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A Christian's Certainty

H. Warneck

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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wurde schon am 8. Juni 1533 an der Wittenberger Universität inskribiert. Er erhielt im Oktober 1539 das Bakkalaureat, und es wird berichtet, daß er in demselben Jahre eine lateinische Rede gehalten habe. In einem Brief vom 27. Januar 1537 lobt Luther seinen Sohn Johannes wegen des bisher bewiesenen Fleißes und ermahnt ihn, darin fortzufahren; zugleich erlaubt er ihm, in den nahe bevorstehenden Fastnachtsferien seine Mutter und Geschwister zu besuchen. (XXIa, 1548.) Auch später finden sich wiederholt Bezugnahmen auf den Fortschritt und die sonstigen Lebensführungen seines Erstgeborenen. (XXIb, 2782. 2785. 2788.)

Was endlich das persönliche Verhältnis zwischen Luther und seiner Käthe betrifft, so finden wir darüber so viele herrliche Ausführungen, daß es eine Lust ist, sie zu erwägen. Von der Feste Koburg aus schrieb Luther am 27. Juni 1530 an Wenzeslaus Vint: „Wenn Du bei guten Leuten meinem Herrn Katharina ‚ein Schod‘ Orangen oder ungefähr so viel verschaffen könntest, würde ich sie gern bezahlen.“ (XXIa, 1503.) In seinem Testament vom 6. Januar 1542 finden sich die Worte: „Das tue ich darum, erstlich, daß sie mich als ein fromm, treu, ehrlich Gemahl allezeit lieb, wert und schön gehalten und mir durch reichen Gottessegnen fünf lebendige Kinder (die noch vorhanden, Gott geb' lange) geboren und erzogen hat.“ In seinen Briefen nennt Luther seine Frau nicht nur in scherzhafter Weise „mein Herr Katharina“ oder „Käthe“, sondern auch in inniger Liebe seine „herzliche Hausfrau“, seinen „freundlichen lieben Herrn“, seine „herzliche Käthe“, sein „Liebchen“, seine „gnädige Frau von Zülzsdorf“ und dergleichen mehr. Offenbar war das Verhältnis zwischen den beiden Ehegatten ein wirklich liebevolles und inniges. (Vgl. diese Zeitschrift, Band IV, 112—119.) Namentlich die „Zülzsdorfer Briefe“ sind reich an Offenbarungen des Geistes, der Luther beseele und der Anerkennung, die er seinem geliebten Weibe zollte. (XXIb, 2485—3203.) Kurz, auch als Gatte und Hausvater ist Luther (mit seiner Käthe) bei allen menschlichen Schwächen ein herrliches Vorbild.

B. E. Reßmann

A Christian's Certainty

Essay read before the Puget Sound Pastoral Conference, October, 1936

When King Saul went to the witch at Endor, he was looking for some measure of certainty about the outcome of an undertaking of greatest moment at the time—the conquest of the Philistines, 1 Sam. 28. No doubt a similar desire helps to explain the fact that an astrologer in Chicago could induce a hundred regular clients, all of them prominent business men, to pay him \$1,000 apiece annually. (*Theological Monthly*, III, 779.) What such men seek after, but do not find despite great cost to themselves the Christian

has "without money and without price," not as a matter of silly, sinful superstition, but as a matter of divine assurance, namely, certainty with regard to that which is uppermost in his mind and nearest and dearest to his heart—the salvation of his soul. The topic of this essay is:

The Christian's Certainty of His Present State of Grace and of His Future Entrance into Heaven

We shall consider in their logical order: its nature, its foundation, and its fruits.

1. Its Nature

Certain synergists like Latermann and others taught that one can be sure of his present state of grace but not of his future entrance into heaven. For that reason the topic was worded as you read; but for all practical purposes the two are one; for if I am certain of my present state of grace, I can and should be certain also of my future entrance into heaven, and *vice versa*. The work of John the Baptist, whose mission was to point to Jesus and say, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," was characterized by the inspired words of his father as giving "knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins," Luke 1, 77. In Rom. 5, 8—10 we read: "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more, then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." Augustine accordingly made the following application: "God promised that we should be there where He is; we shall be with Him. What has God promised you, O mortal man? You shall live in all eternity with Him. Do you not believe it? Believe it, believe it; for He has already done more for you than He has promised. What has He done? He died for you. What did He promise? You shall live with Him eternally. Now, it is surely more incredible that the eternal God died for you than that you, a mortal, should live through all eternity. And yet we already have that which is the more incredible." (Gerhard, *L. de Elect.*, 209.)

