

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/29/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Lutherans try to always place the emphasis on what GOD does and not what we do. Paul makes it abundantly clear in his writings that there is not one act we can perform that will make us righteous and worthy of GOD'S love. Yet GOD'S love is given to us in spite of this and is most clearly seen in JESUS' death for us on the cross. So, while other Christian traditions set requirements or expectations of what we must do to achieve salvation (say a certain prayer; perform specific acts; abstain from particular behaviors, etc.), Lutherans start with GOD and what GOD has done for us, so that all we can do is respond to that grace.

This concept of always putting the emphasis on GOD was made clearly to me when I was in college by our campus pastor, Karl Koch. Karl and I became good friends and spent much time together when I was in college. Karl's teachings and mentorship were instrumental in leading to my decision to become a pastor. Some of you have heard me tell how one day, Karl and I were walking across the quad called the "Free Speech" area and heard two gentlemen preaching. The primary speaker was proclaiming to the small crowd that had gathered, "All you fraternity men are whoremongers and all you sorority women are whores. I know because I was in college and saw and did these same things. But then I found JESUS (at this point, Karl and I winked at each other and said, "I didn't know HE was lost.") and since then I have been without sin."

At this point, something inside me pushed me to call out, "That's amazing because up until now, I knew of only one man in all of history who was without sin."

Suddenly, eight pairs of hands grabbed me and pulled me aside. They were members of the Campus Crusade for CHRIST (today called CRU) who said to me, "Are you a Christian?"

I answered in the affirmative.

As Karl sort of orbited the group of men and tried to figure how to get me out, the members of this Christian club proceeded to question me in an effort to prove that I really wasn't a Christian. (I couldn't have been because I wasn't part of their group.) "When were you saved?" a first person asked.

"Two thousand years ago on a Friday afternoon," I replied putting the emphasis on what GOD had done on the cross in JESUS. (Karl had taught me well.)

The first guy couldn't really argue with that. His mouth kept moving but no words came out.

A second fellow spoke up. "No, when did you accept JESUS as your LORD and SAVIOR?"

"Oh," I said. "I didn't accept HIM. HE accepted me. I didn't have anything to do with it."

The second questioner joined the first in trying to find something to say, but both seemed unable. Finally, a third said, "Well, just quit harassing that guy," referring to the preacher.

Karl now managed to reach into the group, grabbed my arm, and led me away.

Unfortunately, at that age I was motivated more by trying to “defeat” those who confronted me, rather than having a more congenial conversation that might challenge their thinking toward the focus on GOD'S actions in our lives. Perhaps my responses did, but not in a way that built bridges. Now I don't mean to say that they were wrong, and that I was right. There are many variations in our common faith in GOD. Nevertheless, though, my Lutheran theology brought out in me answers that reflect this Lutheran priority to keep the emphasis on GOD.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey