

A FAITH THAT WORKS

Scriptures: Philippians 2:12-18; Ephesians 2:1-10

As most of you know, for nine years I served both the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches in Potlatch, Idaho. During that time I was often asked, “What is the difference between them?” The answer is “not much,” especially nine years of hearing the same sermons from the same preacher. That tended to wash out the differences.

But if I had to explain the difference between Lutherans and Presbyterians, I would summarize this way. At its core the Lutheran church is an answer to the question: How are we saved? How do we obtain eternal life in the kingdom of God? The answer, according to Martin Luther, is grace! We are not saved not by any work we do or any quality we have, or by the good life we live. We are saved by a free gift of God’s grace, given to us in Jesus Christ.

Presbyterians agree with Lutherans on that point. Presbyterians also believe that we are saved by grace. But Presbyterians tend to focus their energy on a different question. For Presbyterians the big question is not *how* are we saved. The big question is *what does it mean* to be saved. What does salvation look like in human bodily life?

I noticed this difference between the two churches when our first child, Laura, was born. Laura was born in November during our second year in Potlatch, and immediately the people of both churches adopted her. I remember thinking, “How are we going to do Laura’s baptism?” I can preach a sermon twice in two different churches, but you can’t baptize someone twice. How will we baptize Laura in one church without the other church feeling left out? To solve that dilemma, we decided to wait until summer to have Laura baptized. In the summer we had one service for both churches, so that people from both churches would be together for Laura’s baptism. I thought that was a brilliant solution. But when I shared that idea with the people of the two churches, an elderly lady named Sigri Larsen was upset. If you can’t guess, Sigri was a Norwegian Lutheran. She said to me, “Don’t you think you should have that child baptized before summer?” In effect she was saying, “Don’t you think it is more important to have your child baptized than to keep everyone happy?”

Sigri was thinking like a Lutheran, which means she was concerned about Laura experiencing God’s grace, and experiencing it sooner rather than later. I was thinking like a Presbyterian, which means I was thinking organizationally. I was thinking about how we would all live together in a harmonious church family.

When I first went to Potlatch, I asked one of the Lutherans for a copy of their *Book of Order*. He said, “What?” I said, “You know, the book that contains your rules of government.” He said, “I don’t think we have one.” They didn’t. At the time I went to Potlatch, the American Lutheran Church did not have anything equivalent to our Presbyterian *Book of Order*. Maybe that’s because the Lutheran church was started by a monk, and the Presbyterian church was started by a lawyer. Anyway, my conclusion, after nine years was that Lutherans know how to celebrate grace and Presbyterians know how to organize a church, and they both could learn a lot from each other.

Which brings me to our scripture readings. In Ephesians, chapter 2, Paul sounds like both a Lutheran and a Presbyterian. In verses 8-9 he says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” That is one of the great Lutheran verses of the Bible. How are we saved? We are saved by grace, pure and simple.

But that is not the end of the story. Listen to verse 10: “For we are what (God) has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” That is one of the great Presbyterian verses of the Bible. We are saved by God’s grace, but we are saved for service. We are saved so that we can live as God’s people witnessing to the power of God’s love.

The apostle Paul makes the same point in our second scripture lesson. In Philippians 2:12 Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Let me explain. Paul is not saying here that salvation is something we earn by works. He makes that clear in the next verse. Verse 13 says, “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” We cannot do anything unless God first works in us by grace.

But the purpose of God’s grace is to make us new people, people that can show the world a new possibility for human life. That is what Paul means by “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” He does not mean that we obtain salvation by works; he means that salvation is meant to work in us. It is meant to make us new people.

The proof of this is in the next two verses—14-15: “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.”

That is where Presbyterians come in. Like Lutherans, Presbyterians believe we are saved by grace. But we are also saved for a purpose. We are saved that the world may glimpse what God can do in human bodily life.

Now I will be the first to admit that Presbyterians do their share of murmuring and arguing, just like Lutherans, just like the Christians in Philippi. We are all fallen sinners saved by God’s grace. But we want that grace to work in us, to accomplish something in us, and that is why Presbyterians are so preoccupied with things like mission, and even with things like the *Book of Order*. As Presbyterians we want our organizational life to be part our spiritual life. We want even our committee meetings, even our business affairs, even our politics to glorify God and to give people a glimpse of the new life God wants us to have.

Which explains a lot of things in which Presbyterians get involved. Right now our church is working with people from the House of Charity downtown to put in landscaping around their building. Are we trying to earn our salvation? Of course not. How can sticking a few plants in the ground compare to what Jesus has already done for us on a cross? We do not do this to earn salvation. We do it to give people a glimpse of what salvation will look like. In

the kingdom of heaven the garden of Eden will be restored. The tree of life will once again grow on the banks of a river. Down at the House of Charity we are putting in a little glimpse of heaven on the corner of Brown and Pacific.

That's why Presbyterians are involved in mission in places like India, where we help untouchables gain dignity through education and job training so that their lives will not be limited to cleaning out latrines. In some areas of India this has gotten the Presbyterian church in trouble. People do not appreciate us taking away their latrine cleaners and turning them into engineers. But you know, in the kingdom of God we will all be equal, so we better start getting use to it.

We are called to do the same thing in our families, at school, in business, and even in the way we relate to each in this church. We are called, as Paul says, to "shine like stars in the world"—to be imperfect but distinctive samples of the relationships we will have with each other in Jesus' kingdom.

I once heard a statement about faith that goes something like this: "A faith that does nothing, that gives nothing, that costs nothing, that suffers nothing is worth nothing." May yours be a faith that works.

- Ken Onstot
June 3, 2007