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The Fragile Soul and Spiritual Duct Tape

Any breach of the rules I would not tolerate.

–Augustine¹

I was terrorized by the thoughts of sin and punishment.
I couldn't go to church for seventeen years.

–Samuel G. Alexander²

While studying in Heidelberg, Germany, some years ago, I rented an attic room. The landlord had many rules, and almost daily I could hear him mutter, “Alles muß in Ordnung sein,” which translates, “everything must be in order.” Indeed, my landlord felt much better when everyone followed the rules.

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 1.9.19, p. 22.
2. Private conversation with Samuel G. Alexander, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, San Rafael, CA.

Why, you may ask, is the author of this book talking about a Heidelberg landlord? I thought this was a book about justification-by-faith and bold sinning! Well, it is. One of the traditional problems with the doctrine of justification-by-faith is that it has been tucked away for centuries in a theological museum gathering dust. The only time it's drawn out for viewing is when the curators of ancient ideas want to display quaint historical artifacts. Justification-by-faith might have been important to our religious ancestors, but in our modern and emerging postmodern society, it's long been forgotten, even for churchgoers. Right?

Rather than a forgotten artifact in a theological museum, I believe justification-by-faith is the single most important and life-giving truth. In my judgment, it is the key that unlocks the prison door, the hand that rips off the blindfold, the aloe that cools the burning gash, and the elixir that tastes of Eden. Nothing anchors the temporal soul more securely in eternal reality. Justification-by-faith is not an esoteric text that only licensed theologians can check out of the rare book room. Rather, it's a radiant idea that brightens our daily life, interior thoughts, and deepest murmurings. In the pages ahead, I want to direct this pearlescent glow so that the confusing crisscross of forces at work within the soul become visible.

In this chapter, I want to begin with the fragile soul, the soul that sticks to the rules, the soul of the sheepish sinner. Every one of us has experienced those moments of rigidity shot through with anxiety. Why do we *need* to stick to the rules? Justification-by-faith is like a flashlight that helps us see what's going on in the dark corners.

Fragility in Chicago

I know what it's like to live with a fragile soul. After leaving Heidelberg, I traveled to Chicago to finish my doctorate. My new

best friend at the time was Marc Kolden, one year ahead of me in our program at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Like most students at that stage of study, I needed a part-time job.

“I’m leaving my job at Thillens,” Marc said. “Want me to recommend you? If I give your name to Mr. Thillens it’s a sure thing.”

“Sure thing, then, Marc.”

First, let me offer a short explanation. Thillens is an armored car company that offers mobile check-cashing services throughout Chicago. Check cashers drive around the city in armored vehicles that stop at factories on payday. Line workers and other blue collars walk with their checks to the parked trucks, where their checks are cashed. The company charges a small fee, to be sure, but the worker goes home with cash rather than a piece of paper. When the checks are deposited at the end of the day, the company collects a profit.

Before Mr. Thillens would hire me, I needed clearance from a detective agency. Today we would refer to this as a background check. The agency was located in the Chicago Loop. After filling out some forms at the detective agency, I was given a polygraph. I signed an innocuous looking contract, which included my agreement to subject myself to another lie detector test in the event of any investigation. Once I’d signed and all details were satisfactorily completed, I purchased my uniform and security sundries.

When I showed up for work the first morning, the office manager asked me if I carried my own gun.

“No,” I answered. “I don’t own a gun.”

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got here for you,” he said, looking through some drawers. “Oh, here’s one you can use.” He pulled out a monster-sized revolver and handed it to me. “And here’s a holster to fit it. Just attach it to your belt.” He then directed me to the men who would become my crew buddies.

I dutifully armed myself. Later in the day, during a pause in a factory parking lot, I turned to one of my crew buddies who was a moonlighting policeman.

“I don’t know anything about carrying a gun,” I told him. “Could you help me?”

“Sure. Let me see it.” The policeman sized up my weapon. “Well,” he went on, “here is the safety. See how it works? On. Off.” I was getting an education.

“Now, this is a Colt .45, a six-shooter. You have five bullets in the chamber. I don’t know why only five. Notice that the empty chamber is the next one. If you try to fire it, nothing will happen. I recommend you always keep a bullet ready for your next shot.”