At any rate, the Christian can and should be certain of the one as well as of the other. In fact, a man is not a Christian unless he is certain of both, for this certainty and that which makes him a Christian, his faith, are the same thing. Christian faith is Christian certainty, and Christian certainty is Christian faith. "Was insonderheit die Gewissheit der Seligkeit betrifft, so ist sie von dem Glauben an Christum nicht zu trennen." (Pieper, *Christl. Dogm.*, 2, 486.) "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence

of things not seen," or, as another translation presents Heb. 11, 1: "Faith is a conviction of mind concerning things hoped for, a certainty of things which are not seen." It cannot be otherwise. Christian faith is certainty, divine certainty; for it is itself the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's heart that he is in the state of grace and will most assuredly enter heaven. 1 John 5, 10 brings this to light: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself," and v. 6: "It is the Spirit that beareth witness." Thus "the Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," namely, "by faith in Christ Jesus," Rom. 8, 16; Gal. 3, 26. As impossible therefore as it is to find a Christian without faith,⁵ so impossible it is to find a Christian without certainty of his soul's salvation. "Die Gewissheit des ewigen Lebens gehoert zum Wesen des Christen."

Hence we find the models after which we are to pattern men of Christian faith or certainty. "I am persuaded" — "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded," that is the well-known language of Paul. John writes: "We know that we have passed from death to life. . . . Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God. . . . Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is," 1 John 3, 14; 1, 2. And according to Luke 10, 20 Jesus Himself calls out to us: "Rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Hence Rom. 5, 1, 2 is the language of every true Christian: "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

This certainty, we must note, is not always, as our theologians express it, *fides reflexa*; it can be present in a Christian although he is not at all times conscious of its presence. Baptized children who have not reached the age of discretion "believe and are sure," but they do not realize the fact. In sleep or in a state of unconsciousness we are not aware of the life that is in us, and yet we live; so Christians may not be aware of their faith, and yet they believe. This is true especially in times of trial and temptation. Then humble, penitent Christians may imagine that they are anything but Christians, and still they are. Their very concern about their spiritual condition is proof of their faith. Were they actually "dead in trespasses and sins," as they imagine, were they in reality unbelievers, they would be unconcerned about their condition. A corpse is not worried about the absence or the presence of life, and an unbeliever is a spiritual corpse, Eph. 2, 1,⁶ cold in his relation to God. Accordingly, he who fears and deplores that he is

spiritually dead is very much alive; he has been quickened together with Christ, Eph. 2, 5, and is a Christian, all his sorrowful protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

That doubts do assail and plague a Christian no Christian is likely to question. He would be compelled to contradict the evidence of his own experience and of Biblical and church history as well. "Even the fathers of faith, an Abraham, a David, a Paul, a Luther, have sighed more than they have rejoiced. Certainty and doubt alternate. There is a constant struggle." (Walther's *Ev.-Post.*, 181.) This "constant struggle" precludes the successful advancement of these doubts against the certainty of salvation. Again we say that neither a physical nor a spiritual corpse will struggle. And there is—thank God!—a struggle in the breast of every Christian against such doubts. Doubt is unbelief, and unbelief is a most terrible sin. "He that believeth not God hath made Him a liar," 1 John 5, 10. What could be worse? Being so "exceeding sinful," the doubts that spring up in a Christian's heart do not belong to the essence of faith and are by no means a fruit of faith, but they spring up alongside it as the fruits of the flesh, "in which dwelleth no good thing." What Paul says Rom. 7 concerning sin in general the Christian may well apply to his doubts in particular: "If I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." As a Christian, according to the new man within him, the Christian does not doubt. "Believing Jacob," said Luther, "may doubt, but not Jacob in as far as he is a believer." And in as far as he is a believer, the Christian strives to suppress such doubts as he does every evil of his heart. Or can he who is dead to sin live therein? God forbid! With the shield of faith,—mark well!—with the strong shield of faith he steps out on the field of battle to engage in mortal combat with the hellish forces of despair, victoriously wards off the poisoned darts of doubt hurled at his soul by Satan with the pliant bow of his sin-inclined flesh, and, be the battle long or short, he stands, by the grace of God, a Christian, certain of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven.

Such certainty must not be confused with the false, carnal security against which we must continually strive in ourselves and in those under our pastoral care. As Dr. Stoeckhardt wrote in his *Roemerbrief*, p. 414: "This certainty is the very opposite of carnal security. It is no mathematical certainty but the certainty of faith." "The certainty of faith" is at home in the regenerated spirit of the Christian, whereas carnal security is another resident of the flesh. Against the latter are directed such warnings as 1 Cor. 10, 12: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," and many others. These admonitions and warnings, however, are

not to reduce, but rather to strengthen and confirm indirectly the Christian's certainty; for by calling our attention to our natural spiritual inability, they assist us in guarding against carnal security and its dreadful results, shown, for instance, in the fall of the Apostle Peter. They are not aimed against "the certainty of faith"; they do not admonish us to doubt our salvation but ourselves. They remind us that we cannot by our own reason or strength work out our own salvation, and that is wholesome; for to imagine that we can is carnal security, the making of the backslider, the beginning of the end of true Christian certainty.

