

Dear friends and members of St. John,

Last month, my newsletter article referred to the wonderful, and true understanding of salvation, by **grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Being Lutheran is wonderful**, since our doctrine declares that there are **no human actions** involved in being brought into God's kingdom – no works, no apprehension of faith – no strings of any kind. To many, when you tell them they **must believe in Christ**, they imagine that **they must apprehend this thing called 'faith'**, so that they can believe in Jesus, and therefore are seen by God as righteous – worthy of heaven.

The error mentioned above is the treating of 'faith' like it's some kind of substance or knowledge learned. People imagine that they can **feel** 'faith' deep inside themselves, and then they become despondent when the feeling disappears. Some Christians believe that faith is some **knowledge** that you can store in your brain, and as long as you know the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, you've got 'saving faith'. Both are very wrong – and these wrongs can be deadly to our souls.

Please bear with me as I try to explain the 'faith' that saves. I'll begin by quoting one of our greatest theologians, Johann Gerhard (b. AD 1582, d. AD 1637):

"It is one thing to be justified **on account of faith** and another to be justified **by faith**. In the former case, faith is the **meritorious cause** [some good thing we earned or have secured for ourselves, so that we believe in Jesus]; in the latter, it is the **instrumental cause** [something God uses in us so that we believe in Jesus Christ]." (bracketed comments by Pastor Travis). "We are **not** justified on account of faith as a merit, but **by faith, which lays hold of the merit of Christ.**"<sup>(1)</sup>

God graciously gives us a tool (or instrument) so that we can receive **the merits of Christ as a gift.**

I know this is a little tricky, so let me give you an analogy. In the olden days of television, everyone had an antenna on their roof (or if you lived in a big city, a "rabbit ear" antenna that sat on top of the TV), so that one could receive the broadcast signals of ABC, CBS, or NBC. Without an antenna, you could forget watching TV. Faith is like a *God-provided antenna* that allows you to receive Christ and His meritorious works, for your benefit. Notice that **faith does not focus on the antenna**; that's like unplugging the TV and staring at the rabbit ears above the TV. Not helpful. Instead, **faith always points you to the "signal."** The "signal" is simply **the cross and the empty tomb, all accomplished for your salvation and eternal life (the Gospel)**. You "look" upon the cross, and the empty tomb (because faith allows you to "see" it spiritually), and you *know* that Jesus carried your sins upon Himself on Good Friday; you know that Jesus exited the tomb so that you can walk out of your grave one day, and live with Him forever. Faith is the necessary instrument that allows you to believe.

It is God who prompts sinners to **receive the "signal," via the "antenna" of faith** (see Ephesians 2:4-9), after God has prepared them for the Gospel by means of the Law. The Law

creates the conditions that are necessary for the Gospel to be received by us (when an infant is brought into God's kingdom through Baptism, the baby is unable to resist the work of the Spirit, that comes from the application of God's word and water). Of course, God cannot prompt a person who continues, and is determined to continue, in his sinful life and thus makes a mockery of God's Word (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). We call this the "fall from grace" - a continued life of unrepentance (living in willful sin) that leads to the "antenna being lost," and the "signal disappearing."

You may remember having one of those TV antennas that could be pointed at the broadcast tower. You could rotate the antenna so that you got the clearest signal. Walking away from worship by coming only once a month (or less) is like allowing the wind to blow the antenna so that it's no longer pointed at God's broadcast. The "signal" becomes fuzzy, difficult to receive. However, Bible study, devotions, and weekly worship attendance focuses the "antenna of faith" at the Broadcaster (God). The signal is strong, and you can rely on that signal to provide you with all that you need, even in the worst of storms.

No analogy is perfect, and neither is this one. If this concept of 'faith' is still a little fuzzy for you, don't be discouraged. It's a challenge for seminary students the first time they are exposed to it. So why teach it?

We said earlier, that some people look inside themselves for faith, as if this "feeling" assures them that they are saved. That makes **keeping that feeling alive inside of you the most important thing in life**. This turns salvation into **work** – **you** must keep the feeling alive. Wrong (and deadly, for all those who trust in their own works for righteousness will surely die – see Romans 3:27-28).

The other error makes 'faith' simply an item of knowledge that is stored in a person's brain cells. But what happens if you suffer from severe dementia and can no longer remember Jesus? Do you die spiritually? Of course not! God is the one providing the antenna, and broadcasting the signal. You simply receive it (even if your mental state prevents you from communicating this to others). God is faithful.

Finally, we are called to simply believe in the Gospel. Childlike 'faith' is the greatest faith on earth (see Matthew 18:1-4). It simply trusts, and does not question how or why! We "see" the cross for what it is. We "see" the empty tomb for what it is. We confess Jesus as Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3), and we are equipped with spiritual gifts that enable us to carry out the good works that God has prepared for us to accomplish (Galatians 5:22, 23, Ephesians 2:10). And each day is a celebration of new life in Jesus – a life that will never end! Happy Easter!

Pastor Travis

<sup>(1)</sup> Gerhard, J., *Locus de justificatione*, paragraph 179.