All of this gave me a sense of security—or was it insecurity? Regardless, I began to imagine getting into a shootout with my Colt .45 and dying for Mr. Thillens’ money. I began to scratch my head, figuratively speaking. I wondered if I would need to calm my nerves as I came to work each day because of, what? Danger?

As it turned out, I enjoyed my job. The geography of the “City of the Big Shoulders” became second nature as we drove to factories all around the area. The off duty police officers with whom I worked were interesting company. Carrying a quarter million dollars in cash in a bushel basket became a curious daily routine, and exciting adventures were my lot. I will tell you one story, but only one.

On a Thursday evening, I received a telephone call. It was Mr. Thillens. Instead of going to work the next day, he asked me to report to the detective agency.

I showed up at the Loop office at the appointed time. Would I take a polygraph test? Of course. I sat in the proper chair and allowed myself to be hooked up to the electronic sensors.

The first questions were routine. What is my age? Who is my favorite baseball team? No problems. Each answer registered truthful.

The tester began to interpolate questions regarding missing funds, money apparently stolen from one of Thillens' armored trucks.

"A week ago Wednesday, Mr. Peters, did you steal seventeen hundred dollars from your armored vehicle?"

"No!" I answered.

The polygraph began to dance like a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader.

Later he asked, "A week ago Tuesday did you steal nine hundred dollars from your armored vehicle?"

Again I answered negatively. Again the polygraph needle went wild. A third question regarding an even larger theft precipitated the same electronic acrobatics. The polygraph was saying that I had stolen large sums of money on three separate occasions.

Just to make sure of the readings, the tester ran the test twice more. On each run, it was electronically clear that I was guilty. At first, I was shocked. Then, I became anxious. "Oh, no! What will happen now?"

I was left in the room to worry while the detectives held a meeting. During the meeting, one called Mr. Thillens on the phone to explain the evidence they had collected. What action should they take?

After their conference, I was told that Mr. Thillens would like to have me retested. Could I come in on Monday? Yes, of course I could.

I headed for home, my head hung low. My eyes could only view the pavement in front of my shoes as I walked to the Illinois Central train station. I can't remember a weekend more filled with anxiety, fear, worry, and even despair. Sound sleep was out of the question. It appeared my future would no longer remain in my hands. What would happen? Prison?

On Monday, I showed up promptly at the detective agency and was escorted into the polygraph room. A new person had been appointed to test me. He hooked me up to all the electronic sensors,

and the test began. Just as it had the previous Friday, the needle went into a break dance when I answered the key questions regarding the three thefts. The polygraph was convinced that it had caught me telling falsehoods.

“Let me try an experiment,” said the tester. “This time, listen to my questions, but don’t answer. Say nothing. Can you do that?”

“Yes, certainly.”

As usual, we made it through the routine questions, which set a baseline. Then came the big one: “Did you steal seventeen hundred dollars from a Thillens truck?”

I said nothing and sat silent. Still, the polygraph needle danced an Irish jig. The same thing happened with each of the other two indicting questions. We repeated the test. It became evident that even though I said nothing, the polygraph was reporting that I was telling a falsehood.

“How do you feel when I ask you questions regarding the theft of money?” the tester asked me.

“Well, I feel kind of nervous,” I responded. “I get uptight.”

“I thought so,” he said. “I have a theory. I believe you are an ultra-scrupulous person. An ultra-scrupulous person has a difficult time with the polygraph. The polygraph measures nervous reactions; and we deduce that these nervous reactions are due to feelings of guilt over lying. Now, Mr. Peters, you feel guilty even though you’re not lying.”

I nodded in agreement.

He went on. “The polygraph is ineffective for about ten percent of the people we test. It doesn’t work on a sociopath because a sociopath feels no guilt when lying. And, curiously, it does not function very well with an ultra-scrupulous person either. You’ve just seen why. Let me mention that I used to be a Roman Catholic priest

before becoming a detective. I'm ultra-scrupulous too. That's why the detective agency appointed me to test you this morning."

