the Lutheran Bible Institute will conduct Continuing Education for Pastors classes. One of these classes will be a review of the doctrine of justification. Why? Because it is our confessional Lutheran heritage. Because it is the Bible's truth. Because without it, we are lost. Because without it, our churches will preach an empty message.

May the almighty God keep each of us and all of our churches faithful to this central teaching of the Bible—that faith is the hand that receives God's forgiveness.

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