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Udo Schnelle

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of divine healing?

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Kritik der religiösen Vorstellungskraft – Douglas Hedleys
Trilogie zur »Imagination« als neues Paradigma der
Religionsphilosophie



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»Justification by faith« – a lifeless concept or the power of divine healing?

Klaus Nürnberger

TED PETERS, *Sin Boldly! Justifying Faith for Fragile and Broken Souls*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2015, 479 S.

This remarkable book makes a bold statement. Unfazed by the misgivings of other denominations, secular indifference, or the aggressive attacks of the new atheism, Peters believes that »It is time to bring the treasure out into the public sphere where it can be enjoyed by all [...] (as) a gift to be shared, not hoarded by a small club of churchgoers.« (xxix) Which treasure? Justification by faith, as Protestants (and Lutherans in particular) proclaim and believe it! On the cover blossoms a Luther-rose. Peters certainly is a »robust« Lutheran!

The author depicts the »fragile soul« as a soul terrorised by anxiety because it does not meet the expectations and criteria of its particular »moral universe« (14). It turns to self-justification, scape-goating and worse. The gospel of justification by grace, accepted in faith, rather than by moral achievement or excellent disposition, relieves the »fragile soul« of its need to justify itself. »If God justifies us, then we don't have to.« (15)

This has immense spiritual, psychological and social repercussions. Self-justification is self-deception. It divides the world between good and evil, locates itself on the good side and blames the other side for evil, thus leading to scape-goating, rejection, retributive justice, violence, war, even genocide. To use an image of my own: We sweep our yards clean and throw the rubbish into the yards of our neighbours; then we express our indignation that the neighbours do not clean up their mess.

Positively, God's justification of the sinner exposes the lie and makes self-justification redundant. Once God's justification, freely given, has catered for its need to be justified, the soul is liberated to turn to more creative pursuits: love of neighbour and responsibility for society, motivated and empowered by the indwelling Spirit of the risen Christ.

So the message of the gospel transforms the »fragile soul« into a »robust soul«. Life, and the reality in which it is embedded, is messy and good intentions may have adverse consequences and cause collateral damage. But the

robust soul can afford to tackle life without being deterred by fears and scruples. It also does not need to hide or apologise for its faith. It is this pastoral concern that gives the book its title »Sin boldly!«.

While this is the basic thrust of the argument, the author deals with a number of adjacent issues: the universal quest for justice; the character of our »moral universe« (a system of meaning with built-in ethical criteria); the character of love as *agape*; consciousness and conscience; »bold ethics« in an ambiguous world; the »broken souls« of soldiers; faith as belief, trust and indwelling Christ; the »Joint Catholic-Lutheran Declaration on Justification«; altruism and its implicit »strings attached« vs. the gift character of the gospel; the relation between justification and sanctification, and the »life of beatitude« as spelt out in Mt 5.

Going through this book was an enriching and emboldening experience. I was pleasantly surprised that it was so close to my own theological thought, although we live on two different continents, probably because we share the same Lutheran tradition. Let me mention a few of the aspects that I believe are particularly important for a responsible theology today.

To begin with, I admire the down-to-earth style, its accessibility, its humour, its ease, but also the tenacious attempt to work through a difficult theological theme and its repercussions for ordinary life, often cast into suggestive images and illustrated with concrete cases. His attempt to regain the existential, communal and social thrust of the core certainty of the Christian faith is timely and relevant.

I envy Peters' capacity to engage countless authors, not only from theology but also from various non-theological disciplines, and his seemingly inexhaustible treasure of quotations strewn in casually wherever they seem to fit.

As mentioned above, I found the boldness with which he unapologetically presents the Lutheran approach as a gift to the ecumenical community and the world at large refreshing. He does not flinch in the face of theological or secular attacks on this version of the Christian faith, but he also does not spare his own Lutheran tradition where necessary (51 ff.; 444).

His critique of »pure doctrine«, for instance, can be outspoken (51–55, 381). The Joint Declaration on Justification, which has been »produced by theologians who love to polish antique doctrinal jewels that are surgically incised and precise in their meaning« is »dull to most people« according to Berger (392). Indeed!

Peters' focus on the »fragile soul« and his profound analysis of the devastating logic and universality of this phenomenon is enlightening. The differentiation between the fragile soul, where the »moral universe« remains

intact, and the »broken soul«, where the moral universe itself collapses (and the mere message of justification no longer helps), is very instructive. I share and admire his ground shaking and impartial critique of the social rhetoric, military ideology and nationalistic politics in this regard (171–194, Chapter 9).

