

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 70:3/4

July/October 2006

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Faith in Contemporary Evangelicalism

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Our Lutheran Confessions speak with clarity about *faith*:

Regarding the righteousness of faith before God, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess on the basis of the general summary of our Christian faith and confession expressed above that poor sinful people are justified before God, that is, absolved—pronounced free of all sins and of the judgment of the damnation that they deserved and accepted as children and heirs of eternal life—without the least bit of our own “merit or worthiness” [SC, “Creed,” 4], apart from all preceding, present, or subsequent works. We are justified on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.

The Holy Spirit conveys these benefits to us in the promise of the holy gospel. Faith is the only means through which we lay hold of them, accept them, apply them to ourselves, and appropriate them. Faith itself is a gift of God, through which we acknowledge Christ our redeemer in the Word of the gospel and trust in him. Only because of his obedience does God the Father forgive our sins by grace, regard us as upright and righteous, and give us eternal salvation. (SD III, 9–11)¹

It sounds simple enough, right? After all, the Formula has spoken and matters are settled. Yet anyone familiar with the history of the church over the last 500 years knows that while Protestants are agreed on the language of *justification by faith*, the way that other traditions understand this language oftentimes differs dramatically. The same can be said of the term *faith* generally. Even within the various traditions there are marked differences over the understanding of justification by faith. After all, immediately preceding the above quotation from the Formula, the authors admitted that a controversy had raged within Lutheranism for a number of years over just what the *righteousness of faith* is. That is why there is an Article III of the Formula!

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 563–564.

So what led to these tensions and problems in Lutheranism? Why the confusion over faith? Let us consider the term *faith* in contemporary evangelicalism. For the purpose of this article, contemporary means anything after 1800. We will examine a well-known parade of characters. First Pietists, then Charles Finney, and finally Joel Osteen will tell us how Luther got faith wrong—or at least incomplete. We will let Luther have the last word.

I. Faith in Pietism

As Lutheranism emerged from the Thirty Years' War and was celebrating its 150th anniversary, some within the Lutheran communion were increasingly concerned about the lack of "lived faith." In the minds of some, times had changed, and the emphasis of Luther and the Formula on faith being *pure passive* had to be updated given the new circumstances. While Philip Jacob Spener recognized that Luther had to speak against works in his context, that context no longer obtained. A revision was in order.

The reason why holiness of life must be dealt with more *now* is because we live in a time when people, from misunderstanding, mostly misuse the gospel and the doctrine of faith. Therefore, we should not speak much now against works when hardly anyone thinks to join works to justification and when most consider them to be neither possible nor necessary We should mostly extol the *power of faith*, which is active through love and holy living.²

One of the basic concerns of Pietism as a movement was discerning who truly had faith and who did not. In a state church setting, inclusion in the church was largely automatic; baptism was offered to children as a normal life event. Children were born into sin and so were in need of forgiveness and regeneration. Baptism offered both, though not in a completed sense. Perhaps it would be better to say that for the Pietists, baptism started the process of conversion, which might later eventuate in conversion and true faith. Why? The inner man could only be reached by a coherent, reasonably stated, and understood articulation of the gospel. Gospel proclamation was information about sin and grace—information that

² Philip Jacob Spener, "Whether Luther Urged Good Works," in *Documents from the History of Lutheranism, 1517-1750*, ed. Eric Lund (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 284.

demanded action. As the father of organized Lutheran Pietism, Spener put it this way:

One should therefore emphasize that the divine means of Word and sacrament are concerned with the *inner man*. Hence it is *not enough* that we hear the Word with our outward ear, but *we* must let it penetrate to our heart, so that *we* may hear the Holy Spirit speak there, that is, with vibrant emotion and comfort feel the sealing of the Spirit and the power of the Word. *Nor is it enough to be baptized*, but the *inner man*, where we have put on Christ in Baptism, must also keep Christ on and bear witness to him in our outward life. . . . The real power of Christianity consists of this.³