Is, then, the Christian absolutely certain of his salvation? If by using the word "absolute" we mean a certainty that is not dependent and based upon anything outside the Christian himself, we must answer, "No." Such certainty of our salvation God alone can and does possess because His certainty is dependent on nothing outside of Himself. To possess such certainty we, like the Holy Spirit, would have to be able to "search all things, yea, the deep things of God." If by "absolute" we mean certain in the highest degree, we can answer our question with an emphatic *yes*. That I cannot be absolutely certain of my salvation in the former sense, does not mean that I must be uncertain of it. That does not follow. On the contrary, the Christian's certainty of faith is an infallible certainty because it rests upon an infallible, a divine, foundation.

2. Its Foundation

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

A. *Not on his work for God, but on God's work for him.*

If the certainty of our salvation depended in the slightest degree upon our work for God, on the fulfilment of one of the commandments of His holy Law, we who are concerned about our salvation would have to live and die not in certainty and joy but in doubt and despair. And the more sincere we would be in our efforts, the greater would be our uncertainty. The more sincere a man is if he is wrong, the worse for him; and the person who builds his hope of a blessed eternity upon his own efforts is most decidedly wrong. He that is of the works of the Law is under the curse of God; for "cursed is he that continueth not in all things which are written in the Book of the Law to do them," and "there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not." Hence our obedience to the Law of God must never be made the foundation of the certainty of salvation. To that the conscience of the anxious soul amply testifies, as we see from the life of Luther in that Augustinian cloister. "My sin, O my sin!" was the only certainty which he found as long as he was "under the Law"; true

certainty of salvation he did not find, although he sought it with tears night and day. To that some of the staunchest exponents of work-righteousness have affixed their stamp of approval. Toward the close of the Council of Trent a Jesuit said in his sermon: "If for a thousand years a man lived like John the Baptist, and if each day he had raised the dead and each day had seen Christ and His holy angels and each day had died countless deaths for Jesus' sake, and you were to ask him, 'Do you know that you will go to heaven? Are you sure of your present state of grace?' he would have to answer, 'No.'" As a matter of fact, looking to one's own righteousness, which is of the Law, for the certainty that one will escape the burning wrath and displeasure of the holy and just God, is the same as seeking shelter from the heat of a noonday sun under one's own shadow. Yes, our best thoughts, words, and deeds, our righteousnesses, are but another Jonah's gourd; smitten as they are by the Law of God (Is. 64, 6), they expose us to His holy and just wrath and leave us to despair of eternal life. "This experienced consciences can easily understand and would not for a thousand worlds have our salvation depend upon ourselves." (Apology; Trigl., 145.) Like Luther they would not have it rest upon a single Lord's Prayer that their hearts might send to God. Like Luther, indeed, like all the Christians of the past, the Christians of today, as will also those of the future, look elsewhere for the certainty of their salvation — to God's work, to God's finished work for us.

A young Christian lad was asked by his pastor when he first knew that his sins were all forgiven before God in heaven. The lad quickly replied, "When a bee stung mother." The story was briefly this: Frightened by a bee that seemed determined to sting him and seeing that his own efforts to chase it away only made matters worse, he had run to his mother and had hidden himself behind her apron. As the mother protectingly put her arms about the boy, the bee settled upon her arm and stung her so deeply that its sting remained in her flesh. The mother then assured her boy that now he was perfectly safe, since the bee could not sting twice, and she went on to tell him also that in a similar manner Jesus bore our sins in His own body on the tree. "That moment of realization," said the lad, "I shall never forget it. It was all so clear then. I saw and understood for the first time what my mother had for a long time taught me, that God could and would not punish me because He had punished Jesus in my stead."

No doubt about it, "the wages of sin is death." But: "O death, where is thy sting? . . . The sting of death is sin. . . . But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" "God hath made Him to be sin for us," 2 Cor. 5, 19, having "laid on Him the iniquity of us all," Is. 53, 6. As a result "He was

wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, and the chastisement of our peace was upon Him," Is. 53, 5. Thus "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them," 2 Cor. 5, 19. This is the one sure ground of Christian faith. This work, God's gracious work of reconciling us unto Himself, is a settled, finished fact accomplished in the past, a fact therefore that cannot be affected either by the present or by the future, by our faith or by our unbelief. "It is finished," even for those "who deny the Lord that bought them" and thus "bring upon themselves swift destruction." Who, then, or what can shake our sure repose? Ah, we must first exclude ourselves from the number of those who are called "the world," we must first prove ourselves totally incapable of sinning before this fact can do aught but give us poor sinners what we need most, the blessed comfort, the certain hope of eternal bliss awaiting us in heaven. It is God, the very One against whom we have sinned so often and so grievously in the past, who in the still more distant past has declared us just and holy enough to live in His presence, world without end.