The analysis of the phenomenon of self-justification is profound (Chapter 2, 165–200, 201 and elsewhere). It can easily be developed further into the realm of »ideology« understood with critical sociology as the legitimation of the pursuit of collective self-interest at the expense of the interest of others, in which selected facts are combined with clever arguments to produce the appearance of serving the good of society, acting in line with accepted moral criteria, and doing the right and prudent thing to do.

With Peters I am firmly on the side of the »indwelling of Christ« concept of justification vs. its »forensic« alternative (348–362). I subscribe to his assumption that the Lutheran position distinguishes itself from others in emphasising that genuine Christian love does not try to gain (spiritual) benefits for the loving, but the (holistic) benefits of the loved (362).

Although I sometimes wished the author had taken the validity of the atheists' critique more seriously, and approached them with greater humility,¹ I do share his conviction that the formal question of the existence of God (which is a »third-person abstraction«) does not penetrate to the material or existential question of who that God is in substantive terms, namely a God of grace (which is a »first and second person« discourse) (275–282, 302–311).

Up to a point I enjoyed his refreshing and provocative use of language: »Instead of living a secure and robust life of muscular faith, both our teachers and disciples snivel and whine, blubber on in sheepish fragility.« (16) He can laugh about »the intellectual constipation brought on by the philosophical debate« (384). »The best we get from the roaring and bellowing and squawking atheists is their own version of self-justification.« (288) I said »up to a point«, because such language can come across as dismissive and hurtful, thus relativising the author's concern about the blaming game and its effects.

Most of all I feel at home with his experiential approach. On the whole, Peters does not build his arguments on the assumption that biblical revelation is inerrant, clear and authoritative, no matter the facts. He does not wallow in the metaphysical swamps of much of traditional theology. Instead he extracts his statements from the nitty-gritty of actually lived life as it

¹ See my book: *Richard Dawkins' God Delusion: a repentant refutation*, London 2010.

manifests itself in the Scriptures and reveals itself in a human existence under the impact of the Word of God. »We have to begin with what actually happens – the concrete – and then reflect theologically – the abstract – on what happens.« (379) »Faith leads to reflection; and reflection on faith leads to theology.« (332) This realism is part of the Lutheran heritage.

These are a few important commendations. If I were to enumerate all the strong points of the book it would explode the limits of a review. Moreover, consensus is boring; it is critique and controversy that makes people sit up and take note, that triggers thought and debate, that leads to a deeper insight, greater clarity and wider horizons. So let me highlight some questions that I think his argumentation raises.

1. The title: »Sin boldly!« That is a bold title for a book, and a bold statement indeed. Peters is invested heavily in this formulation. It appears like a battle cry again and again throughout the book. It is part of the author's email signature. It is meant to reassure, liberate and embolden »fragile souls«. But it also conveys an unintended message to the browser in a book shop or even a casual reader. It sounds like an iconoclastic statement, a statement of defiance: I am entitled to be what I am and do what I like – go to hell if you think otherwise!

»Sin boldly« – forget about stale conventions, prudish morals, and petty arguments! Be yourself! Eat junk food and become obese! Make a killing whenever the opportunity presents itself! Throw your political weight around if you have it! Satisfy your sexual desire when the hormones rush into your bloodstream! »Rationalise« your enterprise at the expense of jobs! Bomb a regime into oblivion if it does not suit your national interests.

This is not the author's intention. But one has to read deeply into the book to discover what his intention is. Luther's injunction »Sin boldly; believe even more boldly« (*pecca fortiter, crede fortior*) addresses a situation where the choice is between the greater and the lesser evil, or the greater and the lesser good, rather than between good and evil. In such cases we cannot help but sin, whether by action or by non-action (400–401). This presupposes that sin undermines or destroys a relationship, while grace maintains it in spite of its problematic outcomes.

As Peters emphasises, this is in fact the normal human condition. »Life is a moral mess« (399–403). While Christians are indeed motivated by self-giving love, perfect love is unattainable. One can go even further than Peters: There is no (evolutionary) construction without (entropic) destruction, no life without the death of other life, no freedom without constraints and potential abuse. Whatever has value is costly. »We sin boldly in the sense that with a pure heart we pursue justice and peace, recognizing that we

cannot control the negative exhaust we emit in the process.« (460) »Sin boldly in love!« (323) To get the problem out of the way I advise prospective readers to read these pages first.