What worried Spener and other Pietists was an overemphasis on the external means of grace that seemed, in their minds, to be a return to the *ex opere operato* of medieval Rome. Such a theology, they claimed, simply turned evangelical sacraments into a new form of works righteousness. Sacraments replaced true, living faith—the external for the internal. Worse still, this theology encouraged people to be lax in their sanctification. Spener put it this way:

How many there are who live such a manifestly unchristian life that they themselves cannot deny that the law is broken at every point, who have no intention of mending their ways in the future, and yet who pretend to be firmly convinced that they will be saved in spite of all this! . . . They are sure of this because it is of course not possible to be saved on account of one's life, but they believe in Christ and put all their trust in him, that this cannot fail, and they will surely be saved by such faith.⁴

Such a faith, says Spener, “leads many people to damnation.”⁵ Faith as knowledge, assent, and trust—as Lutherans had defined it—was not quite enough. Action needed to be added. Proto-pietist Johann Arndt reflected this concern as well when he critiqued the Lutheran position:

I am baptized into Christ; I have the pure word of God; I hear it; I receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper; I also believe and confess all the articles of the Christian faith. . . . I am a Christian in truth, and in the

³ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, ed. tr. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 117; emphasis added.

⁴ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 64.

⁵ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 64.

right way to be saved. This, alas! is the general, but false reasoning of many in these days, who regard their outward performances as constituting true righteousness Look therefore into this, and learn to judge of thyself by the inward frame of thy soul. . . . Hast thou received the unction from above, and art thou possessed of the fruits of the Spirit, that demonstrate a Christian?⁶

In place of this over externalized theology, the Pietists turned their hearers inward. "Dost thou truly believe?" was the question. The answer to this question was not to be found in the simple answer: "Yes! I am baptized!" Rather, the answer of the Pietists was more complex. Christ called us to repentance. After it follow the forgiveness of sins, the imputation of his righteousness, and his holy obedience in the power of faith. Without such *inner faith*, Christ is of no use to man, that is, man does not participate in his grace and the fruit of his merit, which must be received with a sorrowful, broken, repentant, faithful, and humble heart.⁷

What is "true worship" and a faithful life, then? It is not "external ceremonies or sacrifices The true, proper worship, which is pleasing to God, consists *internally* in pure faith . . . the practice of faith, love and humility True worship must proceed from the ground of the heart out of faith, love, and humility."⁸ Because anyone could say this, what offered proof? August Herman Franke tells us:

This then, beloved in the Lord Jesus, is the pure and unblemished worship in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ, considered according to a threefold duty toward oneself, toward one's neighbor, and toward God, and consisting in the practice of the same through the power of the Spirit. Now enter into your hearts and observe there your circumstances in regard to this threefold duty. See how far you have progressed in them⁹

Arndt summarizes: "Have I not preached to you out of which forgiveness comes? Where is *your* repentance? Where is the true living

⁶ Johann Arndt, *True Christianity: A Treatise on Sincere Repentance, True Faith, the Holy Walk of the True Christian, etc.*, tr. A. W. Boehm, rev. ed. Charles F. Schaeffer (Philadelphia: Lutheran Book Store, 1868).

⁷ Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, ed. tr. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 43.

⁸ Arndt, *True Christianity* (1979), 132.

⁹ Peter Erb, ed., *Pietists – Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 162.

faith? Where is the renewal of your mind, the church of life? It is there where forgiveness of sins is."¹⁰

Where? It is located inside of *you*, though made manifest in your sanctified life. Pietism's pastoral concern over sin and proper critique of it notwithstanding—they did a very good job proclaiming the law—their solution to that problem was to point people to themselves. That is, their understanding of faith made it necessarily reflective. What we will see below is just how radically this departs from Luther's understanding of faith, which is essentially non-reflective and externally focused. But first, what about Evangelicalism proper?