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

B. Not on his feeling, but on God's feeling.

Earth has a joy unknown in heaven—
The new-born peace of sin forgiven.
Tears of such pure and deep delight,
Ye angels, never dimmed your sight.

(A. Hillhouse.)

The Christian who grounds his faith on God's saving work for us also "feels saved," i. e., he experiences in his heart the joy of being in a state of grace, he has a foretaste at times of the bliss of heaven which, he knows, he will some day enjoy to the full. Christianity does not demand a cold, lifeless, mournful spirit. So far from doing so, with Ps. 34 it calls upon us to "taste and see that the Lord is good," and believing that where sin abounds God's grace does much more abound, the Christian will sing with David, Ps. 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, . . . who forgiveth all thine iniquities," etc. "One cannot be continually near a fire without getting some of its warmth into his system." The ills of life may for a time obscure the joy of being a Christian, as the sun is at times hidden by clouds. But even so, the sun remains in the heavens, and some of its light filters through the clouds and lets us know that the night is past and the day is come. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning," Ps. 30, 5.

For the very reason, however, that because of the trials so common to life the Christian may experience more sorrow than

joy and feel as though he were under the wrath of God (here read the Book of Job, the psalms of David, the letters of Paul, or the life of Luther), the certainty of our salvation dare not be based upon our feelings. "Our feelings are changeable at best, like the quicksilver in a barometer, sometimes up, sometimes down." They therefore make no better foundation for our faith than sand makes a foundation for a house; when the rain descends and the floods come and the winds blow and beat upon that house, it will fall, and great will be the fall of it.

But "hereby we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart," 1 John 3, 19. 20. "Be my feelings what they will, Jesus is my Savior still."

The matter may be put thus: "You have, let us say, grievously insulted some one. When the recollection of your act torments you, you will not ask how you yourself feel, but how he feels whom you have insulted. You will not be satisfied, fully satisfied, until he tells you that he forgives you. Our case with God is almost identical. The important point is not how we feel, but how He feels; and we can know that only when He tells us. Not even the gift of sunshine will assure us of His complete forgiveness, because He makes the sun to shine on all alike. He must inform us of His pardon, and He does that in the Gospel." The Gospel is God's letter of pardon to every member of the human race. Therein God assures us in writing, black on white: "Though your sins be as scarlet," etc., Is. 1, 18. Once a man accepts that letter in faith and does not heap greater insult upon the Sender by unbelief, but says, "Though 'No' my heart should ever cry, Still on Thy Word I shall rely," that Christian will eventually also find it in his heart to exult with Jeremiah of old: "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart; for I am called by Thy name, O Lord God of hosts," chap. 15, 16.

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

C. Not on the strength of his faith, but on the strength of his Savior.

The notion is sometimes entertained that certainty is dependent upon the strength of one's faith. We really refuted that idea already when we spoke of the nature of the Christian's certainty. Then we saw that faith is certainty, and nothing was said about the strength or weakness of that faith. The Scriptures, too, do not speak of faith as necessarily strong before it becomes certainty. If it is true that our redemption is finished, as Jesus said, and of course it is true, and if, moreover, faith is not a work that merits

but the instrument, the hand, that "receives the remission of sins," and that, too, is most certainly true, Rom. 3, 28; Acts 10, 43, then the strength of faith does not change the fact of possession. A weak faith "hath eternal life" as well as a strong faith. A man may hold a precious pearl tighter and more securely than a child, but that fact does not make him any richer; both possess the pearl. "Who-soever believeth in the Son of God," be it with a strong or with a weak faith, 'has eternal life.'" (Formula of Concord; *Trigl.*, 997.) Therefore it is as Chemnitz says: "Faith should not look upon its own weakness or imperfections and so remain in doubt, but upon Christ and so firmly believe that there is a gracious God and forgiveness with Him." To be sure, if the strength or weakness of our faith were the foundation of certainty, there could be no real certainty, for we cannot know when our faith is strong enough; the nature of the Christian's certainty would be changed, and either despair or carnal security would be the inevitable result, both of which are as hellish as the devil himself.

In this connection we must remember that the mere desire to believe is "faith of the operation of God." A corpse has no desire to live, and an unbeliever has no desire to believe; both are dead and cannot desire. The desire to believe is the work of Him who "worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure." Once this desire therefore has entered the heart of a man, he is (not merely "is becoming") a Christian. Luther: "Das Verlangen nach dem Glauben ist auch wahrer Glaube, und das Seufzen des Herzens in einem Frommen ist ein maechtig Geschrei in den Ohren Gottes." Think of the penitent malefactor's cry and of Jesus' answer, Luke 23, 43. 44. Rom. 10, 13 we read: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Weak as that call may be, if it be only a sigh, it is the sigh of faith, a faith that has Christ Jesus and the glorious Gospel truth that "He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by Him" as its object and foundation.

