

Forgiveness And Faith

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In a former issue of *LUTHERAN EDUCATION* attention was called to a study, which tended to show that a large percentage of the children in our parish schools live in uncertainty and doubt in regard to the forgiveness of their sins.¹ Personal experiences substantiate that conclusion. It seems justified on the basis of the evidence to conclude that in some instances as many as half of the pupils are not sure of their salvation.

Although the cause of the difficulty is not always traceable to materials and methods utilized in religious instruction, nevertheless a Christian teacher by a careless, inept, and inexact presentation of the doctrines of our Christian faith can sow seeds of doubt at the same time that he intends to produce conviction and provide security. There is a reason why the Lord requires that those who carry on the ministry of the Word should be "apt to teach."

In a previous article the writer attempted to show that some of the uncertainty which we find in the hearts of our children may well stem from misconceptions in regard to the relation between contrition and forgiveness.² It is the purpose of this article to show how spiritual insecurity may result from a misunderstanding of the relation between forgiveness and faith.

Because the natural religion of man is a religion of salvation by works, man continually looks for some cause of salvation in himself. And even if the words *sola fide* and *sola gratia* have been dinned into his ears from childhood, he may still find a way in which this *sola fide* and *sola gratia* may be converted into a system of salvation by human merit. The Roman Church with its doctrine of infused grace³ has effectively turned grace into works. It is possible to take the words "justification by faith" and make a doctrine of salvation by works out of it. This is an old heresy. To illustrate, St. Chrysostom in one of his homilies on Romans says that our faith is such a marvelously good work that for the sake of this one good work God forgives us all of our bad works. These words apparently mean that faith is a meritorious act on man's part on account of which God becomes merciful to man and forgives him his sins. We must guard against such a perversion.

Faith is sometimes wrongly considered to be a cause of man's salvation. A Lutheran teacher should be cautious about saying to his class, "God forgives us because we believe." Such a statement is likely to lead to false conceptions, even though the teacher may have good intentions. It could imply that man can contribute to his own salvation, when the Bible clearly states that we are saved by grace alone without any merit on our part. There is no statement in Scripture which says that God forgives us because of faith. Both Goodspeed's translation of the New Testament and the R. S. V. confuse the issue when they say in their translations of Romans 3:30 that God justifies men "because of" their faith. The translation of the phrase should be "through faith" or "by faith."

The view which insists on regarding faith as a meritorious cause of forgiveness seems to come naturally to men. It is one of the last dying gasps of sinful pride. Man seeks in this way to save something of which he can boast. Therefore we ought to be careful that we do not use

¹ "A Broken and a Contrite Heart," *LUTHERAN EDUCATION*, LXXXVIII (October, 1952) 54-58.

² *Ibid.*

³ In Roman theology infused grace is spiritual or moral powers bestowed by God upon man. Through the proper use of these added spiritual resources, man is able to do what is necessary to make himself acceptable in the sight of God. According to this pattern of thought, salvation is a consequence of human conduct.

ambiguous phraseology, especially in this matter. We ought to explain the doctrine of forgiveness with meticulous care so that we do not implant false concepts in the minds of the children whom God has entrusted to us and whom we are to lead, under God, to an ever more confident assurance of the certainty of forgiveness. Such expressions as these, “God will forgive us when we believe,” or “God will forgive us if and when we pray,” while they can be understood correctly, ought to be avoided unless we make it very clear at the same time that faith, or prayer, which is the expression of faith, are not causes of our salvation. God does not forgive us because we believe, or because we pray, any more than He forgives us because we are sorry. He forgives us only because Jesus died for us and took away the sins of the world. He forgives us for Christ’s sake and not for faith’s sake.

Faith is not the condition of forgiveness, but the means by which I receive forgiveness, or the instrument by which I accept forgiveness. Faith is simply the act by which I, under the powerful impetus of the Holy Ghost, working in me through the Word, accept as true the promise of God made to me in the Gospel. It is that act by which I put my trust in the Word of God, which tells me that my sins are all forgiven, that they were indeed forgiven long ago when Jesus died and rose again. It may happen that we say in our teaching that God will forgive us if we believe, but this expression, too, may easily be abused in the interest of work righteousness, since it can easily be misunderstood as implying that God is moved to cancel our guilt by our faith, as though it were a meritorious work of ours.

Teaching which makes of faith a cause or condition of salvation undermines the very foundations upon which Christian assurance rests and generates insecurity in many hearts. When forgiveness is made dependent upon faith in this way, men will, if they are consistent, look for the certainty of salvation in their own hearts. When they discover doubts or a shaky faith in their own hearts, they may conclude that they are not saved, because they are trusting in their own faith and not in Christ’s merits and the subsequent forgiveness of sins which He offers them.

