

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY: "FAITH SAVES"?

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A little old lady was just emerging from the courtroom. Her son had just been convicted of the axe murder of seven nurses, and that on the basis of a video tape of the entire gruesome event. A reporter stuck a microphone into her face and asked: "What do you think of your son now?" She answered in a voice both quivering and confident: "I still believe that he's a good boy!"

In a classic soap opera scene a husband has just been fired from his job. Dejected he heads for home. As he nears his house he sees flames shooting from the windows. Just as he reaches the door his wife and best friend dash through it in a state of embarrassing undress. As his wife passes her bewildered husband she declares: "Oh by the way dear, I forgot to pay the insurance." Frantically the husband runs into the burning house to save his most prized possession - his bowling ball. But as he does so, the house collapses around him. In the next scene we find our hapless hero in the hospital, bandaged from head to toe, trussed up like a thanksgiving turkey. In floats the heroine of the soap opera in some sort of gossamer get up. She comforts the poor fellow with the words: "Well, you just have to have faith."

President Clinton, speaking to the citizens of Iowa during the recent flooding of that state, exhorted the beleaguered flood victims: "Don't give up! Have faith."

The last adult that I baptized told me while I was instructing him that he had always assumed that faith and facts, faith and history were opposites, that there are some things we know, and some things we just believe.

How many times during your ministry has someone said something like this to you: "Well Pastor, that's just not the way I feel about it; this is what I really believe."

In common usage what do people mean in English and in our culture when they use the noun faith and the verb to believe? Do they use those words in the same way that the scriptures use them? When we tell them in instructions or in a sermon that "Faith saves," and exhort them to "Just believe," do they understand such expressions as we intended them? Or do they perhaps attach a meaning altogether foreign to the Scriptures and to our intent? It should be apparent from the above examples that in every day English usage the noun faith and the verb to believe may mean little more than: to have a positive outlook, to be optimistic, to have an opinion that has and needs no basis in fact.

In this paper it will be our purpose to examine the use of the verb to believe and the noun faith in the scriptures and to consider as well their use in our confessions. If their use of such terms is fundamentally other than modern English usage, we need to be aware of the difference. Then we need in our preaching and teaching to proclaim the truth of God's Word in an idiom that will clearly and unmistakably communicate what God has intended. Anything else will place a serious obstacle in the path of the Holy Spirit as he works through the preaching of his word to create and preserve saving faith in our hearers. Anything less will hinder them therefore in their pilgrimage from sight to faith and from faith to sight in heaven.

The most extensive, indeed the definitive treatment of the concepts to believe and saving faith is found in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. From the first chapter to the last, however, one will search in vain for a believing or a faith which is devoid of content, which is but a pious optimism. Quite to the contrary, the terms are packed with meaning that has saving import. And just what is that meaning? Already in the introduction to the epistle (1:1-6) the apostle sums it up when he declares that he has received grace and the apostolic office to proclaim the "obedience of faith" to the Gentiles. The word translated as "obedience" (ὕπακοή) really means "effective hearing." What was proclaimed and effectively heard was the message concerning Jesus Christ, true man and true God, promised by the Scriptures, who died and rose again.

The entire message proclaimed and heard is summed up by the word "gospel," a word that the apostle will spend much of the epistle defining. In the theme stated in 1:16-17 that gospel message is called "the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes." And what is it that is believed? What else but the contents of that message! Just how does the message about this Jesus Christ, true God and true man who died and rose again provoke "effective hearing," the "obedience of faith?" The message reveals, yes, effectively reveals, i.e.,

imparts and gives, "a righteousness that is by faith from first to last." [The NIV here captures well the meaning of the Greek prepositional idiom.] The message which reveals a righteousness from God in connection with this Jesus Christ is not mere information. Rather it is a powerful message which imparts life to those who effectively hear it by giving them the righteousness revealed in it.

Thus already in the introduction St. Paul shows us that saving faith is intimately and inseparably connected to facts and truths of history. Apart from the truth that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, apart from the facts of his death and resurrection, apart from the revelation of the righteousness offered and given in the proclamation of that history, there is no such thing as saving faith. Faith is incited by the hearing of the message; faith applies and appropriates the facts in such a way that the individual who heard responds with the confession: Jesus Christ, true God and true man, died and rose again; God gives me righteousness alone in and through Christ and what he has done.