II. Faith in Evangelical Revivalists

For me, the word *contemporary* really applies to the nineteenth century—so we are getting closer to the present. What did faith mean to nineteenth-century figures? Here, of course, we have to turn to Charles Grandison Finney, the great American Revivalist. Like the earlier Pietists, Finney was especially concerned with the passivity suggested by historic Protestantism. He wanted an active faith—for faith active in works of obedient love was the basis on which the sinner was pronounced justified. Finney picked up the pietistic stress on the sanctified life and largely made it gospel. Finney is Pietism on steroids.

"Faith active in works of love justifies"—does that sounds a little Roman? Personally, I think that might be unfair to Rome, which is merely Semi-Pelagian. In fact, Finney is more Pelagian than Pelagius. And he shows this nowhere more clearly than in what he believes justification by faith is *not*. Read how he expresses himself in this lengthy quotation.

1. Gospel Justification is not the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Under the gospel, sinners are not justified by having the obedience of Jesus Christ set down to their account, as if he had obeyed the law for them, or in their stead. It is not an uncommon mistake to suppose that when sinners are justified under the gospel they are accounted righteous in the eye of the law, by having the obedience or righteousness of Christ imputed to them. . . . I can only say that this idea is absurd and impossible, for this reason, that Jesus Christ was bound to obey the law for himself, and could no more perform works

¹⁰ Arndt, *True Christianity* (1979), 114.

of supererogation, or obey on our account, than any body else. Was it not his duty to love the Lord his God, with all his heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love his neighbor as himself? Certainly; and if he had not done so, it would have been sin. The only work of supererogation he could perform was to submit to sufferings that were not deserved. This is called his obedience unto death, and this is set down to our account. But if his obedience of the law is set down to our account, why are we called on to repent and obey the law ourselves? Does God exact double service, yes, triple service, first to have the law obeyed by the surety for us, then that he must suffer the penalty for us, and then that we must repent and obey ourselves? No such thing is demanded. It is not required that the obedience of another should be imputed to us. All we owe is perpetual obedience to the law of benevolence. And for this there can be no substitute.

2. Justification by faith does not mean that faith is accepted as a substitute for personal holiness, or that by an arbitrary constitution, faith is imputed to us instead of personal obedience to the law.

Some suppose that justification is this, that the necessity of personal holiness is set aside, and that God arbitrarily dispenses with the requirement of the law, and imputes faith as a substitute. But this is not the way. Faith is accounted for just what it is, and not for something else that it is not. Abraham's faith was imputed unto him for righteousness, because it was itself an *act* of righteousness, and because it *worked* by love, and thus *produced* holiness. *Justifying faith is holiness . . .* and produces holiness of heart and life, and is imputed to the believer as holiness, not instead of holiness.

3. Nor does justification by faith imply that a sinner is justified by faith, without good works, or personal holiness.

Some suppose that justification by faith only, is without any regard to good works, or holiness. They have understood this from what Paul has said, where he insists so largely on justification by faith. But it should be borne in mind that Paul was combating the error of the Jews, who expected to be justified by obeying the law. In opposition to this error, Paul insists on it that justification is by faith, without works of law. He does not mean that good works are unnecessary to justification, but that works of law are not good works, because they spring from legal considerations, from hope and fear, and not from faith that works by love. But inasmuch as a false theory had crept into

the church on the other side, James took up the matter, and showed them that they had misunderstood Paul. . . . This epistle was supposed to contradict Paul, and some of the ancient churches rejected it on that account. But they overlooked the fact that Paul was speaking of one kind of works, and James of another. Paul was speaking of works performed from legal motives. But he has every where [*sic*] insisted on good works springing from faith, or the righteousness of faith, as *indispensable to salvation*. All that he denies is, that works of law, or works grounded on legal motives, have any thing to do in the matter of justification. And James teaches the same thing, when he teaches that men are justified, not by works nor by faith alone, but by faith *together with the works of faith*.¹¹

For Finney, Christ's work of living and dying on behalf of sinners did not objectively accomplish the payment for the sins of the world. Rather, Christ fulfilled the law, as he must, *for himself*. Beyond that, however, his faithfulness opened possibilities to those who followed him in a life of obedience to the revealed will of God. Christ's death and resurrection did not accomplish salvation—they *made salvation a possibility*. The realization of that possibility remained the responsibility of the individual Christian who, by acts of the will, chose to live the obedient life. This act of the will coupled with the obedient life is faith for Finney. Thus faith is knowledge, trust, assent, and *obedient action*.

