

THE DANGER OF EMPHASIZING THE ACT OF FAITH (BELIEVING)  
INSTEAD OF THE OBJECT OF FAITH (CHRIST)

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INTRODUCTION:

There is only one Savior. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. Only because of His holy life and sin-atoning death, is God a Friend to sinners. Jesus Christ has done it all.

Satan, the world of non-Christians, and the Christian's sinful nature continually try to take away this one real Savior by substituting some false redeemer for Christ. These spiritual enemies of the Christian urge sinners to trust that God is reconciled because of reasons other than Christ; reasons such as: our noble thoughts, money gifts, church attendance, Bible reading, fervent prayers, strict morality, respect for authorities, and love for children. Such human works, beneficial in themselves, become false-christs when they are made the basis of our certainty that God has forgiven all our sins.

A still more deceptive attempt to replace Christ as Savior is made when sinners are urged to combine the saving work of Jesus with some effort on the part of us humans so that by such a "package deal" God becomes gracious in His heart toward sinful humans. The false teachers who entered Paul's congregations in Galatia urged circumcision and keeping of sabbath days upon the people as necessary for salvation. Those works plus Christ's work were said to save the Galatians from God's curse upon sin. This synergism (helping God save us) made Jesus into a Savior who needed help from us humans in order to atone for all sins. Therefore, Paul wrote in Galatians 1: "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ, unto another gospel; which is not another, but there be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of Christ."

Three years before Luther's death, the synergist Melancton brought in this same false-christ by teaching that a necessary part of our conversion is "the human will assenting to and not resisting the Word of God." In 1548 he wrote, "The merciful God does not deal with man as with a block, but draws him in such a way that his will, too, cooperates." But that thought is not correct! We humans are born spiritually dead. We cannot cooperate with God before or during our conversion. By the time we cooperate with God, we are already converted. Still, Melancton wrote, "There must of necessity be a cause of difference in us why a Saul is rejected, a David received." Thus Melancton taught that David added something which enabled Jesus to save him and Saul did not. This is a false-christ teaching. The true Christ needs no help from us humans to save us. The Triune God created the world without our help and He also saved the world without our help. The name whereby we are saved is not "Jesus-plus-some-human-effort" but "Jesus" alone.

At Luther's time, people heard very little about faith in Christ alone for salvation. Poor sinners were urged to their prayer beads, pilgrimages, fasts, prayers to saints, indulgences, and relics for sources of certainty that their sins were forgiven. The Triune God enabled Luther to preach that faith only in Christ Jesus saves and not faith in beads, pilgrimages, indulgences etc. Luther saw a church entangled in acti-

vities that tortured rather than comforted sensitive and distressed consciences; a church that found it more profitable to encourage endless doing rather than confident existing. Against that crude, blunt preaching of human works to gain salvation, Luther preached the grace of God and faith (believing) only in Jesus. His books are full of the word "faith" and rightly so. He learned about it from the Apostle Paul whose letter to the Romans uses the word "faith" at least 34 times.

The New Testament uses the word "faith" (believing) in a wider and a narrower meaning. In its wide sense, it means "to trust or place one's confidence in something." For example: II Thessalonians 2:11 "and for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." James 2:19 "the devils also believe and tremble." I Corinthians 13:7 (charity) "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things." Acts 9:26 "When Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple." I Corinthians 11:18 "I hear that there be divisions among you and I partly believe it." Matthew 24:23,26 "Lo, here is Christ! Believe it not."

According to this wide meaning, everyone in the world is a "believer" because every person on earth trusts in something. Some put confidence in their brilliant minds, others in their physical strength, riches, friends or abundance of earthly possessions. Scripture warns: Jeremiah 17:5 "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man and maketh flesh his arm." Proverbs 11:28 "He that trusteth in his riches shall fall."

But most of the time the New Testament uses the word "believe" in its narrow meaning. In this narrow sense, "believe" means: "a joyful certainty that Jesus is the Messiah, the God-appointed Author of our eternal salvation." In this narrow sense, only Christians can be called "believers". The miracle of Christian faith is that the Triune God has given us sin-blinded people the ability to turn from trusting useless human works and instead, begin trusting Christ and His work alone for our salvation. The act of trusting in something is not miraculous, but the act of trusting in Christ as the Savior is miraculous, because no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost.