Romans 4 fleshes out the nature of this "effective hearing," this "obedience of faith." There St. Paul declares that this faith is not a work of man, not a "doing." Indeed it is the opposite of doing; it is a receiving only. If this faith, this believing were a doing, a work that man does, then Abraham would have something to boast about. But he has nothing to boast about before God. For how did he come to have saving faith? How was it that he believed and it was imputed to him for righteousness? He heard the promise of God that was contrary to all human doing and all human reasoning. Hearing it, he trusted the one who proclaimed it to him. But the credit for both the message and the trust goes to the one who promised, lest Abraham have anything to boast about.

Likewise David declares that man just whose sin is forgiven and who trusts that that is the case. But why should one trust that his sin is forgiven? He should trust because it is God who declares the man forgiven. Again, that trust has its source in the message from God. For neither Abraham nor David does the matter amount to a decision of man or a work of man, so that either could boast: At least I did this one work of deciding to believe, deciding to trust the message. Though it is indeed damning to call God a liar, to reject his message, and though Abraham and David had that negative ability, nevertheless there is no boasting in the opposite, in "effective hearing," in the "obedience of faith." For that the power lies alone in the gospel which is inseparably connected with its revealer, God himself: It is God alone who loves, who acts in the person and work of Christ, who reveals, who makes the revelation effective for the "obedience of faith."

Thus saving faith is a receiving of righteousness from God, righteousness revealed and conveyed in the message, which righteousness is the same thing as forgiveness of sins; and this righteousness comes not at all from man's doing or even man's cooperation. It is entirely the gift of God's grace on account of the death and resurrection of Christ. The receiving is trust in these truths, the confidence not only that the message is true, but that it gives freely by grace what it promises, i.e., forgiveness an eternal life.

In the remainder of the Epistle to the Romans and in all of his other epistles Paul carries out this theme and defines these terms with rigorous consistency. In Romans 5 he sharply distinguishes between faith and its consequences, faith and its results, while repeating the fundamental definition. In Romans 6 the antithesis between the life that follows faith and the life apart from faith is described. In Romans 7 he deals with the relationships between faith, the law, and the persisting sinful flesh. But always and again he returns and restates the fundamental principle: Faith is the receiving of righteousness by the effective hearing of the gospel message. So in Romans 10:4—Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to all those who are believing ones. [Here the NIV is weak with its "so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."] How beautifully the apostle carries out the point in the rest of the chapter that such believing is the gift of the message! What an incentive for those of us called to proclaim it to do so with both joy and confidence! For God will give what he promises—forgiveness and salvation through the message he has entrusted to our proclamation. The message creates both *das Predigtamt* and the need for it; the message bearers bring Christ and all his saving benefit in the faithful proclamation of the message which is the source and the reason for their office.

Think too of all of those passages that our children memorize which so perfectly sum up the matter. Ephesians 2:8-9 springs to mind. After masterfully preaching the work of Christ stretching from predestination

in eternity to the incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension, extending all the way back up to heaven again, where even now we are seated with Christ, almost breathless the apostle concludes: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this [i.e., the entire matter of salvation, including the faith] not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works, so that no one can boast." The message is filled with saving content, with effective revealing, with the imparting of all that is revealed, of all that is promised—grace, salvation, faith.

How beautifully and succinctly our dear Lord Jesus himself has summed up the matter in the words we know so well: οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον. The Greek is absolutely breathtaking both as to form and content. The word order is, as so often in Greek, emphatic. How the message thrills the heart! How it makes the mouth hang open in wonder and awe! "Thus and this much even God sought our everlasting good, so that even the son, even the only begotten one, he gave, in order that all, namely each believing one, would not perish but would have life which is eternal!" The mind races ahead and then goes back to linger over each word, and that in its proper God-breathed order. Ah, and that's it exactly: the message filled with facts so sublime as to be unbelievable to fallen reason and burned conscience kindles trust which sighs: He means me! That is what it means to be ὁ πιστεύων.