Obviously, this is a massive confusion of law and gospel, and one that goes well beyond the Pietists—Finney really makes Pietism look good. But this confusion finds its application especially in Finney's doctrine of baptism. For him baptism was a means by which the apostles got the attention of their hearers, what he called a *new measure*. But, like all things human, it had lost its attractiveness and appeal, largely due to the church investing it with a mysterious power. As such, Finney believed, it might be useful to develop other practices to incite the hearer to the act of faith. Here his own words in these three paragraphs:

Just so with the awakened sinner. Preach to him, and, at the moment, he thinks he is willing to do anything; he thinks he is determined to serve the Lord; but bring him to the test; call on him to do one thing, to take

¹¹ Charles G. Finney, "Justification by Faith," *The Gospel Truth Web site* (Orange, CA: Gospel Truth Ministries, 1999–2006), http://www.gospeltruth.net/1837LTPC/lptc05_just_by_faith.htm (accessed January 18, 2006); emphasis added.

one step, that shall identify him with the people of God or cross his pride, and his pride comes up, and he refuses; his delusion is brought out, and he finds himself a lost sinner still; whereas, if you had not done it, he might have gone away flattering himself that he was a Christian. If you say to him: "There is the anxious seat, come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord's side," and if he is not willing to do so small a thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything, and there he is, brought out before his own conscience. It uncovers the delusion of the human heart, and prevents a great many spurious conversions, by showing those who might otherwise imagine themselves willing to do anything for Christ that in fact they are willing to do nothing.

The Church has always felt it necessary to have something of the kind to answer this very purpose. In the days of the apostles baptism answered this purpose. The Gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ were called on to be baptized.

[Baptism] held the precise place that the anxious seat does now, as a public manifestation of a determination to be a Christian.¹²

For Finney, faith demands action and baptism is an act of faith. Curious as to whether you are a Christian or not? Then look to your acts of faith.

III. Faith in Contemporary Evangelicalism

Evangelical revivalists in the Finney tradition have continued to develop his thought and practice. While some have steered clear of his more egregious denials of the imputation of Christ's righteousness and Christ's atoning work, others have followed in his tendency to interiorize faith and make the decision of the sinner the key to salvation. The sacraments are at best ignored, at worst turned into demands and symbolic obligations that indicate the presence of an already existing interior faith. We could employ any number of examples, but none is more applicable than Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. His book, *Your Best Life Now!* had long residence on the bestseller lists, both sacred and secular.¹³

¹² Charles G. Finney, "Lectures on Revivals of Religions: Measures to Promote Revivals," *The Gospel Truth Web site*, http://www.gospeltruth.net/1868Lect_on_Rev_of_Rel/68revlec14.htm (accessed January 18, 2006).

¹³ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004).

Osteen's approach is straight-forward and accessible. If you want your best life now!, then carry out these seven principles: 1) enlarge your vision; 2) develop a healthy self-image; 3) discover the power of your thoughts and words; 4) let go of the past (which, as an historian, I find *very* offensive); 5) stand strong against opposition and adversity; 6) live to give; 7) choose to be happy. Says Osteen, "happy, successful, fulfilled individuals have learned how to live their best lives now" and he promises that "by following the principles I'm going to share with you . . . you can be happy and fulfilled, starting today."¹⁴ Note the possibilities here—you *can* be happy, *if* you have faith and employ these principles. The converse? If you are not happy, you do not have faith. Let us allow Osteen to tell us this himself in these five paragraphs.