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

D. Not on his faith, but on God's faithfulness.

Another mistake people quite often make is this — they try to base their certainty upon their conversion or upon the fact that they believe. A mistake I called it; it is that — and more. It is nothing short of a damnable sin. Those who pin their faith upon their faith are as guilty of idolatry as those who trust in their own righteousness, their wisdom, or their riches; for faith, like all of these, is a gift of God, not God Himself. (Luther, XVII, 2213.) And this sinful mistake leads to sheer uncertainty. A woman but recently received into our communion from the Methodist Episcopal

Church is now incessantly tormented by uncertainty. While she freely admits that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that He was buried and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures," she nevertheless insists that she cannot be certain of her salvation because she is not certain whether she is a true believer or not. Poor soul! According to the same logic she would, if caught in a raging stream, try to lift herself out by grasping her own arm. She learned that miserable theology from such as are described in Dr. Pieper's *Dogmatik* as follows: "Alle die, welche bei diesen evangelischen Aussagen (Mark. 16, 16; Apost. 16, 31; Roem. 10, 9) Gesetz im Herzen haben und behalten, lehren so, als ob der Mensch erst den Glauben haben und sich erst seines Glaubens vergewissern muesse, ehe er es wagen duerfe, die von Christo erworbene Gnade und Vergebung der Suenden auf sich zu beziehen. Mit andern Worten, sie gruenden das Evangelium auf den Glauben anstatt den Glauben auf das Evangelium. Sie machen den Glauben in der Rechtfertigung zu seinem eigenen Objekt."

As a rule, these blind would-be leaders of the blind attach to faith an immediate ethical value, making it a meritorious work in man, something that must be added by him to complete his justification before God, to finish what is already finished. Thereby they show that they understand neither what faith is nor how it functions in the matter of justification. Does the beggar at our door merit the meal that we offer him by reaching out and taking it? Do we merit the food on our tables by eating it? Do we thereby add anything to its nutritious value? No more, but much less do we merit the grace of God in Christ Jesus by believing. "Faith justifies and saves, not on the ground that it is in itself a work worthy, but only because it receives the promised mercy." (Apology; *Trigl.*, 137.) Rom. 3, 28: "A man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law." Eph. 2, 8: "By grace are ye saved, through faith" (not "in view of" or "for the sake of" or "because of" faith); "and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast." Acts 10, 43: "Whosoever believeth in Him shall receive the remission of sins."

Just as truthfully and emphatically the Formula of Concord points out (*Trigl.*, 931): "It is false and incorrect to say that faith cannot justify without works or that faith justifies inasmuch as it has love with it or that the presence of works with faith is necessary if otherwise man is to be justified thereby before God." True, "St. James teaches correctly when he denies that we are justified by such faith as is without works, which is dead faith." (*Trigl.*, 931.) Justifying faith works. It does not follow, however, that it justifies because it works. "*Fides numquam est sola, sed iustificat*

sola." Does a tree draw strength from the soil and live because it bears fruit? How foolish! But no more foolish than saying that faith justifies because it produces God-pleasing works. It works because it justifies. "We love Him because" we are certain that "He first loved us," 1 John 4, 19.

Accordingly the "poor soul" mentioned before and all in the same spiritual muddle must be directed to the clear, unconditioned Gospel-promises of God, who justifies the ungodly and whose faithfulness cannot be shaken by man's lack of faith. We, as the ones whom the Lord has called to administer the balm of Gilead to wounded, aching souls, must strive to preach, not merely about faith, but actually to preach faith into the hearts of men; and that can be done, as Dr. Walther has so ably taught us (*Law and Gospel*, p. 260 ff.), without as much as calling attention to faith, its functions and necessity, by simply binding up the bruised reed and replenishing the smoking flax with the many priceless assurances such as we find in Is. 54, 10: "The mountains shall depart and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee."

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

E. Not on his perseverance in, but on God's preservation of, his faith.

This thesis must receive careful consideration; for apart from the truth which it is to convey the Christian cannot be certain of his entrance into heaven. "Where there is forgiveness of sins," it is true, "there is also life and salvation." He who has forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ Jesus has eternal life as his present possession, and he who dies in that faith will enter heaven at once according to his soul. But that is just the point: he must have such faith, he must be certain of his salvation, at the time of his death; he must endure unto the end. How, then, can a Christian be certain that he will be certain of his salvation at the time of death? How can he know that he will endure unto the end? A most important question!

To rest on one's own ability to persevere in the faith is to lean upon a reed that will assuredly break even as it pierces the hand that leans upon it. Such "certainty" is not Christian certainty but carnal security like that which caused Peter to deny his Lord and to fall from grace. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." Therefore "he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." He can be sure only of falling.