The reader surely will be able to add numerous passages that beautifully proclaim this same truth. But for the sake of brevity we will sum them all up. We agree with St. Augustine that faith, when we are talking about saving faith, consists of three things. It is first of all knowledge (*scientia*) of the fundamental truths of salvation as that knowledge is contained in the sacred scriptures. Secondly, it is assent (*assentia*) that this knowledge is factual and historical, not a myth or a fable, but altogether in accord with reality. Finally, it is trust (*fiducia*) that these saving truths are not mere abstractions; they apply to me: I am the object of God's grace; it is for me, even for me, that Christ came, suffered, died and rose again; it is to give me righteousness that avails before God (Luther and the orthodox fathers loved that expression: *Die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt.*) that the message has been proclaimed. Such saving faith is always a miracle worked by God through the gospel. It is no less a miracle in the aged saint who knows his Bible, his catechism and German hymnal by heart than it is in the infant just baptized, who knows, assents, and trusts through the power inherent in the word and the water.

It should be evident from the above that there is a difference as great as that between heaven and earth in the scriptural use of the noun faith and the verb to believe on the one hand, and their use in every day English on the other. In the scriptures we search in vain for the mindless, contentless faith of the American *Schwärmer*.

The Lutheran Confessions mirror well the biblical use of these terms. When the confessions speak of faith, they invariably connect it with a promise. There is no such thing in the confessions as a trust without knowledge, faith without facts, salvation apart from the means of grace. To be sure Luther was struggling against the papist definition of faith as a mere intellectual assent to formal propositions; he therefore stressed faith as trust. But he never forgot to proclaim the source and content of that trust in the message of the gospel. One can argue that Luther gave "Lutheran" or biblical meanings to the German words *glauben* and *Glaube*, much as various stripes of English speaking reformers gave unscriptural meanings to the terms to believe and faith. In point of fact it is inherently difficult in older German to use the verb *glauben* and the noun *der Glaube* in the way that English uses the words to believe and faith. In English, for example, we can say, I believe in this superstition. That may be intellectual nonsense, but it is not linguistic nonsense. In German however it seems linguistically absurd to say, *Ich glaube an diesen Aberglauben*. Accordingly the orthodox Lutheran fathers often reflect the necessity of truthfulness and content in their use of these German words by avoiding the verb *glauben* when they are speaking heresies or mere opinions. For heresy has no basis in fact and is not true. They much prefer the verbs *meinen* or *halten an*.¹ In the Formula of Concord, for example, in Article VII, par. 3 the Tappert edition translates (p. 482) as follows:

¹ There are rare exceptions to the rule, even in Luther. Luther uses *glauben* on one occasion where we might have preferred *meinen*. He is quoted in the Formula of Concord, Art. VII par. 100 (Tappert, p. 587) as saying *wie man es glaubt* when referring to the *utero clauso* theory of the virgin birth of Christ. But such usage is indeed rare.

Some are crass Sacramentarians who set forth in clear German what they believe in their hearts [*wie sie im Herzen halten*], namely, that in the Holy Supper only bread and wine are present, distributed, and received orally. Others, however, are subtle Sacramentarians, the most harmful kind, who in part talk our language very plausibly and claim to believe a true presence [*sie glauben auch eine wahrhaftige Gegenwärtigkeit*] of the true, essential, and living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper but....

The notion that faith is mere feeling and apart from a specific promise of God is often rejected. Condemned as well is the very English and existential notion that nothing is true until and unless I believe it. "Faith" does not establish truth; rather the truth of God's promises creates, establishes and is the heart and core of faith. Thus for example in the Formula of Concord, Article II, par. 56 (Tappert, p. 532):

We should not and cannot pass judgment on the Holy Spirit's presence, operations, and gifts merely on the basis of our feeling, how and when we perceive it in our hearts. On the contrary, because the Holy Spirit's activity often is hidden, and happens under cover of great weakness, we should be certain, because of and on the basis of his promise, that the Word which is heard and preached is an office and work of the Holy Spirit, whereby he assuredly is potent and active in our hearts (II Cor. 2:14ff.).

Or this from Art. VII, par. 89 (Tappert, p. 585):

It is not our faith which makes the sacrament, but solely the Word and institution of our almighty God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, which always remain efficacious in Christendom and which are neither abrogated nor rendered impotent by either the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister or the unbelief of him who receives the sacrament. Just as the Gospel is and remains the true Gospel even when godless hearers do not believe it....

