

IMPORTANT CITIES OF THE REFORMATION



Editor's Preface

This is a little book that commemorates the anniversary of a great event. That great event was the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century. The one church at that time, the Roman Catholic Church, had become thoroughly corrupt and had fallen away from the truth of the word of God. Over the centuries, it had become grotesquely deformed. Through the work of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Knox, and others, the church was reformed. Purity of doctrine and holiness of life were restored to the church.

Because these men reformed the church, they are remembered collectively as the reformers. They were men of conviction, not ambition. They were men with servants' hearts, not self-seeking. They were men who were interested in serving Jesus Christ, not promoting self in the place of Christ. They were men who sought the glory of God, not the praise of men.

And God used them—mightily! He used them in different places and through diverse circumstances, but all of them in very much the same way. He used them in their preaching and teaching—and they were all great preachers. He used them in their writings—they were also prolific writers. He used them not only to reprove the church for her errors and false worship, but he used them to restore to the church the truth of the gospel and the right worship of God. Through the reformers, the church was brought back again—back to Augustine, back to the early church, back to the apostles, and most importantly, back to the word of God.

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In October 2017, the church commemorated the five hundredth anniversary of the great Reformation, if we mark, as is usually done, Luther's nailing of the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, as the beginning of the Reformation. That act of Luther, under the providence of God, set in motion a series of events, all of which culminated in the Reformation. The Reformation changed the entire landscape of Europe, even from a political, social, and economic point of view. Nevertheless, the Reformation was not essentially a political, social, or economic movement. It was a religious event that aimed at changing conditions in the church. And it did—in many different ways, under the providence of God. It did! The church was never again the same. In the providence of God and under the blessing of God, the Protestant and Reformed churches were birthed.

To commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary organized a conference. The conference was spread over two days and included six hour-long speeches. The theme of the conference was: "Here We Stand!" That theme, of course, was taken from Martin Luther's famous words before the Diet of Worms: "Here I stand!" The conference was very well attended, and the speeches were well received. It was not merely a joyful celebration of an event that took place in the past. It was also a grateful acknowledgment of a treasure and tradition that had been graciously bestowed. And it was, hopefully, a way in which to endear to the up-and-coming generation the precious heritage that is ours as heirs of the Reformation.

Already before the conference took place, the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) approached the seminary and expressed an interest in publishing the speeches in book form.

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We readily agreed, anticipating that the value of the conference would thereby be greatly enhanced. You hold in your hand the finished product. I wish to express thanks to the RFPA for considering the worth of publishing the speeches. Also I wish to express thanks to all the speakers, not only for giving their speeches, but for doing all the additional work of expanding and transcribing their speeches as chapters in this book.

Please do not suppose that the chapters in the book are merely transcripts of the speeches that were given at the conference. Much work has been done to enhance each of the speeches by adding material that could not be included in the conference speeches because of time constraints. It is our hope that our readers will find the book to be of value, whether they learn some things that are new or are reminded of things they had forgotten—all of them vital truths of the great Reformation. Then, after you have read the book, recommend it to others as a valuable refresher course on some of the most important aspects of the Reformation. Now read and enjoy!

Ronald Cammenga, editor
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WHAT WAS THE REFORMATION? A STRUGGLE TO ENJOY THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Ronald L. Cammenga



*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God
through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

—ROMANS 5:1

This book celebrates the Reformation—the great Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century. What was the Reformation? In simplest terms, the Reformation was the doctrinal and spiritual renewal of the church in the sixteenth century.