Not our holding fast to Christ, but Christ's holding fast to us, gives real certainty of entrance into heaven. If, after having

brought me to faith in Him, the Lord left me to myself and my own devices, I might, indeed I would, let go of Him; but He will not let go of me, and so I will finally be drawn by Him to His side in heaven. "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Yes, "godly Christians know that God will further strengthen and help them in their great weakness to persevere in true faith unto the end." (F. C.; *Trigl.*, p. 885.) Paul knew that; cf. 2 Tim. 1, 12; Rom. 8, 31—39. So did John; cf. 1 John 3, 2. 3. And both speak as if we, too, should know it for a certainty. And we certainly should. "God is able to keep you from falling," Jude 24. Certainly. Having begun the good work (faith) in us, He will also perform it until the Day of Jesus Christ," Phil. 1, 6. For that reason the Apostle Peter could write as he did 1 Pet. 1, 4. 5: God has begotten you "to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time." Only two parts, but what a sermon! The two parts are: 1. that heaven is being preserved for us; 2. that we are being preserved for heaven.

The Scriptures do teach that it is possible to fall from faith and to be lost. They set many examples of "temporary believers" before us. Those examples are also to serve as warnings to us, warnings not to rest our faith on the wrong foundation; they are warnings against ourselves. They warn us to be careful lest we make shipwreck of our faith. But the possibility of falling does not argue that we cannot and should not be certain of our preservation in the faith for the reason that God promises to preserve our faith. Those promises give us the divine assurance, the certainty "in the highest degree," that the possibility of falling will not in our case become a reality. And it will not! According to 2 Thess. 3, 3 "the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you and keep you from evil." If that does not include the evil of falling from grace and losing heaven, what does it include? Jesus says: "My sheep hear My voice; and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give unto them eternal life. And they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand," John 10, 27. 28. "Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life!" Thereby Jesus assures us against the dangers from without and also against those from within; "He guarantees us," as Hengstenberg expressed it, "against ourselves." "No man" shall pluck me out of His almighty hand, also not this man, my own sinful flesh. Believing that, I confess: "I believe in the life everlasting"; and confessing that, I believe, I know, and am sure, not only that there is eternal life, but also that there is eternal life for me, a life for which I shall be preserved

by the Lord and in which I shall ever be with Him. "He will give unto me and to all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true." Therefore "unto Him that is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God, our Savior, be glory and majesty and power both now and ever!" Jude 24. 25.

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

F. Not on his choice of God, but on God's choice of him.

The chief passages of Holy Writ supporting the above statement, Eph. 1, 3—6 and Rom. 8, 28—30, are quoted in Dr. Schwan's *Short Exposition of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* to prove that a Christian can and should be sure of his salvation. True, the doctrine of predestination of which these passages treat is not milk for spiritual babes, for beginners in Christianity, but strong meat for more advanced Christians. But as meat will strengthen men and thus enable them to do their work in this world all the better, so this doctrine is set forth in Holy Scripture and revealed to us by the Holy Spirit to increase our faith and thus to make us better workmen in the service of our Savior.

The negation in our thesis is, to a certain extent, a restatement of a preceding section of this essay. It states that Christian certainty rests not on the Christian's choice of God. Indeed not; that cannot be. Before conversion we could not choose God because the carnal mind is enmity against God. And after conversion, or better, in conversion, we chose God only because He had already chosen us long before. The Formula of Concord says in Article XI: "The eternal election of God not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps, and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto." Again we read in the same article: "All *opiniones* and erroneous doctrines concerning the powers of our natural will are thereby overthrown, because God in His counsel, before the time of the world, decided and ordained that He Himself, by the power of the Holy Ghost, would produce and work in us, through the Word, everything that pertains to our conversion." And our beloved Church accepts the Formula of Concord because the doctrinal statements contained therein are in full accord with the Word of God. Certainly the two sentences just cited are that. According to Acts 13, 48 "as many as were ordained to everlasting life believed." Evidently the faith, the conversion of the people there referred to, was the result of God's choice. The same is true of course today. God, before the foundation of the world was laid, and prompted only by His grace, "predestinated us unto the adop-

tion of children by Jesus Christ to Himself," Eph. 1, 5. Cf. Gal. 3, 26. And "whom He did predestinate [in eternity], them He also called [in time by the Gospel]; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified," for that was in eternity His object, that they should finally "be conformed to the image of His Son," Rom. 8, 28—30.

Can a believer, then, be sure that God has chosen him? If he cannot, who can? Oh, come, dear Christian, you are not ready to call God a liar, are you? You believe that Jesus redeemed you, a lost and condemned creature, from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, do you not? But you pray: "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief"? Very well! He is seeking to do that very thing this very minute. You can and should be certain that God has chosen you because you believe the Gospel of His grace in Christ Jesus. Your faith is the effect; His choice in Christ before the foundation of the world is the cause. Hence you must be chosen of God. There can be no effect without the cause. And what is more, in the passages already quoted, and in all others in which God speaks of this matter, He speaks both of and to believers only, Eph. 1, 4; 1 Thess. 1, 5; etc.; He speaks of and to you. Hence you and every believer with you can and should be sure, yes, as sure as God's Word is sure, that He "hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth whereunto He called you by our Gospel to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ," 2 Thess. 2, 13.14. You and every believer with you can therefore and should rejoice and sing:

Lord, 'tis not that I did choose Thee,
That could never be,
For this heart would still refuse Thee;
Thou hast chosen me,
Hast from all the sin that stained me
Washed and set me free
And unto this end ordained me,
That I live to Thee.