Or read Article III and see how again and again faith is defined as trust in the promise, how that trust is the result of salvation proclaimed, not the cause of salvation. Consider for example:

Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have the forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father and are saved forever. (Tappert, p. 541, par. 11).

and:

Faith thus looks at the person of Christ, how this person was placed under the law for us, bore our sin, and in his path to the Father rendered to his Father entire, perfect obedience from his holy birth to his death in the stead of us poor sinners, and thus covered up our disobedience, which inheres in our nature, in its thoughts, words and deeds, so that our disobedience is not reckoned to us for our damnation but is forgiven and remitted by sheer grace for Christ's sake alone (Tappert, p.550, Par. 58).

Or this in Article V:

Accordingly every penitent sinner must believe—that is he must put his confidence solely on the Lord Jesus Christ, "who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification," who "was made sin though he knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of

God," who was "made our righteousness," and whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness in the strict judgment of God (Tappert, p. 562, par. 22).²

Or this in Article VII on the connection of the word as the cause of faith in the sacrament:

In the administration of Communion the words of institution are to be spoken or sung distinctly and clearly before the congregation and are under no circumstances to be omitted. Thereby we render obedience to the command of Christ, "This do." Thereby the faith of the hearers in the essence and benefits of this sacrament (the presence of the body and blood of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits which Christ has won for us by his death and the shedding of his blood and which he gives to us in his testament) is awakened, strengthened, and confirmed through this Word (Tappert, p. 584, par. 79-81).

Do you notice how eager the fathers are always to link faith with its content, how loathe they are to talk about believing as a thing in itself, separated from a message? Do you see how far removed both the scriptures and our confessional writings are from the mindless and empty exhortations too commonly heard (Perhaps even from us?): *Just believe! Just have faith!* Both the Holy Ghost and the fathers insist on adding the WHAT and the WHY. Faith without the promise is superstition; faith without the content is merely opinion; faith that is only feeling is mindless naval gazing.

This faith which we call *saving faith* is not a quantity to be measured. Indeed in our culture in which faith is too often equated with feeling, and which is awash in Arminian and other reformed errors, it is probably best to avoid describing saving faith as weak or strong, lest the hearer conclude that there is some level to be reached before his faith is *saving faith*.³ When the subject is our salvation, we want to focus the hearer's attention totally on Christ and his saving gospel. To tell him that he has to *really believe* or that he needs to have *strong faith* can only make him navel gaze; he will begin to examine his heart, his feelings, his mind, his life, in order there to find his comfort. When he sees himself battered by all manner of weakness and doubt, he will despair—the opposite of believing. Or else, when the battering ram of the law is not crushing his conscience and when the cross does not weigh heavily, then he will be tempted to pride in his faith, his believing. In either case his attention is taken away from Christ and from the message and fixed again on himself. Introspection will never work faith but only despair or arrogance. Only the Christ of the gospel creates and sustains faith. The faith described and defined so perfectly in Romans and by our Lord in John 3:16 either is or is not; *tertium non datur!* Either one knows, assents and trusts or one does not.

But do not the scriptures themselves speak of faith as weak or strong? Does not Jesus rebuke the disciples on occasion for the littleness, the weakness of their faith? We need here to remember that there are many terms in the scriptures which we call "equivocal terms," i.e., terms that have more than one use or meaning. Thus for example the word *repentance* sometimes means sorrow for sin worked by the law, coupled with trust in the promise of forgiveness, and sometimes it means only the former; likewise the word *gospel* sometimes refers to the entire word of God and sometimes exclusively to the message of salvation; the word *law* can sometimes mean the entire Old Testament, including its gospel promises, and sometimes only the commandments. The context must determine the specific meaning word. The same is true of the words πίστις and πιστεύω. Thus far we have been speaking about what we commonly refer to as *saving faith*. But not

² For other references in the Confessions which well define faith and which show well the contrast in the use of the word in Lutheran theology with the way the word is used in English and in reformed theology, cf. AAC, Art. IV, par. 48-94 (Tappert, pp. 114-120), Art. XII, par. 60-62 (Tappert, p. 190), LC, (On infant baptism) (Tappert, p. 443-4, par. 52-53, 56-59), FC, Art VII, par. 46-47 (Tappert, p. 477-8).