The one, great church of that day was the Roman Catholic Church. Over time the church had become thoroughly corrupt and apostate. Errors of doctrine and wickedness of life characterized both clergy (officebearers) and laity (church members). From top to bottom the church was filled with unbelief and immorality. The church taught and the people believed the errors of works-righteousness, free will, the papacy, the priesthood, purgatory, the authority of tradition above the authority of the word of God, and many other false doctrines. In his last letter to Pope

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Leo X, in the preface of his treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian,” Martin Luther wrote:

The Roman church, once the holiest of all, has become the most licentious den of thieves [Matt. 21:13], the most shameless of all brothels, the kingdom of sin, death, and hell. It is so bad that even Antichrist himself, if he should come, could think of nothing to add to its wickedness.¹

In a work entitled “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Luther lamented:

How wretchedly and desperately all the activities of the church have been confused, hindered, ensnared and subjected to danger through the pestilent, ignorant, and wicked ordinances of men, so that there is no hope of betterment unless we abolish at one stroke all the laws of men, and having restored the gospel of liberty we follow it in judging and regulating all things.²

The great work of the Reformation was a work accomplished by God. It was not the work of man. Great men though they were, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, and the others did not bring about the Reformation. They were merely the instruments by which the Reformation took place. Several years after the Reformation had begun, Luther looked back and is reported to have said, “Like a blind mule I was led by Christ.” The reformers regarded the Reformation as God’s work through his Spirit. The Reformation was

1 Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Career of the Reformer I*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American edition, 55 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–86), 31:336.

2 Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520,” in *Word and Sacrament*, in *ibid.*, 36:102–3.

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the fulfillment of the promise that Christ made to his disciples in John 16:13 that he would give them the Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who would lead the church into all the truth. The Reformation stands in the history of the New Testament as the proof of Jesus' promise to his disciples in Matthew 16:18 that not even the gates of hell would prevail against his church in the world.

One of the most important aspects of the Reformation was that it restored to the people of God the assurance of their salvation. Assurance—this was the very issue that sparked the Reformation. The Reformation began over Martin Luther's personal struggle for the assurance of his salvation. Luther was brought up in a dark religious climate of doubt and fear. The church of his day denied the very possibility of assurance even to the most faithful. No matter how diligently one made use of the means of grace, attended mass, followed the traditions of the church, and lived in obedience to the dictates of the pope, he could not have the assurance of his salvation.

Luther himself experienced a great personal struggle to come to peace with God and the assurance of his salvation. It was only after he came to understand the truth of justification by faith alone, apart from man's own work, that he also came to the assurance of his salvation. When he no longer depended on his own works but on the perfect work of Christ, and not on his own merits but on the eternal merit of Christ, then the way was opened for Luther to enjoy the assurance of the Christian life.

Luther's struggle is the struggle of every child of God, in every age. It is the struggle of the child of God who knows himself, as Luther knew himself, to be a lost, unworthy sinner. It is the struggle to possess the assurance, the undoubted assurance, of one's own personal salvation in the light of the conviction concerning our sinfulness. It is the struggle to possess the assurance that God

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is your God, your loving heavenly Father. It is the struggle to enjoy the assurance of election, one's own personal election, that you are one of God's elect children. It is the struggle for the assurance that God's Son, Jesus Christ, has died for you, even for you. It is the struggle to know that you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of regeneration and faith. It is the struggle to enjoy the assurance that the Spirit who applies all the blessings of salvation will also preserve you in your salvation.

It is the struggle for the assurance that you are and forever shall remain a living member of Christ's church, as the Heidelberg Catechism expresses it in Lord's Day 21.³ It is the struggle for the assurance that nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus the Lord, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:35. It is the struggle to know that everlasting life and glory await you after the trials and sorrows of this life—the crown of righteousness that Paul confidently expected according to 2 Timothy 4:8. It is the struggle to possess the assurance that dispels every fear: fear of God's wrath, fear of hell, fear that things in this life might be against you. How blessed is the person who possesses this assurance! How miserable, utterly miserable is the person who does not enjoy this assurance!

AN EXPERIENCE IN LUTHER'S OWN SOUL

God used Luther's own personal struggles to prepare him to reform the church. Apart from his own personal experiences, Luther never could have been the reformer that he became. As God used Moses' experiences in the deserts of Midian to prepare him to be the deliverer of his people, and as God used David's

3 Heidelberg Catechism A 54, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:325.

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years of tending his father's sheep to prepare him to be the king of Israel, so God used Luther's own personal experiences to fit him to be the mighty reformer of the church.