We have to conceive it on the inside before we're ever going to receive it on the outside. If you don't think you can have something good, then you never will. The barrier is in your mind. It's not God's lack of resources or your lack of talent that prevents you from prospering. Your own wrong thinking can keep you from God's best.¹⁵

You must look through your "eyes of faith" and start seeing yourself as happy, healthy, and whole. That means even when your situation looks bleak, when you're tempted to be discouraged or depressed, you must encourage yourself by praying, "God, I know that You are in control, and even though this looks impossible, I know today could be the day that things turn around. Today could be the day You restore my marriage. This could be the day You bring my child home. Today may be the day my business begins to prosper exponentially. This could be the day I see my miracle."

Then keep believing and watching for those good things to come to fruition in your life. *You must make a conscious decision, an act of your will*, to maintain an attitude of expectancy and keep your mind filled with thoughts of hope!¹⁶

If you do this, things will improve—they must. For, you see, God wants to make your life easier. He wants to assist you, to promote you, to give you advantages. He wants you to have preferential treatment. But if

¹⁴ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, xi, x.

¹⁵ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 3.

¹⁶ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 15-16; emphasis added.

we're going to experience more of God's favor, we must live more "favor-minded." To be favor minded simply means that we expect God's special help, and we are releasing our faith, knowing that God wants to assist us¹⁷

Live favor-minded. Get up each day and expect it and declare it. Say, "I have the favor of God." Don't sit back passively. **You do your part, and God will do His part.** And you'll have everything you need.¹⁸

Once you do your part, then God will do his part. At that point, you will have everything you need – but not before. Hear Osteen again:

God wants you to be a winner, not a whiner. There is no reason for you to be perpetually living "under the circumstances," always down, always discouraged. No matter how many times you get knocked down, keep getting back up. God sees your resolve. He sees your determination. *And when you do everything you do, that's when God will step in and do what you can't do.*¹⁹

What is the bottom line? In Osteen, we find ourselves back to something like the ledger of good and evil deeds found in medieval Rome.

God is keeping a record of every good deed you've ever done. He is keeping a record of every seed you've ever sown. You may think it went unnoticed, but God saw it. And in your time of need, He will make sure that somebody is there to help you. Your generous gifts will come back

¹⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 38–39.

¹⁸ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 43; emphasis added. See also 82: "Understand, God has already equipped you with everything you need to live a prosperous life. He planted "seeds" inside you filled with possibilities, incredible potential, creative ideas, and dreams. But just because those things are within you doesn't mean they will do you any good. You have to start tapping into them. In other words, you've got to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have what it takes."

¹⁹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 192; emphasis added. See also, 214: "In my life, I've discovered two kinds of faith—a *delivering* faith and a *sustaining* faith. Delivering faith is when God instantly turns your situation around. When that happens, it's great. But I believe it takes a greater faith and deeper talk with God to have that sustaining faith. That's when circumstances don't change immediately, but you say, "God, I don't care what comes against me, I don't care how long it takes, this thing is not going to defeat me. It's not going to get me down. I know You're on my side. And as long as You are for me, that all that matters." Sustaining faith is what gets you through those dark nights of the soul when you don't know where to go or what to do, and it seems that you can't last another day . . . but *because of your faith* in God, you do."

to you. God has seen every smile you've ever given to a hurting person. He's observed every time you went out of the way to lend a helping hand. God has witnessed when you have given sacrificially, even giving money that perhaps you needed desperately for yourself or your family. God is keeping those records. Some people will tell you that it doesn't make any difference whether you give or not, or that it doesn't do any good. But don't listen to those lies. God has promised that your generous gifts will come back to you. In your time of need, *because of your generosity*, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of.²⁰

"Because of your faith," "Because of your generosity," "Because of YOU!" God's gracious and giving actions are conditioned on the frame of mind of the individual, which itself is conditioned on faith of the individual. If things are not going well, *have more faith; believe the right way*. The choice is yours – act!