When I walked from the testing room to the office, Mr. Thillens was waiting for me. "I see you've passed the test," he said. "I know who the thief is, based on other evidence. It's not you. But I still needed to have you tested because it's in our work agreement."

We chatted for a little while. Then he said, "Mr. Peters, I look forward to seeing you at work tomorrow morning."

It took only a nanosecond for me to make a decision. "No, Mr. Thillen, I don't think you'll see me at work tomorrow. I quit. I quit as of this very minute. I don't think I could ever spend another weekend like this one." We chatted for a few minutes, and he graciously accepted my resignation with apologies for the ordeal. I walked to the train station with a cheerful skip. More than the weight of a Colt .45 had been lifted.

My soul was fragile. It had been constructed with a set of emotional LEGO® bricks, rules for scrupulous moral behavior. I could not conceive of a time or a place in which I would behave with something less than complete integrity; and the very thought of stealing money precipitated an emotional reaction.

This means I had internalized a moral universe. Perhaps this moral universe originated with my family, my community, my church tradition, or even came from God on Mount Sinai. Whatever the source, the values I inherited were no longer external. They were—and are—internal. My inner self and my external worldview were isomorphic. A crack in one caused a fissure in the other. Even the mere thought of stealing precipitated a minor earthquake in my psyche. I relied upon my moral universe to ward off chaos and maintain integrity.

By no means am I alone with my fragile soul. Countless religious and non-religious persons live with an underlying anxiety that

influences the relationship between their souls and the world. We don't like to see cracks in either one. When a crack appears, we race to patch it up with spiritual duct tape. That duct tape usually takes the form of rigidity, absolutism, perfectionism, dogmatism, and such.

Now, I am not bragging about being scrupulous. Quite the contrary. Scrupulosity is a symptom. The disease is an unnecessary fragility that robs us of robust living. I wouldn't be writing this book if I were hopelessly imprisoned in shamefaced fragility and dogmatic duct tape. However, my own experience contributes to my perception and to my conviction that this is an important part of human experience for us to understand. When the living Christ is present in the human soul—which is what justification-by-faith alerts us to—then daily life becomes robust, not fragile.³

Sticking to the Rules

Sticking to rules protects us from anxiety. Rules, we mistakenly think, provide a secure bulwark against the threatening forces of chaos in our psyche. And, if we believe the rules we obey are eternal, then we feel eternally secure against temporal temptations that rob us of our hard-won eternity. Eternal and universal reality are constructed according to the principles of justice; and we want our temporal soul to be formed in consonance with this eternal justice.

3. The *fragile soul*, as I employ the term here, does not necessarily refer to the unhappy or melancholy soul described by William James. The melancholy soul, according to James, is divided; whereas the fragile soul, I believe, may rest in a modicum of confidence that its conformity to the moral universe is intact. Here is James on the melancholy soul: "Unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle. If the individual be of tender conscience and religiously quickened, the unhappiness will take the form of moral remorse and compunction, of feeling inwardly vile and wrong, and of standing in false relations to the author of one's being and appointer of one's spiritual fate. This is the religious melancholy and conviction of sin that have played so large a part in the history of Protestant Christianity." James, *VRE* 170–71. The concept of the fragile soul may include the melancholy soul as a subcategory, but fragile souls may enjoy a satisfactory daily life with only occasional moments of anxiety or shame.

To be able to say, “Sorry, but you know the rules as well as I do,” provides one’s soul with the comfort that eternal order brings.

Why stick to the rules? Because a little voice whispers inside our psyche: *You’re not good enough*, or *Somebody’s looking; they’ll see you’re not good enough*. If we stick to the rules and admonish others to stick to the rules, we are telling that damnable inner voice to shut up. Shutting up that voice provides comfort for our soul, to be sure; but it is an uneasy comfort that is easily disturbed.

I think of the human soul as something like the eye at the center of a vortex. Liquid swirls around a center, almost vacating the center. Imagine an electric beater preparing whipping cream in a round mixing bowl. In cyclone fashion, the ingredients swirl, and the center empties. Yet the center still marks the invisible axis around which everything else spins.