Already early in his life, Luther experienced unrest over the assurance of his salvation. His struggles only intensified as he grew older. Especially troubling to him was the prospect of death, and after death facing a just and holy God.

Men and women living in sixteenth-century Europe were much more familiar with death than we are today. For them death was a persistent reality and an ever-present threat, whether by disease, war, or famine. There was widespread poverty, which inevitably took its toll on human life. Unsanitary conditions were the norm, contributing to the rise and rapid spread of many diseases. What today are very treatable diseases were death sentences in sixteenth-century Europe. People who were healthy one day might be dead and buried the next day. Childbirth was an especially risky proposition, for both the baby and the mother. Once born, many children never reached adolescence. More than one-third of all the children born in the sixteenth century died before their sixth birthday. Life expectancy was under forty years of age. Mercilessly death stalked the men, women, and children who lived in the century of the Protestant Reformation.

In the spring of 1505, while Luther was studying at the University of Erfurt, an epidemic of the Black Plague swept through the city. Also called the Black Death or the Bubonic Plague, historians estimate that this gruesome and painful disease killed some fifty million people. Today the disease is effectively treated with antibiotics. But in the sixteenth century there were no antibiotics. In approximately one hundred years, nearly half of Europe's population succumbed to the dread disease. It was spread by infected fleas that infested the rats that were abundant in the cities of this

era. With a great deal of open garbage and raw sewage, the rat population in the cities swelled, and right along with it the fleas carrying the bacteria that caused the Bubonic Plague.

Symptoms of the disease included black-colored boils all over the infected person's body, chills, high fever, vomiting, muscle cramps, seizures, swollen lymph nodes, extreme pain in the infected areas, gangrene of the extremities (toes, fingers, lips, and nose), difficulty breathing, coughing, delirium, coma, and finally death. So widespread was the plague's devastation that nearly everyone lost an immediate family member, and in some cases whole families and villages were wiped out.⁴

Shortly before this new outbreak of the plague, Luther had received the stunning news that his brothers Heintz and Viet had died of the disease. Now the town of Erfurt and its university were infected. Death was everywhere throughout the city. Black crosses that marked infected homes hung on door after door. The carts carrying the dead to the cemetery rumbled through the streets at all hours of the day and night. Because of the great number of victims, the stench of death and decay was everywhere in the city.

The university was hit especially hard. Many faculty members and scores of students died of the plague, a number of whom Luther knew personally. Classrooms were half-empty and many classes were cancelled because the professor who was teaching the class died. One of Luther's closest friends succumbed just before they were to receive their master's degrees. That was an especially severe blow for Luther, and he struggled to understand the wisdom of God's ways.

All of this set Luther to thinking: "What if it's me? What if I

⁴ Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 41–42.

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am the one infected with the plague? What if I die? Will I be able to stand before God? Will I be righteous before him, or will he banish me from his presence forever?”

“I WILL BECOME A MONK”

Because he was beset by doubts and fears concerning his own salvation, Luther left the study of law in order to become a monk. The ascetic, self-denying life of the monastery offered Luther the possibility of peace and assurance. The questions in Luther’s soul were: “How can I, a sinner, be righteous before God? How can I have the assurance that God is my God and Jesus Christ is my savior?” The Roman Catholic Church answered those questions by saying that a man must work. Assurance of salvation must be earned or merited. By what a man did, at least in part, he earned his standing before God and the assurance of his salvation.

At the time that Luther entered the monastery, he believed the teaching of the church. For this reason he became a monk. Becoming a monk or nun was viewed as an especially good work. As a monk, Luther endeavored with all his might to obtain the assurance of his salvation by his own works. He prayed and fasted. He engaged in various acts of self-denial, even beating himself. Willingly he performed the humblest of tasks around the monastery. He ate very little food, until he nearly wasted away and looked like a walking skeleton. In his room, which was called a cell, even in the middle of the winter he had no heat and slept on a mat on the floor with no covers. About his life as a monk, Luther later said:

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery

will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, readings, and other works.⁵