Still, that nagging question remains: "Do I really believe?" The answer, in a rather profound irony, is found in the external circumstances that are created by your faith. As notes above, if you enlarge your vision, develop a healthy self-image, discover the power of your thoughts and words, let go of the past, stand strong against opposition and adversity, live to give, and choose to be happy, then the material circumstances of your life will change to the point where you will be sure that you have true faith.

A theology of faith and works offers no real and lasting comfort. So where shall we turn for relief?

IV. Faith in Luther

Let us hold on to our history and go back to Luther. In a recent issue of *Pro Ecclesia*, one of the more significant articles on Luther's theology in recent memory has appeared. Titled "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," author Philip Cary addresses Luther's understanding of faith, the sacraments, and justification over against the Reformed/Protestant tradition.²¹ The simple version of his thesis is this: for Protestantism, faith is reflective, internally oriented; for Luther faith is unreflective, externally oriented or located in the sacraments, which bring the word of God

²⁰ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 262; emphasis added.

²¹ Phillip Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant: The Logic of Faith in a Sacramental Promise," *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (Fall 2005): 447–486.

concretely to human beings. The result? The Protestant must always ask, "Do I *really* have faith?" Whereas the Lutheran says: "I am baptized!" The Protestant is left with the question mark; Lutherans have the exclamation point!

Cary notes how surprised Luther would be to be confronted by an American Evangelical revivalist. "Brother, are you saved?" was an easily answered question for Luther: "Of course, I am baptized." Cary notes how Luther pointed outside of himself to the objective working of God in the sacraments. Commenting on this distinctively Lutheran turn, Cary writes: "Someone who gives such an answer does not think a decision for Christ or a conversion experience is necessary in order to be a Christian. It is enough to be baptized as an infant and then believe what you are taught, for instance, in a catechism. Hence it is not surprising that there is no revivalist tradition native to Lutheranism."²²

Rather, in Cary's mind, the logic of faith works differently for Luther. There is a "double structure of God's word: first a scriptural promise of Christ that institutes the sacrament, then an oral word that is part of the sacramental action itself."²³ As such, "the baptismal formula, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,' *is the word of Christ*."²⁴ As a result, "the words spoken in the act of baptizing are Christ's own, so it is Christ who really performs the baptism."²⁵

What, then, is Cary's conclusion?

[F]or Luther Christian faith is quite literally faith in one's baptism. To have faith in Christ is to believe him when he says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Since baptism signifies new life in Christ, faith justifies us by receiving this new life. Faith in effect speaks thus: Christ says he baptizes me, and therefore (since baptism means new life in Christ) I have new life in Christ. Hence for Luther justification does not require us to have a conversion experience or make a decision for Christ. These are acts of will that would detract from Luther's point about faith alone: that we are justified merely by believing what Christ says is true. The logical connection is made by

²² Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 448.

²³ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 450.

²⁴ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 451; emphasis added.

²⁵ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 451.

Luther's motto, "believe it and you have it": to believe in your baptism is to have the new life Christ signifies when he baptizes you.²⁶

The importance of this position emerges when we recall just how notoriously fickle human beings really are. Even as Christians, we swing wildly between faith and unbelief, between confidence and despair. The reason for Luther is simple and blunt: "all men are liars."²⁷ As such, dare we make a judgment about someone's faith on the basis of their own claim? After all, we are untrustworthy individuals. "Believe me, I believe!" Oh, do you? Are you sure? Have you sinned this day? Have you lied? Cheated? Stolen? Murdered? If so, I cannot believe you. You are not trustworthy, you are a liar. Luther states plainly, "God alone knows the heart."²⁸ As such, "whoever bases baptism on the faith of the one to be baptized can never baptize anyone."²⁹ For it is impossible to know who has true faith, and that includes the individual himself or herself. Again, as Luther puts it, "the baptized one who receives or grounds his baptism on his faith . . . is not sure of his own faith."³⁰