Confusing the use of the word "believe" in its wider and narrower meanings misleads a person to conclude that all who declare "Faith alone saves" mean the same thing taught by Paul and Luther. Those men used the phrase, "being justified by faith" in the narrow sense only. When Paul wrote in Romans 5:1 "Therefore being justified by faith", he expected his readers to understand he meant "faith in Jesus". In verse 9 of the same chapter the apostle wrote just as easily, "being now justified by His blood." Paul did not have two saviors: one named "faith" and the other named "blood of Christ." One was his Savior: Christ. Luther wrote in the same way saying, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." The one true faith spoken of by Paul and Luther was the faith only in Christ for II Corinthians 5 "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."

## PART I. WHAT THE DANGER IS

By emphasizing the act of faith (believing) instead of the object of faith (Christ), the danger exists of making faith become the savior instead of our dear Lord Jesus. This results in agony for poor distressed sinners and comfort for hypocritical "Christians" who secretly want to earn their own salvation. When poor sinners are told, "Thy faith hath saved thee", "He that believeth shall be saved" and "Believe on the

Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved", they are tempted to turn away from the sin-atonement cross of Jesus and look instead into their own hearts to see if they have such an emotion called "faith". They search their own feelings for certainty of God's friendship rather than looking unto Christ, the Author and Finisher of their faith. God-the Triune God-likes us, not because of our faith but because of Christ.

The proud sinner who wants to be accepted in Lutheran circles, knows that it is unpopular to claim any human effort as the reason for his salvation. But he has found that "faith" is not classified as a human effort and therefore he secretly makes a human work out of his act of believing. He credits his salvation to the fact that he believes in Jesus. Our old natures are constantly on the alert to twist even the most carefully worded statement about faith into a meritorious effort on our part. For example: "Faith is merely the empty hand that receives God's gift of salvation. It is the empty sack which the Lord fills with forgiveness of sins." How quickly and easily our evil natures respond, "Yes, but I held out my empty hand! I didn't pull away the empty sack." This makes "believing" the Savior instead of Christ.

Pastors, perhaps unconsciously, at times urge this false faith-christ on their people because it "gets results". The resulting uncertainty of salvation for the poor, sorry sinners and the satisfying of the self-righteous sinner's pride seemingly sparks a congregation into active Christian workers. In reality it is a mixed group made up of tortured souls ever seeking the offered (but never quite given) Savior, and of proud sinners who are satisfied to support a church which permits them to rely on their own efforts of believing as a ticket into heaven.

Poorly instructed church members have said, "It does not matter what you believe, just as long as you are sincere in your faith. Believing will save you". That is like saying, "Going will cure a toothache". Going where? To a movie? To a candy store? Of course not! Going to a dentist cures the toothache. Certainty of our salvation does not rest on the act of faith but on the object of faith. Luther wrote: "To free myself from regarding the law and works (that human efforts save) I make it my habit so to conceive of the thing as though there were in my heart no such quality called faith or love, but in its place I put Christ Himself and say: 'This is my righteousness.'" Unless the object rather than the act of faith is emphasized, the trembling sinner's gaze will be directed away from Christ and toward himself. Faith will have been made into a false-christ. This is the serious danger which exists when the act of faith (believing) is emphasized instead of the object of faith (Christ).

## II. This Danger Really Exists

This danger of which we are speaking actually has existed for many years. Over 75 years ago the Ohio (Lutheran) Synod flatly rejected the truth that God already declared the whole world of humans justified of all sins because of the death and resurrection of Christ. They called this correct Scripture teaching "a sin against holiness", "insanity", "a night of error", "a miserable figment of man's own invention." Ohio defined its unscriptural position this way: "Through the reconciliation of Christ the holy and gracious God has made advances to us, so that forgiveness of sin and justification have been made possible on His part; justification itself, however, does not occur until through God's grace the spark of faith has been kindled in the heart of the poor sinner.

As the years went by, this unscriptural teaching was not corrected in the American

Lutheran Church (now a member of TALC). In 1938 the ALC declared, "(God) purposes to justify those who have come to faith." One of their theological professors, Dr. R.C. Lenski has written on Romans 4:5 "God declares the ungodly righteous by reckoning his faith for righteousness...but (except) for faith there would be no justification. I must ever say, 'I believe, therefore am I justified. The strength of my faith is the degree of my certainty.'"