But in the way of trying to earn his salvation, Luther could not come to the assurance of his salvation. He had no peace in his soul, no inner confidence, no certainty that he was a child of God. Work as he might, he stood in constant terror of the wrath of a holy God. Luther once said, “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction.”⁶ In his recently published biography of Luther, Eric Metaxas correctly assesses this phase of Luther’s life:

In 1507, Luther was a monk and an ordained priest. But it wasn’t enough simply to be a monk. Now he had to do what monks did: be scrupulous in his prayers and his thoughts and constantly confess the slightest unscrupulousness that he could see in these areas. Whereas it would be wrong to suggest other monks didn’t take all of this seriously, one gets the impression that Martin Luther took it about as seriously as anyone ever could, and because of this he bumped hard into the limitations of this life in a way that few ever did, which in turn is precisely what caused him to think about the whole religious system in a way that few ever did.⁷

5 Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, NY: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), 45.

6 Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, in *Luther’s Works*, 34:336.

7 Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York, NY: Viking, 2017), 42.

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THE MERITS OF OTHERS

If Luther could not arrive at the assurance of his salvation through his own works, perhaps he could rely on the works and merits of others. This, in fact, was also the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church of Luther's day, as it is the teaching of Rome still today. Rome taught that many of the saints, especially the blessed virgin Mary, had done many more good works than were necessary for their own salvation. Their "leftover" good works were called works of supererogation. The merit of those works constituted a great treasury, which could be transferred to those whose accounts were behind, that is, to those who lacked sufficient merits of their own to earn salvation. This transfer was done by the church through the pope or the pope's representatives. Such a transfer of merit was called an indulgence.

Indulgences, of course, were purchased. The sale of indulgences was a huge money-making scheme that the medieval Roman Catholic Church had invented. It brought a great deal of revenue from all over Europe into the coffers of the pope. Besides obtaining indulgences for oneself, it was possible to secure an indulgence for a relative or friend who had died and was suffering the pains of purgatory.

The church connected the dispensing of the merits of the saints with visitation of their relics. Again, this was something for which visitors paid. The greatest storehouse of relics was in the city of Rome, the seat of the popes and the nerve center of the Roman Catholic Church. It was alleged that in Rome there were the remains of forty popes and more than 76,000 martyrs. Rome was supposed to have a piece of Moses' burning bush and links from the chain with which the apostle Paul had been bound, as well as some of the bones of Peter and Paul. In Rome one could view the pieces of money that had been paid to Judas Iscariot in

order to betray Jesus; whoever viewed these coins obtained an indulgence of 1,400 hundred years from the sufferings of purgatory. In Rome was the white marble staircase with its twenty-eight steps that supposedly stood in front of the palace of Pontius Pilate, the very stairs which Jesus had climbed on Good Friday. The staircase was known as the *Scala Sancta*. Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine the Great, had the staircase brought from Jerusalem to Rome. No city on earth was so plentifully endowed with holy relics and with indulgences as Rome.

For this reason, Luther was overjoyed at the opportunity to visit Rome in 1510 in order to conduct some official business on behalf of his monastic order. During the month that he was in Rome, Luther sought to take full advantage of the spiritual benefits that the city afforded. Besides performing the daily tasks assigned to him in the Augustinian cloister in which he lodged, he visited and celebrated mass at numerous sacred shrines, visited the catacombs and the basilicas, and venerated the bones and sacred relics of countless saints.

But in the end, Luther's doubts persisted. For one thing, he was stupefied by the ignorance, pleasure madness, and immorality of the Roman clergy. He was also horrified by their irreverence for that which was holy and their apparent unconcern for spiritual things. After he returned from Rome, Luther is reported to have expressed agreement with the adage, "If there is a hell, Rome is built over it."⁸ What shattered Luther's confidence and fueled the doubts with which he was struggling were the supposed merits of the saints and the merits attached to visiting their sacred shrines. More and more he came to see these for what they were: crass money-making schemes intended to take advantage of the poor

8 Thomas M. Lindsay, *Luther and the German Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1900), 44.

and the ignorant. Luther climbed Pilate's staircase on his hands and knees, repeating the Lord's prayer on each step, and kissing each step for good measure. Later he said that when he reached the top he said to himself, "Who knows whether it is so?"⁹

Not in his own works, nor relying on the works and merits of others, could Luther possess the assurance of his salvation. "Peace, peace," the church said. But for Luther there was no peace.