³ There are places in the confessions where saving faith is described as being weak or strong. But care is taken even in such places to define the weakness in such a way that salvation is not made dependent on a certain level or strength of faith. Cf. for example, F.C., Art. VII, par. 71 (Tappert p. 582): And worthiness does not consist in the weakness or certainty of faith, be it greater or smaller, but solely in the merits of Christ, of which the distressed father of weak faith (Mark 9:24) partook no less than Abraham, Paul, and others who had a cheerful and strong faith.

infrequently the scriptures speak, of a faith which is the result of saving faith, of faith in a specific promise which flows from faith in Christ as the Son of God and our Savior.

As with the other equivocal terms mentioned, so with *faith* the precise meaning of the term must be determined by the context. But even in those instances where the text is not speaking specifically of saving faith, the fundamental definition of the term does not change; it will still presuppose a promise, assent to that promise, and confidence that the promise applies in the specific instance.

Consider for example Mark 4:35-41. It is the account of Jesus' stilling of the storm. The disciples in fear of drowning have awakened him with the anxious cry, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" After rebuking the winds and the waves, Jesus said to the disciples, "Have you still no faith?" [πῶς οὐκ ἔχετε πίστιν;] Exactly what is the nature of Jesus' rebuke to the disciples? Is he accusing them of not knowing or trusting that he is the promised Messiah? That seems most unlikely. For they have followed him precisely because they know the Old Testament promises and do trust that he is the Messiah. Even in the text, they approach him for help in the confidence that he is able to help. Their problem at the moment is that they cannot understand why he is not helping them in this specific situation. Thus Jesus' rebuke is not that they do not know or trust that he is the Messiah; rather it is that they do not see the connection between saving faith and faith in the particular situation in which they now find themselves.

And just what is that connection that they should have made and seen? Everywhere that Jesus went he had shown his love and his care. For them to ask if he does not care for them in this desperate moment betrays a lack of trust in his promised providence. Furthermore he had already told them that they were to be fishers of men. How could they do that if they would now drown? Because of that specific promise, they should have trusted that they would not now drown.

Do you see what a mess will be made of things if the preacher does not know the difference between saving faith on the one hand and faith applied in a specific situation on the other? Rev. P. Thumper mounts the pulpit and applies this text by concluding that those who fear do not *really believe*! What havoc he causes in the poor soul whose knowledge of God's promises is but slight and whose Christian maturity is as yet poorly developed! He will succeed only in driving that poor soul to despair.

Just as bad is the Rev. S. Woosh. He informs his members that all they have to do in the hour of trouble is really believe that they will be delivered, and then they will be! That's faith in the modern English usage of the term. But God has nowhere promised that we will never drown, have trouble, or die. Again, those informed otherwise will be driven to despair as soon as trouble and the cross darken their door. But if we understand that saving faith is not without its applications in life, and if we tell our people that God has promised his care and help in every need, regardless of the outcome in a specific circumstance, then we are inciting a proper faith in God's providence which flows from saving faith. We would point out that the disciples did not listen closely to the specific promise of Jesus about their future, and that's why they came to the brink of despair in this dark moment. We would exhort our hearers to listen always and ever more to the word of the Lord, that they might come to trust him in every need and circumstance, regardless of reason, regardless of the outcome of the moment. For faith is not just strong feeling or pious optimism. Nor is every use of the term a direct reference to salvation. But it is always trust based on a promise.

But do we not have a passage which at first blush appears to agree with the English usage of the word faith in Mark 11:22-24:

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will be yours.

The difficulty is made easy if we cling to the fundamental meaning of the word *faith*. Is Jesus telling us that all we have to do is believe hard enough and even mountains will be like match sticks for us? Is he telling us that all we have to do is want something badly enough, convince ourselves that we will get it, and it will be ours?

Not at all! Were that the case, then Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane would present us with insuperable problems: We would have to conclude that he didn't really believe; if he had, then the cup would have passed from him! What a monstrous piece of exegesis that would be!

Jesus expects us to know that faith is based on a promise. Once that is clear to us, then the passage is not difficult at all. The point is this: If Jesus had given us even such a promise, that by ordering it to happen we could move mountains, then, if we, trusting the promise, told the mountain to go into the sea, it would. Again we must note it: What a mess is made of this passage, if Jesus is speaking here of saving faith! Then even Paul must despair and be consigned to the flames. For the thorn in the flesh was not removed (II Cor. 12:7-9).