Compare that horrible doctrine with the true teaching as presented long ago by Dr. Stoeckhardt of Missouri Synod. He wrote, "God has in Christ already forgiven the sins of the whole world. The entire Pauline doctrine of Justification, and also all comfort derived from this doctrine, stands and falls with this special article of objective justification. For thus alone does it become unmistakably clear that justification is in no way dependent upon man's conduct. And thus alone can the individual become certain of his own justification. For it is a compelling conclusion: if God has already, in Christ, justified all men and forgiven them their sins, so I also must have a gracious God and the forgiveness of all my sins...Never in this sense do we hear it presented; 'I believe; I am conscious of the fact that I believe on my Savior. Therefore I am justified in the sight of God.' A believing Christian does not make the pulse of his faith-life the criterion of his state of grace...The believer rather makes this conclusion: 'Oh, how godless I still am! Out of my heart godless thoughts continue to arise. There is no doubt but that I am a poor, unworthy sinner. My sin is ever before me. But now God's Word tells me that God has already declared godless sinners righteous. Thus I belong without any doubt whatsoever in the number of those whom God justifies.'"

In spite of this wonderfully clear, correct teaching, Missouri Synod in 1950 declared that the "Common Confession" was a settlement of such past differences with the American Lutheran Church. Since the ALC did not retract its false doctrine concerning faith, it is little wonder that more and more pastors in the Missouri Synod have left the true, Scriptural position and now with TALC are emphasizing the act of faith (believing) at the expense of the object of faith (Christ).

Surely such a history should put all faithful Christians on guard so that they realize that the danger described in this essay really exists and that they must strive to keep this error from creeping into their own way of thinking.

### III. Warning Signs that Indicate the Presence of this Danger

Fortunately there are warning signs which indicate the presence of this danger. Here are some of them:

1) When the words "faith", "believing", and "accepting" are used exclusively and their synonyms such as "trusting", "confidence", "certainty" etc. are avoided, then it is possible that the act of faith is being given too much importance. The repeated use of these specific words tends to become a magical formula which must be uttered in those exact syllables or else the "incantation" for being saved will be nullified. The words can become an amulet to which the aged and dying especially cling to. All their lives they have been told, "Believe in Jesus and you will go to heaven." They may not understand what the phrase means, but think that somehow one can enter heaven's bliss by saying the 'Open Sesame!' formula, "I believe in Jesus". Compare such rigid use of terms "faith", "believing", and "accepting" with the way Luther freely spoke and wrote. He used terms such as "certainty", "sure confidence", "firm reliance", "refusing to be torn away from", "casting one's entire self on" just as easily as he used the words "faith" and "believing."

2) Another indication that the word "faith" is possibly being used as a magical formula is seen when the word "faith" is placed side by side with a synonym for "faith" so that the impression is given that the word "faith" must be included in the sentence in order to make the doctrine Scriptural. For example: the adult instruction manual "What Does the Bible Say?" by O. Riess has this statement: "Only he receives the benefit of this redemption who by faith accepts Christ as his personal Savior and trusts in Him for his salvation." "Faith in Christ" and "Accepting Christ" are synonymous. By placing the word "faith" next to the word "accepts" the impression is given that certainty of accepting Christ in the right manner requires one to use the magical word "faith."

Another example of needless repeating of the word "faith" is found in the Wisconsin Synod Catechism in the following sentences: "The Holy Ghost brings the righteousness of Christ to us by the Gospel and gives us the faith to believe it." (The correct wording should be: "the ability to believe it.") "What will become of the unbelievers who rejected Christ?" (The correct wording should be: "What will become of the unbelievers?" or "What will become of the rejectors of Christ?") "What will be our inheritance with all believing children of God?" (The correct wording should be: "What will be our inheritance with all believers in Christ?" or "What will be our inheritance with all children of God?") As the words stand, there is danger of emphasizing the act of faith (believing) instead of the object of faith (Christ).

3) An easily recognized indication of over-emphasizing the act of faith is to notice which words a speaker emphasizes when reading Scripture passages that contain both the act of faith and its object, Christ. The verse John 3:16 is a good example. Test yourself with it. Read the verse aloud and note carefully which words of the verse you emphasize. The dangerous emphasis is: "Whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish.." The correct emphasis is: "whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish.." In a similar way the passage from Acts 16:31 is frequently abused. The dangerous emphasis is: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." The correct emphasis is: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." From these examples one can see how incorrect it is to say that mere Bible reading without comment in the public schools would not teach error. The reader by emphasizing the act of faith (believing) rather than the object of faith (Christ) would lead the children to make a false savior out of faith.

Test yourself again with words from the hymn: "Rock of Ages". Which words should correctly receive the emphasis in the lines: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling."? Which words should not be emphasized?

4) One of the most serious warning signs that a Pastor can receive in this matter is when he asks one of his members, "If you died right at this instant, would you be 100% certain that you would go to heaven?" and the member answers, "I think so, I hope so; I surely want to." Such a poor person is uncertain about his salvation, probably because he is looking at the weakness of his act of believing rather than fixing his gaze on the certain object of his faith: Christ Jesus the Savior.