Let me press this analogy further. That empty vortex around which everything swirls is your soul, my soul. The swirling cream is your or my daily life: our metabolism, our thinking, our activity, our identity. The perimeter of the mixing bowl provides the limit. If it were not for the limit imposed by the mixing bowl, we would fly off into chaos. Everything would lose its form, and the center would disappear. The limit provided by the mixing bowl is our worldview, our moral universe.

At the center is a vacuum—well, actually, a low-pressure zone, a relative vacuum. At the center of all this hullabaloo is a virtual absence, a hollowness, an emptiness. As long as you and I give our attention to the external swirling, we don’t notice the emptiness at the center. In those fragmentary moments when one does notice, one becomes aware of the fragile existence of his or her own soul. A tropical depression begins to look like a personal depression.

Chaos is avoided by the moral universe that keeps all this activity within limits. But what if that mixing bowl begins to show cracks?

What if we feel the threat of chaos? We may race to patch up the cracks with duct tape, establishing new limits with spiritual duct tape. The fragile soul is always on watch, ready to protect the empty center.

The fragile soul fears the nothingness at the center. The threat of that nothingness is experienced as anxiety: the fear of non-being. It is the fear that death will put all our swirling to an end. We fear plummeting into the abyss of black emptiness. “Tiefe Ewigkeit” (deep eternity), said Friedrich Nietzsche—deep, endless, incomprehensible eternity.

In its panic to protect the empty center with an external perimeter of controlled chaos, the fragile soul shelters itself within a world of its own imaginary self-construction. In later chapters, I will show how this patched up perimeter we call our *world* becomes a moral universe that supports our own delusions, our own self-justifications, our own intolerance. The spiritual duct tape with which we hold the fragile soul together is called *perfectionism* in common parlance; theologians refer to it as *legalism*, or *works of the law*, or *self-righteousness*.

Scaring the Hell Out of Us

You or I might want to live a life of scrupulous adherence to religious dogmas or moral codes if we believe that God demands such absolutism. We might shake in our boots if we're told that our eternal salvation or damnation depends on our ability to observe every detail of the divine law.

Our fragile souls might require extra support if we are told that the deity is an almighty god, a righteous god, a just god, a vengeful god, or worse, an arbitrary and predestining god. If our only hope for pleasing this deity is scrupulous obedience to the rules and

regulations, then we would make the requisite commitment. We would tremble in fear whenever we found ourselves in violation or think of ourselves as sinners. Each sin would release a gusher of anxiety, overwhelming us with the fear of losing eternal life.

America's most influential theologian is the eighteenth century divine, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards is largely responsible for the Great Awakening of the 1740s and is remembered for his erudite interpretations of the Calvinist tradition. Edwards assumed that in our natural condition we human creatures are condemned to everlasting hell but that divine grace acts to elect some of us for salvation—some, but not all. Our rigorous obedience to the divine law testifies that we belong among the elect rather than the damned. Am I saved? Am I damned?

One of Edwards's sermons is particularly notable, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Note how God is described: angry. Imagine yourself, a sinner, slung in mid-air between heaven above and hell below. What holds you? What keeps you from falling? Only one thing: God's inscrutable will.

Natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger. . . . all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliterated forbearance, of an incensed God.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf. Unless we are born again and made new creatures . . . being dead to sin . . . [we could remain] in the hands of an angry God.⁴

4. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Henry Rogers and Edward Hickman (London: Ball, Arnold, and Col, 1840), 2:9.

If I had sat as a child in Pastor Edwards's congregation and heard only such sermons, the hell would be scared right out of me. I don't want to be dropped into the bottomless gulf, the pit of hell! My motivation for living a holy and virtuous life would be sky-high, and living with a fragile soul would be quite understandable. I would work diligently to cover up my sins so that none of my friends could see them, so that I could hide my sins from God and even from myself. I would be tempted to live the life of a lie, a lie that would persuade this angry God to lift me out of hell into heaven.

Many who identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) report having left their childhood church experiences behind. "As a kid, I was a terrorized Baptist," one host for the *Waking Times* radio show told me. Grown-up souls seek liberation from religious terrorism.

