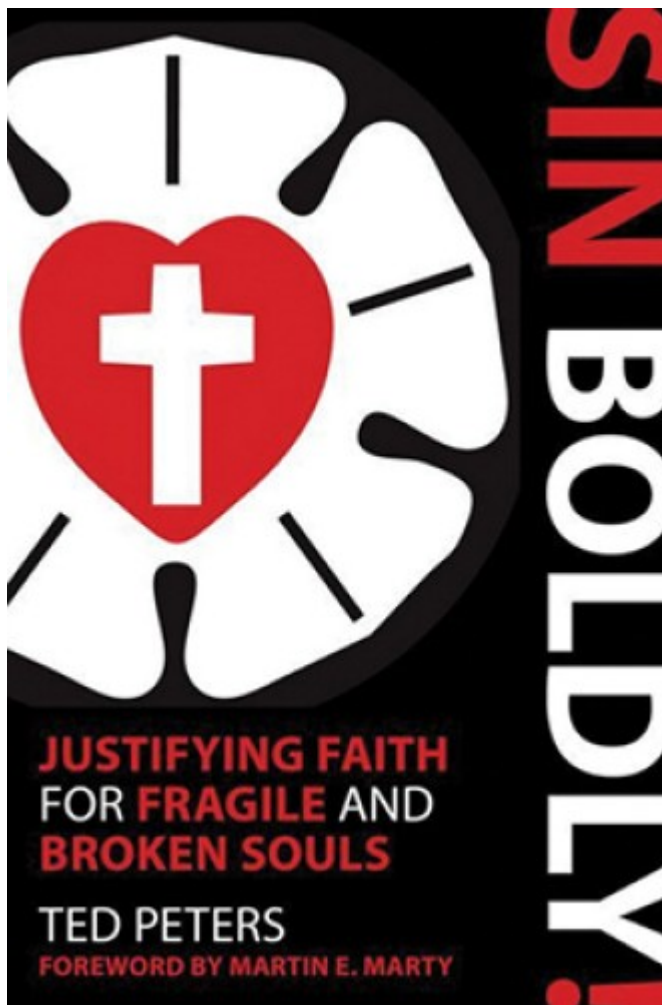


Justification by faith for fragile and broken souls

Ted Peters translates theological concepts into a folksy manual for pastoral care.

by [Matthew Lynn Riegel](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Sin Boldly! Justifying Faith for Fragile and Broken Souls

By Ted Peters
Fortress

"Can faith make one's life better? More vibrant? More robust?" These questions sound like a pitch for yet another warmed-over prosperity gospel. But any suggestion of that school of thought ends as soon as it begins in Ted Peters's book. What follows instead is an unexpected journey into the soul and its maladies, with Peters as an affable and chatty tour guide.

What makes this book unexpected is its departure from the author's well-known forte. Peters, who has taught at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union since 1978, is best known for his work at the nexus of theology and the natural sciences. What he offers in this book is part theological reflection, part manual for the care of souls.

With a nod to various theologies of the soul, Peters avoids protracted arguments about the soul's nature or even existence. Instead, he pursues an understanding of the soul that is more experiential than metaphysical. This emphasis allows him to dive straight into the human condition. He then focuses on the struggles of people with two different and troubling conditions, the "fragile soul" and the "broken soul." As nostrum for these maladies, Peters advances the Lutheran "justification by faith" formula.

The fragile soul and broken soul are conceptually very different from one another. The fragile soul might be described as the human's anxious state before a just and demanding God or moral code. Appealing to Luther's catechetical discussion of idolatry, Peters imagines the fragile soul desperately trying to apply duct tape to the fractured perimeter of its moral world.

Justification by faith is a no-brainer as remedy for the fragile soul. Peters's greatest insight here is the universal applicability of this remedy. He argues that the condition of the fragile soul does not require a preexistent Judeo-Christian matrix. Fragile souls are fragile souls with or without the glowering God of the Ten Commandments demanding his due.

The broken soul, on the other hand, is beyond moral categories or even traditional notions of atonement. Here Peters engages in a lengthy discussion of moral injury among military veterans. Intriguingly, he identifies military personnel as "invisible scapegoats" and juxtaposes them with the "visible scapegoats" of which Christ is the archetype. Peters resists substitutionary thinking at this point, claiming that any such thought will be nonsensical to someone whose moral world has utterly

collapsed. In place of substitution, Peters offers accompaniment, the solidarity of Christ in the moral abyss, as the beginning of healing.

To make this case, however, Peters must disclose what he intends by “justification by faith.” He acknowledges the importance of knowledge and assent to theological propositions in the life of faith. A believing faith believes in something, and that something is inextricably connected to knowledge of the object of faith. Even so, Peters engages questions of certainty and doubt, allowing him to move beyond knowledge to trust.

Peters, who is willing to part from historic theological formulas, has little use for forensic justification—the atonement model whereby God declares the sinner as righteous and imputes Christ’s righteousness (which is alien to the sinner) to the sinner. Peters argues for justification by indwelling rather than imputation. This indwelling of Christ in the soul is not merely grace as a substance or a reward dispensed to us in regard for our act of faith. Any faith that holds God as its object is secondary to the faithfulness that Christ shows toward human creatures. Peters seems to relish turning classic models on their head as he claims that Christ has faith in us and it’s this faith that justifies.

When Peters engages sanctification as a category, he is loath to separate it from justification. He poses the Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) as a foil to his understanding of sanctification, arguing against what he considers to be tired categories that obscure the fullness of Luther’s notions of indwelling and neighbor love. Peters marshals a wide array of modern writers and holds them in tension with Luther. Unfortunately, he doesn’t avail himself of those elements of the scholastic Lutheran tradition that would have helped him to move more nimbly through his argument, such as the distinction between sanctification in the *broad* sense (which includes justification) and sanctification in the *narrow* sense (which excludes justification).

The concluding chapters on faith, justification, sanctification, and justice lay bare the concept of the robust soul, and it is the creation of this robust soul that constitutes Peters’s therapeutic goal. Here the author is faithful to his core conviction that we cannot create the robust soul. The consequence solely of Jesus’ work in us, the robust soul lives a robust life marked by faith and justice as a necessary and spontaneous consequence.

This book is a remarkable attempt to translate theological concepts into a manual for the care of souls. Some readers will readily identify with the fragile soul, and the counsel Peters offers may give relief to such troubled consciences. It seems less likely that someone with a broken soul will pick up this book or persist through to the relevant chapters. Still, pastors may find it helpful in their ministrations.

A greater divide in opinion about the book may result from its style. It is conversational, at times confessional, and frequently folksy. The prose often reads like a string of essays that are only loosely connected. There are periodic excurses that could have been handled more tersely without compromising the argument. Readers who seek a tightly focused work in an academic tone will be disappointed. Those who enjoy sitting in the presence of a gentle raconteur who happily meanders through the topic with a breezy stream-of-consciousness manner will find it a pleasant read.

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