RECOVERING THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

By his own bitter experience and through God's providential leading, Luther was brought to see that the only possibility for assurance of salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel of grace is the possibility of assurance—the only possibility. Apart from it, there can be no enjoyment of the assurance of salvation. In Christ alone, *solus Christus*, through faith alone, *solifide*, by grace alone, *sola gratia*, is the possibility of salvation and the assurance of salvation.

Because the Reformation was a recovery of the gospel of grace, it was also a recovery of the assurance of salvation. It was a recovery of the truth of assurance—the only basis and ground of assurance. And it was the recovery of the actual experience and enjoyment of assurance by believers.

The possibility of assurance is by faith, Luther came to see. The possibility of assurance is true faith that looks away from self and looks instead to Jesus Christ. Assurance is enjoyed through a faith that trusts not in our own works or in any other works of man, but that trusts alone in the perfect work of Jesus Christ. That is the faith that brings the believer assurance. This is the only ground for assurance! Apart from faith in Jesus Christ there is no assurance, no enjoyment of peace in heart or mind. Apart from faith

⁹ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 51.

in Jesus Christ there is only doubt and fear, anxiety and despair. Apart from faith in Jesus Christ there is only the sense of God as an angry and righteous judge before whom every man must one day stand and to whom we must all eventually give account.

One of the most troubling aspects of the Reformation to the Roman Catholic authorities in Luther's day was that at long last believers began to know whom they believed and to be assured of their salvation. It was the wonderful Reformation truth of justification by faith alone that was the key to open the door of assurance. When Luther understood that his standing before God did not depend on himself, on his own works or merits, on who he was or what he did, but depended instead on Jesus Christ alone, the fears and doubts that for so long had troubled him were dispelled as mist before the rising sun. When Luther understood that his righteousness before God was not due to his works but was due to the finished and perfect work of Christ, he experienced what he never had experienced in the way of working to earn his salvation: peace with God. It was the peace that the apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 5:1: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." It was the peace that the prophet Isaiah spoke of long ago in Isaiah 32:17: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever." At last, peace, perfect peace!

In his *Table Talk*, Luther is reported to have said:

Nothing is more sure than this: he that does not take hold on Christ by faith, and comfort himself herein, that Christ is made a curse for him, remains under the curse. The more we labour by works to obtain grace, the less we know how to take hold on Christ; for when he is not known and comprehended by faith, there is not to be expected either

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assurance, help, or comfort, though we torment ourselves to death.¹⁰

Note what Luther says: when Christ “is not known and comprehended by faith,” we cannot expect “comfort, though we torment ourselves to death.” Luther had nearly tormented himself to death, but despite all those torments, he did not enjoy comfort. Trusting in Christ, he found what he could not find trusting in himself.

GOD’S WILL THAT HIS PEOPLE ENJOY ASSURANCE

An important aspect of Luther’s recovery of the truth of assurance was that Luther came to see that it is God’s will that his people live and die in the assurance of their salvation. The Roman Catholic Church of Luther’s day and the Roman Catholic Church of today not only deny the possibility of the assurance of salvation, but deny that assurance is the will of God for his people. That is the stranglehold that the Roman Catholic Church has on its members. The only possibility of assurance of salvation is living in obedience to the church. But even the most faithful can never attain the unfailing assurance of their salvation. The best for which they can hope is years spent in the agonies of purgatory until finally they are delivered from the fires of purgatory into the glory of heaven.

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent was convened in 1546 in order to stem the tide of the Reformation. In one of its many decisions taken in opposition to what the reformers were teaching, the council denied the possibility of the assurance of salvation in this life.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, ed. Thomas S. Kepler, trans. William Hazlitt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, repr. 1995), 114.

