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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 7 • Number 4 • FALL 1998

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Without being fully aware of that he was doing it, Luther was completely rebuilding the road to salvation. For his teachers, faith had been like the other virtues of hope and love that were supposed to characterize Christians. A small amount of faith remained after the fall, but this faith had to be augmented by the sacraments in order to ensure salvation. For the mystics, faith was to be exercised by an ever greater distancing of the self from this world and an ever more single-minded contemplation of the goodness of God in God's own essence. The focus was on partial, weak, human faith on the one hand and the absolute demands of God on the other. By contrast, Luther made it clear that by "faith alone" he intended "Christ alone." Paul, he noted, inveighed against "those presumptuous persons who think they can come to God apart from Christ, as though it were sufficient for them to have believed and . . . then having once accepted the grace of justification, not needing him. . . . Salvation and the gift of faith were not one-time events but a never-ending process.

—JAMES M. KITTELSON, *LUTHER THE REFORMER: THE STORY OF THE MAN AND HIS CAREER* (MINNEAPOLIS: AUGSBURG, 1986), 94.

## MARTIN LUTHER ON ASSURANCE

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*Joel Beeke*

Martin Luther ushered in the Reformation, not by doctrinal criticism but by the imperative of religious experience. Overwhelmed by sin, Luther unsuccessfully tried to find assurance of faith through the church's agencies, sacraments, and penitential system. Ultimately, he found the grace of God in Christ, through whom forgiveness of sin is complete and not dependent on human merit.

Luther's Christ-centered approach to faith and assurance was rooted in personal experience.<sup>1</sup> Through his experience of God's graciousness in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ, Luther was empowered to lead Christianity out of the tyranny of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that determined what and how one could believe. Luther presented Christianity as believing assurance of the living God, who reveals Himself and opens His heart in Christ to sinners. Luther thus became instrumental in releasing the sixteenth-century church from a systematic denial of salvation's certainty and directed it toward the freedom of justification by gracious faith alone.

Subsequently Luther challenged the semi-Pelagian system by asserting that assurance is the birthright of every Christian, since it is the believer's privilege to know subjectively that God is gracious to him in His Son. Luther wrote:

We must daily more and more endeavor to destroy at the root that pernicious error that man cannot know whether or

insistence on assurance with ongoing spiritual warfare within the believer. Indeed, Luther's concept of anxiety in the elect because of waning consciousness of faith, had a pervasive effect on how he regarded the practical outworkings of assurance.

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Luther's doctrine of assurance, like much of his theology, includes paradox. For example, despite asserting the inseparability of faith and assurance, Luther also taught that the believer's continuing unrighteousness frequently weakens certainty of faith. He wrote: "Even though we are certain that we believe in Christ, we are not certain that we believe in all his words. Hence, also, 'the believing in him' is uncertain."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Luther stated that security could be a sign of God's wrath, and that "it is fear and trembling that is the surest sign of grace."<sup>15</sup>

Luther distinguished security (*securitas*) from certainty (*certitudo*). He said that *securitas* brought him into the

monastery. *Securitas* is derived from *sine cura*, that is, "being without care." For Luther, *securitas* seeks ease apart from the grace of God. Hence Luther could say that *securitas* in its deepest sense is a form of carelessness, since concern for divine righteousness and glory is secondary. By contrast, *certitudo* is a divine gift embraced by faith.<sup>16</sup>

Though assurance ought to be an abiding certainty for every believer on account of God's faithfulness, in practice, Luther said, it comes and goes because of human infirmity. Luther thus wrote: "When a man sins, the spiritual life in him does not die, but it is he who turns away from it that dies, while it remains in Christ forever."<sup>17</sup>

In Christ salvation is certain, but since the believer does not always remain consciously in Christ and must be continually called back to Christ by the Spirit, assurance may often be missing. Thus the believer has assurance when his pride is destroyed and he rests wholly on God's grace, but when pride reasserts itself, assurance vanishes.