"Upon this [divine predestination] our salvation is so founded that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it." "Thus this doctrine affords the excellent, glorious consolation that God was so greatly concerned about the conversion, righteousness, and salvation of every Christian and so faithfully purposed it [provided therefor] that before the foundation of the world was laid, He deliberated concerning it, and in His [secret] purpose ordained how He would bring me thereto [call and lead me to salvation] and preserve me therein. Also, that He wished to secure my salvation so well and certainly that, since through the wickedness and weakness of our flesh it could easily be lost from our hands

or through the craft and might of the devil and the world be snatched and taken from us, He ordained it in His eternal purpose, *which cannot fail or be overthrown*, and placed it for preservation in the almighty hand of our Savior Jesus Christ." (F. C.; *Trigl.*, 1065. 1079.)

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven rests

G. Not on anything in him, but solely on God's Word outside of him.

This thesis forms the natural summary and conclusion of this section treating the foundation of our Christian certainty. It expresses the teaching most characteristic of our Church and directs us in brief to the only sure foundation for our faith. We are spiritually in the condition of a person falling. To stop our downward course to hell, we must lay hold of something outside of ourselves, and the only thing outside of ourselves that will hold our weight and completely break our fall, the only thing to which faith can safely cling, is the Gospel, the glad tidings of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. We must "grasp the Gospel as a tree or branch in the great flood," says the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (*Trigl.*, 213). That is as God wants it. Luther writes: "Gott will nicht leiden, dass wir uns auf etwas anderes verlassen oder mit dem Herzen hangen an etwas, das nicht Christus in seinem Wort ist. . . . Der Glaube hat keinen andern Grund, darauf er bestehen koenne." (XI, 453 ff.) "Dies ist die Ursache, dass unsere Theologie gewiss ist; denn sie bringt uns dahin, dass wir nicht auf uns selbst sehen, sondern gruendet uns auf das, was ausser uns (*extra nos*) ist, dass wir nicht bauen auf unsere Kraefte, Gewissen, Gefuehl, Person und Werke, sondern uns verlassen auf das, was ausser uns ist, das heisst, auf die Verheissung und Wahrheit Gottes, welche nicht fehlen kann." (IX, 509.)

3. Its Fruits

The Christian's certainty of his present state of grace and of his future entrance into heaven bears fruit a hundredfold.

For obvious reasons it leads the Christian to give God the honor due Him as the Author and Finisher of his faith and salvation. As we have seen, those who rely upon their own efforts to save themselves either wholly or in part and consequently boast of their own achievements, do not have this blessed certainty. Those who are certain are certain only because they attribute their entire salvation in its past, present, and future aspect to the grace of God alone. That being true, the very nature of Christian certainty must, as a matter of course, give all the glory to God alone, Col. 1, 12—14; 1 Pet. 1, 3—6; Eph. 1, 3; etc.

The certainty of salvation also buoys up the Christian and keeps him from sinking amid the billows of the troubled sea of life, Rom. 8, 17—25; 1 Pet. 1, 6; etc. Yes, Maclaren expressed it well: Faith, Christian certainty of salvation, is "the true anesthesia of the soul." It tends to deaden the pain inflicted by the knife of affliction and trial with which the great Physician cuts off the life-destroying growths of sin. It quickly heals the wounds caused by the pruning-hook in the hands of the Husbandman as He lops off the dead twigs that the branches grafted into the Vine may bring forth more fruit, John 15, 1—5. For how can one who is certain that God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for his salvation believe that the very trials which he endures are anything but blessings in disguise from the bountiful hands of a heavenly Father, who does all things well? Ah, the persecutions of this world, the worst that the enemies of Christ and His Church can say or do, are powerless against the man, woman, or child who knows that life begins with the advent of death. Luther:

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

This certainty is the one true incentive, the power that impels Christians to show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light, 1 Pet. 2, 9; it moves them to take an active part in the greatest work done on earth today. It lends meaning and force to the question:

Shall we whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,
Shall we to men benighted
The lamp of life deny?

And it supplies the answer, too:

Salvation, O salvation!
The joyful sound proclaim
Till earth's remotest nation
Has learned Messiah's name.