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No one, moreover, so long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; as if it were true, that he that is justified, either cannot sin any more, or, if he do sin, that he ought to promise himself an assured repentance; for except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God hath chosen unto himself.¹¹

It is not the will of God that his people generally possess assurance. Only the select few to whom God gives a special revelation may have the assurance of their salvation.¹²

There are those, even in the Reformed tradition, who have viewed the Christian life as a life of perpetual doubt and fear. There have been those who lived and died in what seems to be a proud lack of assurance of salvation. They at least are not like so many professing Christians who take their salvation for granted. Oh, no! It must be given, this assurance of salvation. If you have not been given this assurance, you are not to be blamed, and there is nothing that you can do but wait for it to be given. Others have contended that assurance must be sought, and that only after rigorous efforts, throughout most of one's lifetime, is it finally attained. There have been ministers in this tradition who aimed in their preaching to create doubt among the members of the

11 Canons and Decree of the Council of Trent, sixth session, "On the Gift of Perseverance," in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:103.

12 Interestingly enough, the Arminians at the time of the Synod of Dordt also took the position that only they who receive a special revelation from God may have the assurance of their final salvation and preservation in salvation. For this reason, article 10 of the fifth head of the Canons of Dordt begins as it does: "This assurance, however, is not produced by any peculiar revelation." Confer Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:594.

church, rather than to comfort repentant sinners with the good news of the gospel.

It must be admitted that in our superficial and hypocritical age, when many profess to be Christians but live very much like the world, it is tempting to go in this direction. In our day, there are many who are at ease in Zion, content with outward membership in the church, as were many of the Jews in Jesus' day. These people prided themselves in the fact that they had Abraham to their father and that they had been circumcised in the flesh. Today many rest their confidence in the fact that they were born into Christian families, were baptized and brought up in the church, were educated in the Christian schools, and have made an outward profession of faith. But we must not correct one error by introducing another equally pernicious error. The normal Christian life is not a life lived in doubt and fear; neither is it a life lived in false confidence. But the normal Christian life is a life lived in the assurance of faith, that is, in the assurance of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Luther understood from scripture that it is the will of God not only to save his people, but also to give those whom it is his will to save the assurance of their salvation. He saw from God's word that it is God's will to give believers the assurance of salvation in this life, here and now. He contended that this is the normal experience of the Christian.

That is a wonderful thing, indeed! It would be wonder enough if it were only God's will to save us, but never to give us the assurance of our salvation in this life. That would be grace, indeed, because no one deserves salvation. It would be grace if in the end God saved us and took us to heaven to live with him, but all our life long he never gave us the assurance of salvation, so that we could never be certain that we were saved. Then we would live all

of our life in doubt and fear, not knowing for sure whether or not we were the objects of God's grace, although in the end we would be brought to heaven and given the enjoyment of heaven's bliss in the presence of God and Jesus Christ. But God's salvation is even more wonderful and his grace even more amazing. For it is God's will not only to save us, but to give us already in this life the assurance of our salvation.

It is God's will to give us the assurance that he is our God, our loving heavenly Father who is for us and never against us. It is his will to give us the assurance that Christ died for us, even for us, and made satisfaction to God for the guilt of my sin, even mine. It is his will to give me the assurance that the Holy Spirit dwells in me, has regenerated me, and has given to me the gift of faith so that I believe in Jesus Christ and walk thankfully in all good works.

Luther insisted that the assurance of salvation was the normal experience of the Christian—part of salvation itself.

But when the heart has doubts...it is also driven in a short moment to blasphemy and despair. For this reason St. Paul so often urges us to have full assurance...that is, a firm and unshakeable knowledge of God's will toward us, which gives assurance to our consciences and fortifies them against all uncertainty and mistrust. The teaching of the pope is all the more detestable because it not only disregards this but even wickedly maintains that one should have doubts; that is, he publicly declares God a liar, even though he promises, swears, pledges His majesty, and curses Himself.¹³

13 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21–25*, in *Luther's Works*, 4:144–45.