That every man is a liar includes all human beings, which includes me. I cannot have any faith in my own words. I cannot have faith in my own confession. I certainly cannot have faith in my faith. I cannot have faith in anything that is my own. To do so would be to return to the reflexive faith of medieval Rome—the *curvatus in se*. Rather, I am drawn out of myself by the external word of the gospel to the promises of God in Christ. Again, quoting Cary:

In this sense Luther makes Christian faith profoundly unreflective: faith does not include knowing one has faith. It does not even require *believing* one has faith: for "he who doesn't think he believes, but is in despair, has the greatest faith." Christian faith puts no faith in faith, precisely because it is faith in God's word alone. For faith, Luther teaches, must be certain, which means it cannot put faith in our inadequate ability to believe. So for Luther the doctrine of justification by faith alone means that

²⁶ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 451; emphasis added.

²⁷ Martin Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 40:240 (hereafter *LW*).

²⁸ *LW* 40:240.

²⁹ *LW* 40:240.

³⁰ *LW* 40:240; emphasis from Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 452n15.

Christians do *not* rely on faith. Faith does not rely on itself but only on the promise of Christ.³¹

The word of Christ—being a sacramental word—is wholly external. It depends on an external reality—the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ—for its meaning. And its truth is located in the Christ who speaks the sure word of promise, uttered without condition to sinners. There is no demand to the sinner to “have faith”—he cannot. There is only Christ who, through the Holy Spirit, creates faith by means of the proclamation of Gospel.

The implications are profound, and Cary summarizes them well:

This dependence on external circumstances of utterance makes it possible for the word of Christ to use the pronoun “you” to address me in particular. (This understanding of the gospel as a sacramental word of address leads to Luther’s habit of expounding the logic of faith in the first person singular, which I adopt here. Trying to speak in the third person when explaining Luther’s theology—persistently saying “one is baptized,” for instance, rather than “I am baptized”—makes for unbearably awkward prose. This is no accident, of course. Luther wants to make it difficult to overlook the first-person character of faith, which includes the realization that Christ’s life and death, preaching and promise are indeed *for me*. This is the famous Lutheran *pro me*. It is important to notice that the emphasis here is not on personal experience but on the content of the word of God. When the gospel is preached—most clearly of all in the sacraments—Christ himself says “you” and means me. To believe this word is to learn about myself from another, rather than to trust my own personal experience or feeling. Thus the Lutheran *pro me* does not make faith reflective, but precisely explains why it is unreflective: 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. . . . If the gospel alone is the proper object of faith, then the *pro me*—the fact that I am the object of Christ’s love and redemption—is part of the content of faith, whereas an awareness that I believe is not. That is why faith in a word that is explicitly *pro me* is free to be unreflective.)³²

³¹ Cary, “Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant,” 452.

³² Cary, “Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant,” 452–453.

In the Evangelical tradition, as we have seen, faith is largely reflective, though its veracity is located either in the sanctified life (Pietism), the decision and obedience of the individual (Finney), or the life circumstances made possible by a frame of mind (Osteen). In all these cases, the gospel is made conditional on the believer's act of faith. It is essentially and necessarily self-referencing.³³ Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the conditional preaching of justification. You are justified *if* you believe. For Luther, that leads the sinner back to himself and robs him of the gospel's comfort.

Thus, if Evangelical Protestantism is concerned with a reflexive faith in faith, Luther appeals to us to "cling to externals." In the context of the Sacrament of the Altar, Cary contrasts the effects of this posture for Calvin and Luther: "Calvin will say 'the Sacrament sends us to the cross of Christ,' whereas for Luther if we want to receive what Christ won on the cross we go to the sacrament, not the cross, for it is in the sacrament that that it is actually given to us through the word."³⁴ Why? Because "apart from his word Christ is present everywhere like sunlight, and is equally ungraspable."³⁵ However, while "He is present everywhere . . . he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word [is], and there you [will] lay hold of him in the right way . . . He has put himself into the Word, and through the Word he puts himself into the bread also."³⁶ And so, summarizing, Cary writes:

This externalistic sacramental piety—groping for God in bread—is indispensable if faith is to be unreflective. A faith that looks away from itself needs somewhere external to look—somewhere quite independent of the experience of faith. If, on the contrary, we must not "cling too tightly to the outward sign" as Calvin says, then the sacraments must direct our attention away from themselves to something more spiritual and heavenly—and that means faith will inevitably become to some degree an adventure of conscious experience, transcending the mere perception of outward things.³⁷

³³ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 457.