The same is true of the promise that Jesus attaches to his words to us about prayer in the above cited passage. When in a specific situation we focus on the appropriate promise, and ask in accord with the promise, we receive that for which we prayed.⁴

Instructive too are those passages in the gospels which speak of faith in connection with the miracles of our Lord. Consider for example Mark 9:23, the account of the healing of the demon possessed boy. His father prays, "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus answers, "What do you mean, 'If you can?' Everything is possible for him who believes." Notice that Jesus does not say that everything will happen, if we but believe that it will happen. His words are perfectly consistent with the definition of faith as a trust in a specific promise. A prayer without trust in the promise of Jesus is without effect, is in point of fact no prayer at all (James 1:5-8). This poor father's plight is brought sharply into focus by Jesus' words: He has brought his son in desperation to the disciples and ultimately to Jesus; he knows what Jesus has done for others, knows too something of Jesus' message. But that knowledge has produced in him no fixed or firm conclusion about the ability or willingness of Jesus to do something in his particular case. His doubt and fear, his lack of trust in the promise implicit in whatever it was that he already knew of Jesus is brought to light by Jesus' words. In anguish over his doubt the man cries out to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." By performing the miracle of casting out the demon from the boy Jesus heard the anguished cry of a doubter, and he fixed this poor soul's attention on his own person and word of promise. But again it is not saving faith as such that is here the focus of attention, but rather its application to a specific situation in life. Of such faith it may well be said that it is weak or strong; it is strong when the Christian understands the promise of God and trusts that he will do in the specific situation what is right, what is best. It is weak when knowledge of God's promises is slight or when a trust is lacking that the promise applies now this way, now that it is in a specific circumstance.

Or consider the case of the centurion in Matthew 8. Jesus praises the faith of the centurion, who confessed by what he prayed a trust in Jesus' omnipotence and grace. The centurion had fixed his mind and heart on what Jesus had done and what Jesus had said. He applied what he knew of Jesus and his word to the specific situation of his servant's sickness; on that basis he pleaded for help, even trusting that Jesus could heal the servant without actually going to the centurion's house. That was indeed faith of a very special sort!

To give but one more example from the gospels of this use of the word faith we note the case of the thankful leper in Luke 17:19. Jesus healed all ten, but singled out the one who returned for this special praise: "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." These words of praise for faith are striking indeed. The man had trusted Jesus. On the basis of that trust he had come not only for healing but after that for worship. He drew conclusions from what he knew, what he saw, what he experienced. And for that Jesus praised him! Think of it for a moment: Christ is the source of the man's faith; Christ confirmed his faith in the act of cleansing; Christ is the object of the man's faith as he worships the Lord who cleansed him. But Jesus attributes help to the man's faith! How kind! How generous of him! He reckons righteousness to trust in his merit and mercy; he reckons cleansing to trust in the power and grace which alone healed the man! Is that not yet another incentive to hear the word, to fasten on to the promises of Jesus is that word, that thereby Jesus may increase our trust in him in every situation and circumstance of our pilgrim life? For see how he praises and attributes much to his gifts in us, to his gifts applied in our lives.

⁴ Notice that the Greek form for *receive* in vs. 24 is ἐλάβετε—an aorist, not a future: So certain is the reception of that which was asked trusting in his promise that it is as good as received already!

St. Paul too speaks at times of faith as being weak or strong. In Romans 14:1 he urges that the *weak in faith* be received and that their consciences not be troubled or confused. But the subject under discussion is not salvation; it is the problem of eating meats offered to idols. Those described as *weak in faith* were in fact weak in knowledge and understanding of Christian freedom with respect to eating things offered to idols. The result was a lack of trust or confidence that such eating was in itself not necessarily idolatry. The way to correct their erring conscience was the way of patient instruction, until a proper conscience and a proper confidence would flow from that instruction. Then they too would have *strong faith* with respect to this specific problem.