Christian teachers know from their own experiences and from the confessions made to them that many pious children of God are troubled by what they feel is their lack of faith. Many of these people never doubt for one moment that Jesus died for them. They are convinced that without Jesus they would be lost forever, that only the blood of the Savior can cleanse them from all sin. And yet, while they are sure that forgiveness has been provided for them, they are very much in doubt as to whether *their* sins are really forgiven because they are not quite sure that they are believers. It is true, of course, that such people do not have a correct understanding of the nature of faith, for to be sure that Jesus has taken away my sins is to have saving faith.

Faith is composed of three interrelated inseparable concepts. First, faith is knowledge of God’s plan of salvation for us. To know or grasp with the mind the communication of God’s plan of reconciliation is the steppingstone to faith. “How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” (Rom. 10:14.). “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Second, faith is assent. When the forgiveness of God is presented to the individual, his will must change from one of rejection to one of acceptance. God must break the evil will. The power of God in the Gospel must persuade the individual to accept the truth of salvation. This is done through the preaching of the Gospel. Paul was “persuading one to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28) and “Persuading men concerning Jesus” (Acts 28:23). Assenting faith accepts from the hands of the sin-atonement and death-conquering Christ the full and free acquittal of sins. Third, faith is trust and confidence. Abraham’s faith is described in Ro 4:20: “He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to

God and being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was able also to perform.” Faith is a confidence that “all the promises of God in Christ are yea and in Him Amen” (2 Co 1:18-20).

The “joy of salvation” is not always strong in our hearts. In those moments of weakness we sometimes cling to faith instead of to Christ. In moments like that, the person who has learned to say, “I am going to heaven because I am a believer,” is in a bad way. We must learn to say instead, “I believe that I am going to heaven because Jesus died for me.” For to make the first of these two statements is to be a believer in faith, and in the final analysis it means nothing more than saying: “I am sure of going to heaven because I am sure of going to heaven.” Our Catechism does much better when it says that a believer should be sure of the forgiveness of his sins because God’s promise is sure.

The Christian teacher, therefore, in seeking to bring his pupils to a firm confidence in the forgiveness of sins, should always point them to the only sure foundation of such assurance, namely, the words and the promises of God, and not to their own faith. Any other course will lead to doubts and fears. A person must learn to understand the meaning of this passage: “If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things”; and when he has learned to put his trust in what God says, rather than in what his heart and conscience tell him, he will have found the way to certainty about his forgiveness. Even if our own conscience and heart condemn us, this does not change God’s truth, because His forgiveness still stands. It is the heart which knows by the power of the Holy Spirit that God has said, “The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin”; it is this heart that has found that firm foundation which enables it to sing:

I believe in what my Savior taught
And trust it, whether felt or not.

In all our teaching, therefore, we must always consciously, earnestly, repeatedly, point our children to that one thing which can give real certainty and which Paul expressed so beautifully when he wrote: “He loved me and gave Himself for me,” and “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.”

PRELUDE TO DISASTER—More than half a century ago there lived in central Europe an unhappy little fellow. Illegitimate son of a housekeeper, his mother was ashamed of him, his father only grudgingly acknowledged him. He grew up in that forbidding atmosphere hurt and bitter. World War I came on, and he enlisted. III at ease with other soldiers, resentful and uncooperative, he never made much progress, though he served four years. At the end of the war he was only a corporal. He went home to a defeated and faminestricken land. There, unemployed and frustrated, his uncongeniality turned to surly resentment and vindictiveness. Someone must pay for this misery. With other malcontents he plotted a rebellion, and when it came off badly, the leaders went to prison.

There in solitary confinement, alone with his bitterness, he wrote a book, and called it *My Battle*. It wasn’t new or original, for he borrowed from many great minds, but it was all brought together in the form of an impassioned working program. Out of prison, he started to organize other rebels. The number increased because of the poverty and misery of the people. As the years went on, the organization that implemented this hate grew into workable form. Before indifferent citizens knew what was happening, these organized revolutionaries had seized the government and established a new order built on hate and revenge and the exploitation of the common people for the grossest ends of national triumph over the rest of the world. Power led to arrogant ambition and eventually to World War II, the bloodiest in history. And eventually the end came with Adolph Hitler’s suicide and Germany’s destruction.

That is a chapter in modern history, a terrible one, that men will find incomprehensible in years to come. But, more than that, it is the story of a boy, an unwanted boy, whom nobody loved,

who found nothing but hate in the world, and who pyramided that hate into national leadership and world disaster. It was not foreordained that Adolph Schickelgruber, or Hitler, as he later was known, should be the Judas Iscariot of the German people. What could have happened if some man, perhaps the pastor or schoolteacher or a friend of the family, had taken time to interpret life to that confused little mind? If little Adolph Hitler had learned what love meant, and how it can rule a man's heart for good, what a different world we should have today! Yet the difference between world peace and world disaster hung in the balance in that little Austrian town fifty years ago. And no one lifted his hand to swing it toward good will. What a chance lost to humanity!—
Herbert Carleton Mayer in *Young People in Your Church* (Fleming H. Revell Co.).