In other words, the Christian's certainty of his salvation brings about the very opposite of what our enemies accuse us of fostering by preaching the Gospel without any derogatory ifs, buts, or maybes. This Christian certainty—be it repeated—is Christian faith, and "faith worketh by love." This love, the child of faith, is the parent of all virtue. "Faith and works are like the light and heat of a candle; they cannot be separated"; where you find one, you will find the other. "Put Christ into the heart, and you empty it of the world." "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared [in Christ] to all men, teaching us [Christians]

that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ," Titus 2, 11 ff. As the world appears blurred and unattractive to the natural eyes that look upon it after they have been fixed upon the sun for a time, so the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life appeal the less to the Christian the more the eyes of his faith are fixed on the Sun of Righteousness. Yes, being justified by His grace, we are heirs according to the hope of eternal life, writes the apostle; and this, he says, "is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou [O Titus, O pastor and teacher of the Church] affirm constantly that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works," Titus 3, 7. 8.

So closely are Christian certainty and Christian life joined together, the latter being the fruit of the former, that a life of God-pleasing works is to the Christian an external proof, an outward testimony of the Holy Spirit, that he is in a state of grace. "In believers good works are indications of salvation." (*Trigl.*, 951.) By the presence of the former we can satisfy ourselves of the existence of the latter. Just as a few rays of sunlight breaking through a clouded sky argue for the presence of the sun above the clouds, so God-pleasing activity argues for the presence of Christian certainty in our hearts. "Ye know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren," 1 John 3, 14.

But in bringing out this fact, Dr. Pieper was always very careful to point out, too, that a Christian who is troubled by his sins imagines that his life is devoid of good works, and that therefore he must be directed, in the final analysis, not to his works or anything in himself, but solely to the words and promises of God. (*Dogm.*, II, 535.) The external testimony of our works must not be made the foundation of faith; for they are simply a corroborative witness for the existence of that certainty which is founded on the Gospel, and as such only we must appeal to them in our pastoral contacts with the souls in our care.

This leads me to take over a short section of sound advice found in Dr. Pieper's monumental work: "Hat die Ungewissheit ihren Grund in anhebender fleischlicher Sicherheit, z. B. im laessigen Gebrauch der Gnadenmittel oder im unachtsamen Wandel ueberhaupt, so ist mit Aufdeckung dieses Schadens, also mit der Anwendung des Gesetzes, zu beginnen. Von diesem Fall handelt 2 Kor. 13, 5: 'Versuchet euch selbst, ob ihr im Glauben seid; pruefet euch selbst!' Hat die Ungewissheit ihren Grund in der Bloedigkeit des von der Suendenschuld geaengsteten Gewissens, so ist der Fall mit dem lauterem Evangelium zu behandeln, also mit

dem Hinweis auf die objektive Versoehnung, 2 Kor. 5, 19; Roem. 4, 25, und mit der Betonung der Tatsache, dass Gottes Gnade in Christo groesser ist als alle Suenden, Roem. 5, 20. 21. . . . Als Seelsorger sehen wir uns auch solchen Faellen gegenueber, in denen der Patient—wir moechten sagen: mit einem gewissen Eigensinn—von uns den Beweis fuer die Existenz seines Glaubens begehrt. In solchen hartnaeckigen Faellen wird man mit Erfolg der Selbstqual durch die Aufforderung ein Ende machen, die Frage nach dem fruerehen Glauben auf sich beruhen zu lassen und jetzt die allen Suendern zugesagte Gnade im Glauben zu ergreifen." (*Dogm.*, III, 533.)

To conclude, let us all resolve to take to heart what Dr. Walther writes in his *Law and Gospel* (p. 297) concerning the importance of being careful when engaged in our chief work: "Unspeakably great damage may be caused by one false sentence in a sermon. For instance, the preacher may administer an unwarranted reproof that is taken up by godly, conscientious Christians who are full of concern about their souls and are working out their salvation with fear and trembling. When such sincere Christians observe in themselves something that the preacher has marked as a fault and as something by which men forfeit divine grace, they may become uncertain of their state of grace and imagine that they dare not believe that they will be saved. . . . Again, on an occasion when he should have administered a rebuke, he may have offered false comfort to the delight of all false Christians, who disregard all the rest of his sermon and lay hold of only that part which permits them to regard themselves as good Christians, when they are anything but that. Is it not an awful condition for a carnally secure person to get into and to remain in his blindness until the final summons consigns him to eternal perdition? Mistakes like these may happen even to a sincere pastor. In a moment of inattention, when he is not on his guard and does not pray while he is writing his sermon, God may permit him to rely on his own strength in order to make him see the sorry results which he has achieved without prayer. . . . Every one of your sermons must be the product of heartfelt prayer." Indeed, with each sermon we must pray some such prayer as this:

O let me never speak
 What bounds of truth exceedeth;
 Grant that no idle word
 From out my mouth proceedeth;
 And grant, when in my place
 I must and ought to speak,
 My words due power and grace,
 Nor let me wound the weak. (Hymn 346, 3.)

Shelton, Wash.

H. WARNECK