2. The concept of »justification«. Here Peters follows the theological tradition. What else can you do as a good Lutheran! My question is whether the tradition conveys the intended meaning. Over time, I have come to the conclusion that it doesn't. Paul used legal terminology, because he had to respond to the legalism of his Jewish critics. Luther could take over Paul's legal formulations without much thought because it responded to the legalism of his Catholic opponents.

In short, the message of justification by faith was a contextualisation of the gospel. Contextualisations are indispensable. For the gospel to reach its addressees, we must »become all things to all people« (Cor 9:19/23). But contextualisations have the nasty habit of distorting the intended meaning. Here it is the legal frame of reference which undermines the clarity of the message of Christian freedom and motivated involvement. Even the concepts of autonomy, heteronomy and theonomy (22–23) conjure up the idea of *nomos* (= law).

The very concepts of justice and justification are not clear. Peters spends a number of chapters on the topic and yet in the end a reader who is unfamiliar with the intricate theological debate may still be puzzled. Does it refer to God's justice, or to God's righteousness? (Latin and German do not allow for this terminological distinction). If justice, is it God's distributive, retributive or restorative justice (89–100)? If righteousness, does righteousness mean conformity with a set of norms, or truthfulness and reliability in a covenant relationship (as in the Old Testament)? Similarly, is sin transgression of these norms, or undermining the relationship?

If God justifies us, what does he actually do: *condemn* us (in Luther's time »execution« was called »justification«), or *vindicate* us when we are accused, or *declare* us righteous, although we are not, or simply *forgive* us, or *accept* us in his fellowship, or *make* us righteous? If he makes us righteous, do we actually *become* righteous, or do we *share* in the righteousness of Christ (this is what Luther's concept of a *iustitia aliena* means)?

Does the phrase *simul iustus et peccator* refer to a stagnant paradox, or a continuous existential struggle in which our participation in the new life of Christ overcomes and replaces our old sinful life? Does Luther's »*merry exchange*« mean that Christ becomes evil, while we become good, or that Christ shares and suffers our human condition to bring us back into the fellowship of God?

In short, the entire »law-gospel« debate (392–420) reveals a giant entanglement of polysemy that puzzles and confuses the laity, that even trained theologians do not always master and that has devoured massive intellectual and spiritual energies that could have been spent on more productive and more loving pursuits.

The most adequate formulation of the gospel is found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Father does not condemn the renegade; he does not demand that the lost property be returned; he does not even expect him to wash himself first. He embraces the guilty and filthy rascal, restores his dignity (decent clothes), affirms his status as a son, rather than a labourer (the ring), and throws a party. And he pleads with the elder son to join him in his joy – and thus also in his suffering on behalf of the rascal! Not the slightest reference to justice or justification!

Acceptance comes first, transformation follows! Not the culprit suffers the consequences of his deeds, but the wronged person, in this case the Father and the elder son. Forgiveness implies suffering; love implies suffering; fellowship implies suffering. On this basis, the »article by which the church stands and falls« can be rendered as God's suffering, transforming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship, and God's invitation to those whom he accepted to join God in his suffering, transforming acceptance. The parable is entirely clear, powerful and redemptive.

That cannot be said of »justification«. Already in Paul's argument with his Jewish opponents, in Luther's rendering of the gospel, throughout the history of the Protestant tradition and up to the present ecumenical debate, the terms remained ambiguous and vulnerable to misunderstanding. In our congregations it does not lead to the joyful appropriation of God's gift, but confusion and uncertainty. Forgiveness is clear, justification is not. Endless quarrels, conflicts, even wars could have been avoided, if the legal terminology had been abandoned in favour of the communal one.

3. Imprecise formulations. Peters enjoys using outrageous formulations, only to disarm them later. They are rhetorically powerful; they make us sit up and listen, think, and enter into debate. That is their strength. But they can also confuse and mislead. They plant an unintended message in the reader's brain that tends to linger on even after it has been corrected. I think it would take little effort to offer a more precise formulation to begin with. Apart from »Sin boldly!« here are a few further examples:

(a) We divide reality between good and evil, locate ourselves on the side of the good, while God places himself on the evil side (201). »The great reversal in the story of Jesus is that God lands with both feet on the evil side of the line.« (207) Really? As Peters makes clear, God is on the side of the

victim of evil, whether committed by others, fate, our own pride, or sin, not on the side of *evil!*

God is on the side of the humiliated, disempowered, the repentant sinner – to *overcome* the consequences of evil (202). »Curiously, the self-acknowledged sinner – the one that sins boldly – becomes the best ethicist.« (214) No way! The self-acknowledged sinner is not somebody who sins boldly, but who repents of his sin. His humble confession as such does not make him righteous (213), but a receiver of divine mercy.