To sum up the matter:

1. Faith in the scriptures and in the confessional writings is not merely a feeling, an opinion, some sort of pious optimism.
2. Faith in the scriptures and in the confessional writings is knowledge of facts of the history and promises of God in the scriptures, assent that these are true and real—not just myths or fables, and confidence that the particular truth or promise applies to the believer.
3. When the subject is salvation, *saving faith*, it may well be best to avoid speaking of it as weak or strong; for one either trusts that the virgin born and risen Christ is his savior, or he does not.
4. Most often when the scriptures and the confessional writings speak about *weak/strong faith* they are not talking about *saving faith* but about its consequence, namely that faith which trusts God's word and promises in specific situations and circumstances in life.
5. Even when speaking of *weak/strong faith* in the sense indicated above, the scriptures and the confessional writings are not talking about mindless feelings, emotions alone or opinion; the faith in a particular circumstance is weak or strong in relation to knowledge of God's promises and trust that those promises apply to us in our every need.

But why all the fuss? Why spend so much time and energy trying to define two Greek words and distinguish the ways in which those terms are used? The most obvious answer of course is simply this: We are dealing with the words of our God; as he gave his word for us to understand, so we live by it and live to hear it.

Beyond that obvious reason there are yet other compelling reasons that urge our attention to the careful definition and use of these terms. The doctrine of justification is that doctrine by which the church stands or falls. Those who hold to error on the nature of faith inevitably err on the doctrine of justification. The typical English speaking church member would have little or no difficulty in subscribing to the following proposition: *We are saved because we believe*. That's what almost all Protestants and a good many heretical Lutherans teach. But it isn't true. Faith is not a cause of salvation; it is the result of salvation. The gospel is proclaimed in II Cor. 5:19-21; the gospel is proclaimed in John 3:16; the gospel is proclaimed in the Epistle to the Romans. The result of that proclamation is trust that the message is true. The power to produce that result is God's power inherent in the proclamation; for God cannot be separated from his word. The message doesn't become true because I believe it; I believe it because it is true. God himself works that conviction through the word alone and not apart from it.

But what happens in the soul of the one who confuses cause and effect in the proposition, *We are saved because we believe*? Such a one spends his religious energy not as St. John the Baptist who said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." That call bids us look outside of ourselves and focus entirely on Christ. Instead he spends his religious energy on introspection. He wants to know, "But do I really believe? Do I really have faith? Do I have enough faith?" It makes little difference what his answer to the questions are. If he answers in the affirmative, he may be well on the way to the pride of the Pharisees. If he answers in the negative, what despair must gnaw at his conscience and how tormented must be his soul!

Nor is that the end of it. The one who imagines that he is saved because he believes, who makes faith a cause of salvation, errs on the doctrine of man and on the doctrine of the means of grace. He supposes that there is a residue of good in his own nature and will by which he can make the right decision for Christ. The gospel does not really need to be a "power of God to salvation;" for he has that power within himself, even in his fallen nature, reason, will.

Or what becomes of that poor soul who doesn't think at all, who imagines that faith and feeling are one and the same thing? What happens to the worship life of the individual and of the church when such dream that, "All you have to do is really believe, really feel saved? Where the assumption reigns that salvation is the result of faith, and that faith is either my decision or just a good feeling about God and me, there worship degenerates into "Feel good religion," into "Woopie worship." Doctrinal sermons and hymns disappear. Text study on the part of preacher becomes less and less important. In order to make people feel good, the preacher resorts to cute and clever stories that amuse and entertain; he tries to be a Sunday morning Johnny Carson, so that people will leave church happy—liking God and the preacher, impressed with how much fun church is and now clever the preacher is. The first table of the law, which always damns, disappears, and along with it the anguished cry of the prodigal son and the publican in the temple for mercy and for grace. Instead of the first table of the law only the external aspects of the second table find their way into the sermon.⁵ Repentance becomes likewise superficial and easy, if it does not disappear altogether. The gospel correspondingly becomes relatively unimportant, certainly unappreciated. It degenerates into, "God is my buddy." A certain *gospel reductionism* takes over. The hymns are in 3/4 time; their message fits their meter; they feel good and make the singer feel good. They say nothing (e.g. *In the Garden, Were you there?*)