In *Treatise on Works*, Luther went one step further in the matter of doubt. In an almost Perkinsian mode of casuistry,<sup>18</sup> Luther advised the believer of weak faith: "Begin with a weak spark of faith and daily strengthen it more and more by exercising it."<sup>19</sup>

To console those with "weak sparks" of faith, Luther unequivocally stated that infirmity of faith must be expected in all. He added: "There is no one on earth who does not have his share of it."<sup>20</sup> At best, assurance of salvation is never perfect in this life (hence Luther's expression, *fidei summus gradus* — "highest degree of faith");<sup>21</sup> at worst, a believer may have saving faith without being aware of it.<sup>22</sup> Luther could thus say that confidence and boldness must be regarded as the fruit of faith, leaving the impression that assurance may be a result rather than the intrinsic property of saving faith.<sup>23</sup> He could also explain assurance as an experiential transition from being justified by faith to a

not he is in a state of grace, by which the whole world is seduced. If we doubt God's grace and do not believe that God is well-pleased in us for Christ's sake, then we are denying that Christ has redeemed us—indeed, we question outright all his benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Luther had no patience for any view of assurance that returned the burden of salvation from God to man.<sup>3</sup> Hence he grounded his doctrine of assurance in Christ and His atoning work.<sup>4</sup> In expounding Psalm 90:17, Luther wrote:

He who prays for remission of sins and hears the absolution of Christ should be certain that truly, just as the Word declares, his sins are forgiven; and he should be assured that this is in no sense man's work but God's work. Whatever, therefore, is done in the church must rest on certainty.<sup>5</sup>

Faith is thus nothing less than assurance of forgiveness. Understanding Scripture and agreeing with it from the heart are synonymous with trust in it, Luther said, for assent (*assensus*) and trust (*fiducia*) are one. Predestination,<sup>6</sup> faith, and assurance are inseparable from God's promises. Since God does not lie, anyone who trusts His promises "will be saved and chosen."<sup>7</sup> Faith lays hold of the promise of God, assents to it, and assures the believer that God is graciously inclined to him in Christ Jesus. All experiences of faith are bound both to God's promise and to Christ in the promise.<sup>8</sup> On Abraham's faith, Luther wrote:

Abraham is righteous . . . because he believed God who gave a promise. . . . For faith is the firm and sure thought or trust that through Christ God is propitious and that through Christ His thoughts concerning us are thoughts of peace, not of affliction or wrath. God's thought or promise, and faith, by which I take hold of God's promise—these belong

together. . . . The confident laying hold of the promise is called faith; and it justifies, not as our own work but as the work of God. . . . Faith alone lays hold of the promise, believes God when He gives the promise, stretches out its hand when God offers something, and accepts what He offers. . . . The only faith that justifies is the faith that deals with God in His promises and accepts them. . . . Furthermore, every promise of God includes Christ; for if it is separated from this Mediator, God is not dealing with us at all.<sup>9</sup>

For Luther, assurance was an integral part of saving faith. In a basic description of saving faith, Luther stated:

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God.<sup>10</sup>

On occasion, Luther implied that lack of assurance is incompatible with being an authentic Christian. He wrote:

Should you . . . not believe that your sins are truly forgiven and removed, then you are a heathen, acting toward your Lord Christ like one who is an unbeliever and not a Christian; and this is the most serious sin of all against God. . . . By such disbelief you make God to be a liar. . . .<sup>11</sup> These words should be written in letters of gold: Ours, Us, For Us. He who does not believe these words is not a Christian.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Luther usually refrained from stating outright that such a doubter is not a Christian; rather, he only acts like an unbeliever when he has no assurance. For, despite his accent on the righteousness of Christ for and outside of the believer,<sup>13</sup> Luther also viewed assurance as an internal phenomenon. This enabled him to balance his

being raised to a higher level of full assurance.

Luther did avoid saying that lack of assurance could threaten, much less overthrow, saving grace.<sup>24</sup> In this, R. L. Dabney suggested that Luther added a scriptural balance that's lacking in Calvin. Dabney wrote, "Luther sometimes speaks more scripturally than Calvin, distinguishing between 'an assuring faith' (the fuller attainment) and 'a receiving faith,' which he regards as true faith, and justifying."<sup>25</sup>

We must thus understand Luther's explanation of assurance as a constitutive element in the exercise of faith, and his writing against Agricola that does not discount sanctification as a prop to assurance.<sup>26</sup> Though such sanctification is secondary due to a believer's continuing inadequacy before God, Luther did not shrink from stating that the believer's assurance cannot be based solely on the testimony of Christ to him through Word and sacrament. Assurance must also be suggested by the testimony of a good conscience based on works, said Luther. A good conscience testifies to the truth of a believer's faith, yet true faith trusts only in Christ and not in the testimony of conscience.<sup>27</sup>