(b) Ethics is sinful. No! There are two levels here: The distinction between good and evil is not sinful; the »complicity of ethics« in self-deception and scapegoating (210) is sinful. When »Jesus tries to put an end to the cycle of justified violence«, he is not unethical. Rather, what he tries to *overcome* is unethical! (211).

(c) »Justice is a serial killer« (93, 177). What? Is it not rather injustice that is a serial killer? Surely this verdict only refers to »bully justice« (72), or »retributive justice« (93), not to »distributive justice« (as when the poor and oppressed demand their fair share) and »restorative justice« (97). One has to read the context before his intention becomes clear.

(d) The expression »God's trust in us« (301) is ambivalent: Does it mean that God trusts us, or that God's acceptance empowers us to trust him? Fact is, we cannot be trusted and God picks up the consequences. The same ambiguity appears in the phrase: »God has faith in us and places that faith in us.« (326) Is it God's faith in us, or God's acceptance that encourages and empowers us to have faith in God?

4. More substantive issues.

(a) Altruism vs self-sacrificing service (386–392). »Reciprocity is what philosophers once called enlightened self-interest.« (386) While social groups need it to survive, »we need to filter reciprocity out of the definition of agape love.« (387) I wonder whether this *quid pro quo* argument is not based on typically Western individualism. With his reference to Augustine, Peters comes close to my own thinking here, so I may perhaps add a few reflections:

First, in a living community each individual is not autonomous and has to reciprocate when receiving a service, but we all contribute in our own specific ways to the life of the community. Speaking with Paul's image of the Body (1 Cor 12–14), the ear does not repay the foot for doing its work by hearing. (Social consequences: What makes extreme poverty so degrading is that the poor have nothing to contribute to the whole. That is why in situations of mass unemployment, we should not try to share consumption but production!)

Second, the joy inadvertently produced by giving or serving others without any strings attached is not restricted to Christians. The joy of a child at Christmas, or the joy of an elderly person whom we brought flowers, reflects back on us and gives us joy, without us ever having had this in mind when we brought the gift.

Third, how does God come into the picture? God is not one actor among others who makes his particular contribution, but God is the Source and Destiny of the very existence and life of the community. Christ is not one of the members of the Body, but the community *is* his Body; the Spirit of Christ permeates, liberates, transforms and empowers the Body of Christ. »God is secretly at work within the human will.« (387) Indeed, but it is the collective will of the community that the individual shares.

That raises the question of the meaning of »loving God«. Can we love God all on our own, in our heart, bypassing the community? Augustine speaks of the Spirit (389–392). But the Spirit is the Spirit permeating the community. Can one say that, just as God speaks to us through the community (*verbum externum*), we respond by addressing God through the prayer and life of the community? Our hymn books are manifestations of unashamed and unmitigated spiritual narcissism.

(b) »The soul has no ontological reality, it is a linguistic construction.« (311) I could accept the argument that there is no *essence* in the soul, because »essence« is an idealised abstraction from a historical flow. But our ego is not an essence; it is the dynamic existential core of the reality experienced by humans.

The idea also appears in the metaphor of the mixing bowl (9, 15, 21, 28 and elsewhere). Peters argues that the centre of the mixing bowl is empty. But if that were the case, there could be no correlation between »outer moral order« and »inner soul« (249, 309, 309). In my view, even the fragile soul has to be seen as a *concretely filled* centre of our life world.

It is the would-be *autonomous* self, which has no transcendent mainstay, that has to assert and justify itself. It also tries to bring its entire lifeworld under its control. It is hunting for power, recognition, wealth, »robustness«. As such it is restored to its authentic, dependent and humble disposition through God's acceptance into God's fellowship.

By the way, this seemingly insignificant observation raises a profound theological issue. »The emptiness in the soul's vortex becomes filled with the person of the Jesus Christ who is placed there by the Holy Spirit.« (316) Really? Paul actually says so: »No longer I, but Christ in me!« But that is an overstatement. The idea is similar to the ancient Christological notion of the *anhypostasia* of Jesus (Jesus has no hypostasis of his own) and the *enhypostasia*

of the Logos (Jesus' hypostasis is constituted by the Logos). It was rejected because it made Christ less than human.²

Christ does not replace our personhood, but transforms it into his image (2 Cor 3:17–18). To be able to do so, Christ must be fully human. To share his new life with us, Christ cannot be a half-god (or simply God »himself«), because we cannot become divine. By implication we must be full human beings, too. Paul argues that, in contrast with Adam, Christ is the authentic human being (Rom 5:12–17; 2 Cor 4:4), but the assumption is that both are human.