5) Another warning sign in this matter shows itself when members of a congregation hear a Christ-centered sermon and react to the teaching of universal justification by asking, "If our salvation is so certain, then why do we need Lord's Supper?" Most of the time such members have been under the impression that each time they go to Holy Communion they receive a new portion of forgiveness to cover their sins done since they last received the Lord's Supper. God does not forgive sins by the month like a

mortgage payment. The complete payment was made for all sins of all people, past, present, and future, over 1900 years ago when Christ Jesus declared from the cross, "It is finished." "It is paid in full." Lord's Supper is one of the ways God has chosen to underline and emphasize His words, "Because of Christ, I love you. I accept YOU. YOU are My dear child." The sinner who thinks that his act of believing in Jesus moves God to issue him another monthly ration of forgiveness during Communion, is in danger of being a "faithian" instead of a "Christian."

The closing part of this essay is made up of quotations from Dr. C.F.W. Walther's book: "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel."

"A preacher must be able to preach a sermon on faith without ever using the term faith. It is not important that he din the word faith into the ears of his audience, but it is necessary to frame his address so as to arouse in every poor sinner the desire to lay the burden of his sins at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and say to Him: 'Thou art mine, and I am Thine.'

"Here is where Luther reveals his true greatness. He rarely appeals to his hearers to believe, but he preaches concerning the work of Christ in such a manner that the hearers get the impression that...they are blessed men; all their anguish and unrest has been useless; they have been redeemed perfectly, reconciled with God, and are numbered with the saved and those on whom God has made His gracious countenance to shine. The moment a person thinks these thoughts, he attains to faith."

"On the other hand, you may spend a lot of time telling men that they must believe if they wish to be saved, and your hearers may get the impression that something is required of them which they must do. They will begin to worry whether they will be able to do it, and when they have tried to do it, whether it is exactly the thing that is required of them. Thus you may have preached a great deal about faith without delivering a real sermon on faith.

"I do not mean to say that you must not preach about faith. Our time particularly lacks a proper understanding of this matter. The best preachers imagine they have accomplished a great deal when they have rammed into their hearers the axiom: 'Faith alone saves.' But by their preaching they have merely made the hearers sigh: 'Oh that I had fiath! Faith must be something very difficult; for I have not obtained it.' These unfortunate hearers will go home from church with a sad heart. The word faith is echoing in their ears, but gives them no comfort...A preacher of this sort may labor for years and preach to a dead congregation. That explains why people talk in uncertain strains about their salvation. You can tell that they are driven to and fro with doubts and become awfully frightened and distressed when they are told that they are at death's door. Whose fault is it? The preacher's, because he preached wrong about faith.

"The Word of God is not rightly divided when faith is required as a condition of justification and salvation, as if a person were righteous in the sight of God and saved, not only by faith, but also on account of his faith, for the sake of his faith, and in view of his faith.

"In the postils (sermons) and devotional writings of all modern theologians you may find the doctrine that man is made righteous in the sight of God and saved by faith. But by faith they understand nothing but what man himself achieves and produces.

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Their faith is a product of human energy and resolution. Such teaching, however, subverts the entire Gospel.

"What God's Word really means when it says that man is justified and saved by faith alone is nothing else than this: Man is not saved by his own acts, but solely by the doing and dying of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the whole world. Over against this teaching, modern theologians assert that in the salvation of man two kinds of activity must be noted: in the first place, there is something that God must do. His part is the most difficult, for He must accomplish the task of redeeming men. But in the second place, something is required that man must do. For it will not do to admit persons to heaven, after they have been redeemed, without further parley. Man must do something really great--he has to believe. This teaching overthrows the Gospel completely. It is a pity that many beautiful sermons of modern theologians ultimately reveal the fact that they mean something entirely different from the plain and clear teaching of Scripture that man is saved, not by what he himself does or achieves, but by what God does and achieves."

Both the creation and preservation of faith in Jesus the Savior <sup>ARE</sup> undeserved gifts from our merciful Triune God. It is not of human works lest any man should boast. It is easier for us to remember this fact if we precede the word "faith" with the phrase "God-given" or "God-preserved". Thus: "We are saved by our God-given faith in Jesus." "We are saved by our God-preserved faith in Jesus." It is also helpful for us to think those same words when we read in Scripture the frequent statement of Jesus to those whom He had healed: "Thy faith has saved thee. Go in peace." Unless we remind our selves that it was their God-given faith that saved these people, we will be in danger of emphasizing the act of faith (believing) instead of the object of faith (Christ, for surely Jesus meant: "Thy faith in Me has saved you."

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