³⁴ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 462.

³⁵ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 466.

³⁶ LW 36:342–343; quoted in Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 466.

³⁷ Cary, "Why Luther Is not Quite Protestant," 466.

Note the difference in Luther, who constantly points troubled sinners to the completed work of Christ bound up in the word and sacraments:

Although the work is done and the forgiveness of sins is secured by the cross (John 19:30), it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word. How would we know about it otherwise, that such a thing was accomplished or was to be given to us, unless it were presented by preaching or the oral Word (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21)? How do they know about it? Or how can they receive and make the forgiveness their own, unless they take hold of and believe the Scriptures and the Gospel? . . . The treasure, indeed, is opened and placed at everyone's door, yes, upon his table.³⁸

V. Conclusion

The website of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod summarizes the thinking of Osteen and others of the Word/Faith school very nicely:

- Faith is a force, released by words, by which one can create reality: "The force of faith is released or activated by words. Faith-filled words put the law of the Spirit of life into operation."
- The "force of faith" is activated by speaking or positively confessing what one desires and requests from God: "Your right confession will become a reality, and then you will get whatever you need from God." Negative words create negative realities in one's life.
- God wills that every Christian have perfect health and experience complete healing: "God intends for every believer to live completely free from sickness and disease." God has obligated Himself to heal every sickness for those who have faith. The promise to heal is part of Christ's atonement. The failure to be healed is evidence of a lack of faith. To pray "thy will be done" is to destroy faith. In fact, when people die they bear some of the blame, because [*sic*] did not have enough faith.³⁹

³⁸ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism, Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 461.

³⁹ The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, "Word-Faith Movement," *The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Web site* <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Word-Faith%20Movement%20ROM%20Eval.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2006).

To put it another way: the gift is free, it is yours, *all you have to do . . .* With those five little words, grace is limited, faith changes from that which receives God's gifts to that which acts to move God to give, and the phrase "saved by grace!" with its exclamation point, to "saved by faith?" with its question mark. The gospel applies to you only if you meet the conditions.

For Luther, on the other hand, the gospel is unconditional and creates its own reality through the working of the Spirit in the sacramental word.

Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe on Him, and have Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 12:3; Galatians 4:6). The work of redemption is done and accomplished (John 19:30). Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, resurrection, and so on (Colossians 2:3) . . . So that this treasure might not stay buried, but be received and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed. In the Word he has the Holy Spirit bring this treasure home and make it our own. Therefore sanctifying is just bringing us to Christ so we receive this good, which we could not get ourselves.⁴⁰

Contrast Luther's certainties with Osteen's potentialities and uncertainties:

Raise *your* level of expectancy. It's our faith that activates the power of God. Let's quit limiting Him with our small-minded thinking and start believing Him for bigger and better things. Remember, *if* you obey God and are willing to trust Him, you will have the best this life has to offer—and more! Make a decision that from this day you are going to be excited about the life God has for you.⁴¹

Is it all about us? No. It is all about Christ who has made us his own in baptism! In contrast to Osteen and in alignment with Luther, therefore, we sing:

God's own child I gladly say it,
I am baptized into Christ
He, because I could not pay it,
Gave my full redemption price

⁴⁰ Luther, *Large Catechism, Concordia*, 429.

⁴¹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 306.

Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any
That brought me salvation free,
Lasting to eternity!⁴²

⁴² "God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It," in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 594:1.