In summary, Luther said that assurance is the birthright of every Christian, though such assurance may ebb and flow. To have assurance is a normative state, while to miss its security is a common condition which is not always unhealthy.<sup>28</sup> This paradoxical tension explains why Luther could state so strongly, that "It is not security (*securitas*), but rather assurance (*certitudo*) that is promised to faith."<sup>29</sup>

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books, including *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*. He also edits *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* magazine. He has previously contributed to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

#### Notes

1. The best edition of Luther's works is *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, ed. J. C. F. Knaake, et al. (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus, 1883- ), denominated the Weimar Edition (hereafter: WA). The WA consists of four parts: *Writings*, 68 volumes (WA); *Letters*, 18 volumes (WA Br); *Table Talk*, 6 volumes (WA TR); and the *German Bible*, 12 volumes (WA DB). Only the first part containing the "writings" is not complete. For Luther in English, see *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan, et al., 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia [vols. 1-30]; Philadelphia: Fortress Press [vols. 31-55], 1955-79). Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 238-43, provides a handy overview of other editions of Luther's writings. For bibliographical guides to Luther studies, consult Roland Bainton and Eric W. Gritsch, eds., *Bibliography of the Continental Reformation: Materials Available in English*, second ed. (Hamden, Connecticut: Shoe String, 1973), 57-106; Jack Bigame and Kenneth Hagen, *Annotated Bibliography of Luther Studies, 1967-1976* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1977); Mark U. Edwards, Jr., "Martin Luther," *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 59-83.
2. Cited in Stephan H. Pfürtner, *Luther and Aquinas, a Conversation: Our Salvation, Its Certainty and Peril*, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1964), 120.
3. Mark Noll, "John Wesley and the Doctrine of Assurance," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (1975):162.
4. Richard Lovelace, *American Pietism of Cotton Mather* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 94, 101.
5. "Selected Psalms II," *Luther's Works*, 13:140.
6. Luther found profit for believers even in reprobation. We draw comfort from reprobation: (1) by considering that God's distinguishing grace could justly have passed us by; (2) by remaining utterly humble in receiving grace as we are reminded of the "reprobation shadow," for otherwise faith would divorce itself from the humble fear of God and become swollen with pride; (3) by being moved to continually exercise faith in manifesting God's election rather than reprobation. Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 283-84.
7. *Luther's Works*, 54:387.

8. W. van't Spijker, *Luther: belofte en ervaring* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1983), 198.
9. "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works*, 3:18-26.
10. *Luther's Works*, 35:370-71.
11. *Ibid.*, 13.
12. WA 31, II, 432, 17 (cited by Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen, vol. 1 [St. Louis: Concordia, 1962], 68n).
13. Cf. Gottfried W. Locher, *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 183n.
14. Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck. Library of Christian Classics, vol. 15 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 105.
15. Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 392.
16. Cf. van't Spijker, *Luther: belofte en ervaring*, 199.
17. Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 185.
18. See Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), chapter 5 on Perkins, the father of Puritan casuistry.
19. *Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1930) 1:228.
20. *Ibid.*
21. WA 18, 633, 14.
22. *Luther's Works* 35:101. Frederick Loetscher proposes that Luther himself underwent a development in personal, progressive certainty of his salvation, which found expression in his "post-Romans" works ("Luther and the Problem of Authority in Religion: Part II," *Princeton Theological Review* 16 [1918]:517).
23. *Luther's Works*, 35:374.
24. Cf. Isaak A. Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology, Particularly in Germany*, trans. G. Robson and S. Taylor (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 1: 239.
25. *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 709. Dabney seems to ignore Calvin's similar, albeit more cautious view of faith-assurance questions, which strayed little from Luther's position despite several changes in terminology (see pp. 37ff. below).
26. WA 31, II, 482, 34-37. Cf. Mark R. Shaw, "The Marrow of Practical Divinity: A Study in the Theology of William Perkins" (Th.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1981), 161.
27. WA 20, 716, 24-28; 36, 365, 28-33; 36, 366, 12-15. Cf. Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 80-87.
28. Luther taught that it is only right that the conscious security of

assurance vacillates. Many Reformers and post-Reformers agreed. For example, Head V of the Canons of Dort says that when the believer backslides, he often loses a sense of God's assuring presence, which produces anxiety rather than security. The Holy Spirit uses this anxiety in making the believer aware of his backsliding and in leading him to return to God with repentance, thereby recovering assurance. If assurance did not vacillate, the doctrine of perseverance might be sorely misused by the believer when backsliding.

29. Locher, *Zwingli's Thought*, 183n.