Commenting on David's familiar words in Psalm 23:1, "The LORD is my shepherd," Luther wrote:

For faith is and must be a confidence of the heart which does not waver, reel, tremble, fidget, or doubt but remains constant and is sure of itself. A similar idea is expressed in Is. 40:8: "The word of our God will stand forever." It "stands," that is, it is steadfast, it is certain, it does not give way, it does not quiver, it does not sink, it does not fall, it does not leave you in the lurch. And where this Word enters the heart in true faith, it fashions the heart like unto itself, it makes it firm, certain, and assured. It becomes buoyed up, rigid, and adamant over against all temptations, devil, death, and whatever its name may be, that it defiantly and haughtily despises and mocks everything that inclines toward doubt, despair, anger, and wrath; for it knows that God's Word cannot lie to it.¹⁴

In his lectures on the sermon on the mount, Luther often treated the matter of the assurance of salvation. In his comments on Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God," he said:

It is a wonderful thing, a treasure beyond every thought or wish, to know that you are standing and living in the right relation to God. In this way not only can your heart take comfort and pride in the assurance of His grace, but you can know that your outward conduct and behavior is pleasing to Him...All the monks have publicly taught that no one can know whether or not he is in a state of grace. It

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise on the Last Words of David*, in *ibid.*, 15:272.

serves them right that because they despise faith and true godly works and seek their own purity, they must never see God or know how they stand in relation to Him.¹⁵

In his sermons on the gospel of John, preaching on John 15:4: “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me,” Luther railed against the “doctrine of the pope” and “all factions” who nullify faith and the assurance of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. They “say about pious people, who are upright and perform good works” that they “are not to know how they stand with God.” Luther went on to say that “the vile and accursed devil from hell told them to say and proclaim this!”¹⁶ A bit later, Luther expressed the judgment “that it is intolerable to declare in Christendom that we cannot and must not know whether God is gracious to us.” He went on to counsel every “Christian pastor or a believing Christian” that he must profess and say, “I know that I have a gracious God and that my life is pleasing to him.”¹⁷

That it is the will of God that believers enjoy the assurance of their salvation, the scriptures make abundantly plain. For one thing, scripture proclaims the blessed truth that God is our heavenly Father. What Christian parents would be satisfied only to provide for their children, giving them plenty of food, adequate shelter, and sufficient clothing? What Christian parents would be pleased only that their children feared and obeyed them? What Christian father or mother would be satisfied with that? Do not Christian parents want above all else that their children know that they love them, love them more than anything in the entire world? Do not Christian parents do everything that they can to reassure

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, in *ibid.*, 21:38.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 14–16*, in *ibid.*, 24:217.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24:221.

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their children of their love for them, surrounding them with the tokens of their love, so that their children have that assurance? How much more is this not true of God, our heavenly Father, in relation to those who are his children?

Scripture also teaches that God is the husband of the church. The church is his bride and wife. What Christian husband would be satisfied only with providing for and protecting his wife? What Christian husband would be content that his wife honor him, submit to him, and cook and clean for him? Is it not rather the case that a Christian husband desires more than anything else that his wife loves him and knows of his love for her? Does he not repeatedly remind her of his love and constantly surround her with the tokens of his love? We need to do more of that than we do as Christian husbands. If everything is right in a Christian marriage, the husband not only loves his wife, but constantly reassures his wife of his love for her.

That is what Christ, the head and husband of the church, does. He does that in his word, his love letter to his beloved bride. That is what holy scripture is and the purpose that holy scripture serves. In its pages Christ proclaims his everlasting love for his bride, the church. In the preaching of the gospel, Christ assures his church of his love. That is the “good news” that the gospel proclaims: God’s love in Jesus Christ for his elect people. Every Lord’s day, through the preaching of the gospel, we are confirmed in God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. This is one reason—not the only reason, but one reason—on account of which the pure preaching of the gospel and faithful church attendance ought to be of great importance in the life of every Christian.