Since the center has switched from Christ to me, from the means of grace to my feelings, prayer soon becomes THE means of grace. For when my feelings save me, it's more important that I communicate those feelings to God than it is for him to communicate his will to me. And what of that prayer? It is not the anguished cry of one who always remains a sinner in a desperate and absolute need of grace and pardon. Rather it tends to be a rehearsal of how I feel and how I want to feel or think I should feel. God should somehow infuse happiness into my heart as he whispers his answers—apart from the means of grace—directly into my quivering and waiting soul. At the very least he should provide a way of escape from all *Angst und Anfechtung*. For it is not the way of the cross but escape from it that we seek.⁶

All of this of course brings about a most perilous subjectivism and an anti-clerical individualism. "Well, I just feel..." begins all doctrinal discussions. Instead of, "Speak Lord, thy servant heareth," the refrain is, "Listen Lord, thy servant speaketh." There is little need for pastors; for we all have "The Spirit," are little bibles unto ourselves. And there is certainly no need for all this training for pastors, when his feelings are no more true than mine. In Bible Class let's just share our feelings about the text; the pastor can serve as moderator, as facilitator, perhaps as resource person. Everybody is a theologian; everybody is right. The important thing is that we *really believe*, that in our Christianity we are *loving and caring*.

What has been described in the above paragraphs is of the essence in much of American Christianity, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant. It is all summed up by one good German word: Schwärmerei. Individualism, subjectivism, sentimentalism are words that describe as well much of Lutheranism these days. The writer leaves it to the reader to ponder how near or far such soul destroying tendencies are from us. For soul destroying it is, when faith is feeling, when it is separated from the word of God, when the distinction between saving faith in justification and weak/strong faith in sanctification disappears. There is nothing left in the hour of trial or on the day of death but the pride of the Pharisee for right feelings or the despair of Judas for wrong ones.

How can we prevent this creeping cancer that makes the law trivial and turns the gospel into shallow sentimentality from invading or overpowering our pulpits and people? For faith as feeling, faith as opinion, faith as cause of truth and salvation is a bed-rock assumption of American life and culture. The best beginning, middle and end remains the motto of Martin Chemnitz: AD FONTS! Back to the source, to the scriptures, and that in the languages that God breathed. Back to good solid text study. Back to the proper distinction between law and gospel. Back to the goal of knowing the scriptures so well that the analogy of faith is always at work in

⁵ Let the reader examine the Lutheran Confessions from first to last; few are the specific references to the second table of the law; the emphasis in the preaching of the law is always on the first commandment. Without that emphasis the preaching of the law becomes Protestant moralizing.

⁶ The reader will find Luther's comments on the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer in his *Large Catechism* most instructive on this point.

our private and public use of the sacred texts. Back to the faithful reading of the Lutheran Confessions, which breathe an air so different from that of the *Schwärmer*, the brisk bracing air of total devotion to the scriptures, and faith which flows from their pure proclamation. Back to trusting that God will keep his promise of creating and sustaining faith through that word. Back to the assumption that Chemnitz so frequently voiced, that there is nothing which keeps people in church so much as good preaching—and by that he meant the preaching of the text.

When we get back to those basics, we will not soon confuse people by indiscriminate exhortations to “Just believe” or “Really believe.” Rather we will proclaim the truth of God's word and end it with Luther's oft repeated call: “This is the Word of the Lord; you can trust it; he would not lie to you.” We will rid ourselves of the foolish notion that everybody knows the gospel well enough, what they really need is the law. No one knows the gospel well enough. The *opinio legis* wars against it also in us day and night. When we really give ourselves over to the scriptures we will see that the variety of ways in which the truth of justification is presented there is almost infinite, not at all repetitious or redundant. Our preaching of the text will remain fresh, and those leaving the service will know that they heard the word of the Lord—they will remember the text, not our cleverness or cuteness. Then faith will grow and flourish under the shadow of the cross. Let the hearer here that you have a love affair with the word of the Lord, that you did indeed “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it,” so that they could do and learn to do the same.

Will that solve all our problems? Of course not! But the problems will be the result of faithfulness to the scriptures and our call, rather than the problems which result from unfaithfulness or indifference or carelessness with that holy and saving word. Such problems that flow from faithfulness can be met with faith that flows from the Lord himself in his gospel. Problems that come because we have become ignorant and indifferent and have fostered the same in our people—in Christ's people—we face full of fear and alone.

May God grant us that faithfulness which he alone can give as the result of the faith which he alone creates and sustains through his precious means of grace!