Mainline Christian churches long ago gave up fire-and-brimstone sermons. Worship today is sedate and tasteful, exuding the values of a middle-class moral universe. Yet, in their own quiet way, worship services communicate that we worshippers are worms, wriggling obsequiously in the dirt. The medium is generic guilt or what Wolfhart Pannenberg calls "indeterminate and generalized feelings of guilt."⁵ Morning Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer* opens with these familiar words: "Almighty and most merciful Father, We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. . . . We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done. . . . And there is no health in us."⁶ Like lowering a great gray pall, the liturgy places us all into a pit of indeterminate or generalized guilt. No account is taken of your or

5. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 287.

6. *The Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1929) 6.

my actual life; rather, this sentence to the guilt pit is generic. It's a liturgical class action, so to speak.

I am by no means recommending we eliminate confession from communal worship. However, we need to look for and recognize those factors that might contribute to the fragility of the soul. We need to ask honestly: What do we do to frighten fragile souls into buying more spiritual duct tape?

Atheists leap upon this particular dimension of religion by arguing that religion is a disease caused by anxiety and fear; science is the right cure. As Bertrand Russell puts it, "Religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly . . . the wish to feel that you have a kind of big brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing—fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. . . . Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations."⁷ The fears on Russell's list are existential fears such as the terror of the unknown. Preachers such as Edwards add an angry God to the list of things to fear. In our own era, we can add an additional fear: the fear that our belief system and our moral universe might be false. No wonder so many of our souls exist in a state of fragility.

The fragility of our souls might also be something we generate from within. Likewise, fragility might be something created in us by an image of an angry, demanding, and lawful God who keeps track of our sins and exacts retributive justice toward sinners. In either case, we build a dike to keep back the flood of anxiety. As the French established the Maginot Lie to protect their country from German invasion, we resort to our own Maginot Line: legalism. We obey the divine law, and we demand that others do so as well.

7. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 22.

Anxiety and the Terror of Religion

What makes the sheepish soul fragile is anxiety. “An incessant anxiety stalks us,” observes former Methodist bishop and theologian, Kenneth Carder.⁸ Anxiety is the gasoline that drives the fragile soul toward rigidity.

Our primary defense is to retreat into absolutism. Absolutism takes many forms in today’s public square. Watch how some people and institutions contend that “the sanctity of (human life) is *infinite*; at the core of great art lies divine and inexplicable *genius*; consciousness is a problem too hard for us mere mortals to understand; and—one of my favorite targets—what I call *hysterical realism*: there are always deeper facts that *settle* the puzzle cases of meaning. These facts are real, *really* real, even if we are systematically unable to discover them.”⁹ Daniel Dennett tells us that concepts such as infinity, genius, consciousness, and realism function as unassailable absolutes, protected from erosion by the hurricane force of the Darwinian revolution. Religious absolutism is only one kind of absolutism; but Darwinian evolution dissolves them all in the rushing rapids of relativity. Dennett contends that Darwin relativizes everything, which would probably come as a surprise to Darwin. Be that as it may, we often do retreat into absolutes to protect ourselves from anxiety. And we do so just as Dennett describes it.

The self-justifying attempt by the fragile soul to construct a worldview secure against the external attacks from hostile forces relies upon fixities and essences. It relies upon definitions of reality that are unassailable, or at least appear unassailable within the worldview of the fragile soul. The fragile philosopher will appeal to essence; the fragile scientist will appeal to the exclusivity of empirical knowledge;

8. Kenneth L. Carder, *Living Our Beliefs*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009), 70.

9. Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 204, Dennett’s italics.

the fragile politician will appeal to divine blessing for the nation; while the fragile religious devotee will appeal to orthodoxy. All such appeals function as spiritual duct tape to prevent breakage.

A better antidote to the anxiety experienced by the fragile soul is to recall what St. Paul tells us in Rom. 8:33b (NASB): “God is the one who justifies” (*theos ho dikaiosune*). If God justifies us, then we don’t have to. The gospel of justifying grace eliminates the need for spiritual duct tape because it plugs up our nuclear void with a theonomous or God-grounded center, giving our moral universe both the strength of steel and the flexibility of a rubber balloon. Yet, I ask: Why is this good news not being heard?