(c) Although the idea is so appealing for our hedonistic culture, I just cannot get comfortable with the concept of a »robust soul« or a »robust faith«. Not being gifted with such a soul, I have been scared of robust souls throughout my life: the bullies at school; the judgment of teachers, examiners and academic colleagues; the dismissive certainties of fundamentalist believers; the weighty presence of bosses, the ruthless pursuits of autocrats, imperialists and captains of industry and commerce. Alexander, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Dawkins, Trump, proponents of the Prosperity Gospel, aggressive Evangelists – these are examples of robust souls for me, however different their motivations.

Obviously that is not what Peters has in mind! At the very latest, this becomes clear in the last chapter where he interprets the Beatitudes (436 ff.). »God doesn't answer [...]. A silent heaven produces anxious and angered emptiness of the soul.« (439) The author wants to uplift the downtrodden, give courage to the timid, nurture self-confidence in fragile souls, heal broken souls.

But the concept may backfire when it inadvertently falls into the groove of a demand or an expectation that has to be fulfilled – whether by God or the believer. What if a robust soul does not seem to materialise in my case? Have I failed? What have I done wrong? Was my faith not strong enough? Has God turned away from me after all? Is there such a God in the first place?

Luther seems to be the epitome of a robust faith. He could stand his ground against the mighty Catholic Church and the Empire. In fact, however, Luther's soul was exceptionally »fragile«. His faith was constantly

² According to the Council of Chalcedon (451), the divine person and the human person are each intact; they should neither be separated from each other, nor be confused with each other. Significantly, the Council of Constantinople (681) applied the same formula to the divine and the human will in Christ. God's will does not replace our will but empowers it.

being attacked by afflictions (*Anfechtung*) from all kinds of corners: the law of God; his own conscience; the authority of the church and its established doctrines; the misunderstanding of his followers; war and destruction in the wake of the Reformation; the miserable state of emerging Protestant congregations; his health problems – and all of that understood as the work of the devil!

Luther never had faith in his pocket; his faith was continuously created and sustained by the proclamation of the gospel or the actualisation of his baptism. As Ratschow, Ebeling, Oberman and others have emphasised, the onslaught of doubts and afflictions was a *constitutive* element of Luther's faith. He was the »Human being between God and the devil« (Oberman). Peters is in agreement with this observation. In fact, the very term »robust« is a powerful part of the reassurance that his message is meant to convey.

My concern is, however, that the idea of robustness may send out the wrong message if it is not proclaimed as a response to the realities of never-ending affliction. »Whereas the indwelling of Christ – sealed for eternity in us by baptism – is secure, the external forensic judgment must logically be repeated again and again.« (356) Is the indwelling *secure*? Or is this a reification of an assumption? If it were secure, why must a »forensic judgment« (of all things!) be repeated again and again? Is the gospel not rather proclaimed as a reassuring response to the insecurity of the fragile soul?

(d) Eschatology and the determinative »power of the future«. This is the only substantive point where I find it really difficult to follow Peters. It is hazardous to deduce an entire eschatological construct from a few pages (421–432). So let me just mention the basic terminological difficulty.

Peters concedes that »when we die, we pass from being into nonbeing. [...] We might wish to be eternal, but we know this is not realistic.« (166) This statement dismantles any wishful thinking on the part of believers. It is honest experiential realism.

But when it comes to eschatology, Peters moves into transcendent terrain. I say so because the here concept of the »future« assumes the function of transcendence in the conventional notion of God. For me that impedes the plausibility of the argument. Being pure potentiality, the future can have no »retroactive« power. Moreover, according to modern scientific insight, »the future« cannot refer to an ontological reality without entropy, suffering and death.

A *vision* of what ought to become can liberate us, direct us, inspire us, transform our motivations and even change the course of history. But a

vision reflects what *ought* to become in response to what ought *not* to have become. A vision works pro-actively, rather than »retroactively«.³

I offered these reflections to open up a constructive dialogue. They are notes jotted down on the margins of a remarkable book. They reveal my joy of reading and engaging the thought-provoking and enlightening insights of the author. I hope that many will join me in this experience.

³ For my own approach to eschatology see Klaus Nürnberger, Faith in Christ today: Invitation to Systematic Theology, Volume II, chapters 23 and 24.