Spiritual Bullies

Proclaiming the Christian message can come as bad news to the fragile soul, as we saw in Jonathan Edwards’s sermon. An exalted vision of Christian perfection may reinforce other intimidations that the fragile soul must deal with on a daily basis. The fear of missing the mark, falling short of someone’s expectations, disappointing the boss, looking too fat in the mirror, or violating God’s law can ruin the day for a fragile soul. The fragile soul already feels diminished.

To make matters worse, spiritual bullies in the pulpit or on television take sledgehammers to our protective bowls. We fear we may run out of spiritual duct tape before we can patch up the cracks. Imagine a pulpiteer preaching like Martin Luther on the law of God: “Therefore the proper use and aim of the Law is to make guilty those who are smug and at peace, so that they may see that they are in danger of sin, wrath, and death, so that they may be terrified and despairing, blanching and quaking at the rustling of a leaf (Lev. 26:26).”¹⁰ Such a declaration of one’s guilt would turn a tiger into a sheep, a muscle into flab, a dynamic self into pliable putty. If I would

hear this message from a spokesperson for God, my daily life would be filled with timidity, if not trembling.

However, this terrifying use of the law is only the left hand of God, at best. God's right hand is raised in grace, in blessing, in gospel, in comfort. "The Gospel, however, is a proclamation about Christ: that He forgives sins, grants grace, justifies, and saves sinners," Luther announces.¹¹ Without this gospel, we'll have to mortgage our house to buy enough spiritual duct tape to protect us from damnation.

For reasons difficult to fathom, the very religion that purports to follow Jesus has pressed the mute button on the life-giving power of this gospel. We hear the law that condemns, not the gospel that gives life. Instead of living a secure and robust life of muscular faith, both our teachers and disciples snivel and whine, blubbering on in sheepish fragility. We grovel before the standards of perfection, and we cower in fear that our inadequacies might become exposed. Measurements, milestones, merits, awards, and orthodoxies rule our psyches like Caligula ruled Rome. Like sycophants in the emperor's royal court, we create a fictional public image by bowing and fawning before the ambient opinions of what is acceptable, respectable, admirable, good, just, and true. And in our rare moments of self-bolstering, we assure ourselves that we stand for eternal justice, the unassailable good, and what is absolutely right—what Luther refers to as "the Law." In doing so, the fragile soul becomes

10. Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1535), in *LW* 26:148.

11. *Ibid.*, 26:126. "The Gospel in its essence is the oral proclamation of forgiveness," says Heidelberg's Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1961), 198. In contrast, Schlink's student, Wolfhart Pannenberg, believes the gospel should refer to more than merely the forgiveness of sins. The gospel should include the inbreaking of God's kingdom in Jesus as well as the promise of salvation, understood as full reconciliation. It should also include the mission of the Church to spread the gospel, which is more than merely a dialectical counterpart to the law. On this point, Pannenberg sides against what he thinks Luther says and supports what Barth says. "Barth rightly opposed the restriction of the gospel to the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins (*CD*, IV/3, 370)." Pannenberg, *ST*, 2:460–61.

temporarily hidden beneath self-justifying bravado. Nevertheless, fragility is ever present, sapping our soul of honesty, integrity, and authentic caring. To make matters worse, Christian sermonizers—preachers whom Cathleen Falsani calls “spiritual bullies”¹²—man their pulpits like a captain on the bridge; they manipulate our already innate anxieties and turn timidity into terror. The perpetual fear of eternal damnation turns a fragile soul into a petrified self. We fragile ones go through the motions of life, but we don’t really live it.

Romans 8:33b, “God is the one who justifies,” should be heard by us as good news, as grace, as gospel. The gospel is aimed at liberating our selves from fragility and our souls from the endless unrolling of duct tape. The result of such liberation is bold sinning. “Sin boldly!” might become a motto for the graced soul. Falsani reminds us that this was said by “Martin Luther, that great theological hoodlum and father of Protestantism.”¹³ Falsani adds, “In other words, if you’re going to screw up, at least do it with feeling.” She continues:

Sin boldly.

Believe in grace even more boldly.

Love without limits.

Live this life.¹⁴

The Self, the Soul, and the World in Relation to God

As the reader may notice, I frequently use the terms *self* and *soul* interchangeably. In addition, sometimes I’ll mix up *soul* with *spirit*. Even so, such terms deserve precise definition.¹⁵ Well, at least this is

12. Cathleen Falsani, *Sin Boldly: A Field Guide for Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 100.

13. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

14. *Ibid.*, 107.

what most theologians think. Nevertheless, I would like some overlap between terms just to show that what the self experiences affects the shape of the soul. Destructive experiences can distort the soul, whereas experiences with God's grace shape and sanctify the soul.

Let me attempt a few precise definitions. When working a few years ago on a co-authored book with two treasured colleagues, Karen Lebacqz and Gaymon Bennett, we gave considerable thought to defining key terms. We concluded that

the term *soul* refers to our inmost essence as an individual self, while the term *spirit*, which overlaps with *soul* to be sure, refers to our capacity to relate with one another and with God. While the word *soul* connotes who each of us is as an individual, the word *spirit* connotes that dimension of our personal reality that unites us with others. . . . The soul is not a ghost-like entity that simply inhabits a body. Rather, to speak of soul reminds us that as embodied creatures we have a center of identity, a centered self. . . . *Souls and centered selves are formed by and develop in spiritual relationships!*¹⁶

That vacuum at the center of our whirling self is where we will deal with the question of the soul—with or without an essence—and its relationship to the uncontrollable winds that blow around it.

15. One of the most illuminating attempts at terminological precision is Michael Welker's exposition of key terms in the writings of St. Paul, with special focus on the trichotomous self as body (*soma*), soul (*psyche*), and spirit (*pneuma*). Welker first distinguishes between flesh (*sarx*) and the body (*soma*); the flesh is at war with the spirit but the body makes a home for spiritual influence. It is through the heart, not the soul, that God's spirit prompts our transformation. "The activity of God's Spirit does not penetrate directly into the psyche. Rather its effects flow via the heart into the human body and then indirectly upon the soul." Welker, "Flesh–Body–Heart–Soul–Spirit: Paul's Anthropology as an Inderdisciplinary Bridge–Theory," in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 55. More relevant to our treatment here is Welker's observation that, for St. Paul, "*psyche* encompasses an individual, earthly life—an earthly, bodily, and spiritual individuality that, while created by God, has not (yet) been filled by God's Spirit" (ibid., 54). In my treatment of justifying faith, terms such as *soul* and *self* allow the heart and the divine Spirit to influence and even shape the meaning.
16. Ted Peters, Karen Lebacqz, and Gaymon Bennett, *Sacred Cells? Why Christians Should Support Stem Cell Research* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2010), 207, italics in original.

What we have avoided here is making a traditional metaphysical commitment regarding the soul. Is it by nature immortal? No. “Our soul only becomes immortal because of our spiritual relationship with the eternal God. To think of a human person in the fullest sense is to include body, soul, and spirit in relationship to community and to God.”¹⁷ If we become blessed with subjective immortality, it will be a gift from God’s spirit; it will not be due to the endurance of the empty center of our human activity.¹⁸

Our concern in writing the book, from which I quote, was human dignity. We asked: How do we ground human dignity? We ground dignity in the “infinite value of the human soul.” These are the words of Adolf von Harnack, writing a century ago. The teachings of Jesus, said Harnack, may be grouped under three heads: “firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming; secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul; and thirdly, the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.”¹⁹ Harnack’s tradition lives on in our century. Without using the word *soul*, Dwight Hopkins contends that “the progressive liberal theologian believes the authentic person is committed to the ultimate significance of human lives in this world.”²⁰ At work here is a moral understanding of the soul, not a metaphysical one. Along with Harnack and Hopkins, I contend that each human person has infinite and ultimate value. To put it another way, we treat one another as a moral end, never merely as a means. The heavy word *soul* seems to bear this moral weight.

17. Ibid.

18. By “subjective immortality,” I refer to eternal life, which you or I enjoy as a conscious subject. This contrasts with “objective immortality,” which refers to someone else remembering us after we are dead. A tombstone inscription or scholarship fund set up in our name might give us objective immortality—other people remember us as an object—for a few generations or so.

19. Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper, 1957), 51.

20. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 162.