Many specific passages of scripture make plain that it is the will of God that his people live and die in the assurance of their salvation. Many give expression to the comfort in life and in death

that God's people actually enjoy. Think of the book of Psalms and how frequently the psalmists give expression to the assurance of their salvation. To be sure, the psalmists had their struggles with various doubts and fears, as is the case with every child of God. There were the doubts and fears that were due to their own sins and falls into sin. There were doubts and fears that arose in their souls because of the distressing circumstances of their earthly lives. But in the end, they enjoyed the assurance of the love and favor of God.

Think of Psalm 23. In the very first verse, David confesses, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." That is the assurance of the child of God. He is assured that his Savior is his shepherd, the one who guides him and protects him as he walks down all the different pathways of life. Exactly because he has the confidence that the Lord is his shepherd, he is able to say, "I shall not want." That clearly is the idea of Psalm 23:1. Because the Lord is his shepherd, therefore he is assured that he shall not want. To such an extent is he assured that he shall not want that even "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (v. 4). In the confidence that the Lord is his shepherd, he is even able to face death—death, mind you—with confidence and without fear. The conclusion of the psalm is that "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever" (v. 6).

Or think of Psalm 73. Though for a time the psalmist was envious of the wicked and felt that God was against him, he came to see the truth of the matter: "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart" (v. 1). That was the conviction God worked in the psalmist through the hard circumstances of life which he had led him. So the psalmist was brought by God to the assurance, which is the conclusion of the psalm, "Nevertheless I

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am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory” (vv. 23–24). Glorious assurance!

Or call to mind the Old Testament patriarch Job. After the Lord had grievously afflicted him, he expressed his doubts and fears, as in Job 19:9–11: “He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He hath destroyed me on every side, and I am gone: and mine hope hath he removed like a tree. He hath also kindled his wrath against me, and he counteth me unto him as one of his enemies.” Yet he did not lose the assurance of his salvation altogether. Think of what Job confidently confessed just a little later in verses 23–26:

23. Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book!
24. That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!
25. For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:
26. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

What a glorious confession! What an expression of the assurance of salvation enjoyed by the believer!

Over and over again the New Testament teaches the same assurance of salvation that God’s elect people enjoy.

15. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.
16. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

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17. And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. (Rom. 8:15–17)

Think of Paul's glorious confession in 2 Timothy 1:12: "For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." "I know whom I have believed," says the apostle and every child of God through the apostle. That is the language of confidence—unwavering confidence.

In the first epistle of John, an epistle that is all about assurance, the apostle John uses similar language. He speaks there of knowing that we know God. In 1 John 3:1–2, the apostle exclaims:

1. Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons [children] of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.
2. 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.

That is the assurance of the Christian: that he is God's child and that God has set his love upon him. That gives us confidence for the present and good hope for the future.

In the end, the whole Christian life is built on the assurance of salvation. That underscores the importance of assurance in the life of the believer. There is not and there cannot be a Christian life apart from the assurance of salvation. Why does the Christian do good works? Why does he strive to live in harmony with the will

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of God? Why do we carry out the demands of our earthly calling, sometimes at great cost? Why do we sacrifice, expend ourselves, endure persecution, and are willing even to lay down our lives for the sake of the gospel? In order to earn or merit with God? No! A thousand times, no! Why? In order to show our love for and our thankfulness to the God who has saved us. That is the reason—the only reason. Our thankfulness to him arises out of and proceeds from our assurance of salvation. How can I be thankful to God for that of which I am not assured? That is impossible. I cannot be. No one can be. True thankfulness presupposes the assurance of salvation. The whole Christian life of gratitude rests squarely on the assurance of our salvation.

“THESE DOUBTS AND FEARS THAT TROUBLE ME”

This is not to deny that there are times when doubts and fears arise in the soul of the child of God, even the strongest of God’s children. There are times in the life of every Christian when he succumbs temporarily to these doubts and fears. We sing in Psalter 210 concerning “these doubts and fears that troubled me.”¹⁸ In Psalm 77, of which Psalter 210 is a versification, the psalmist speaks of crying out to God in “the day of my trouble” (v. 2). He complains that his “spirit was overwhelmed” and that he was “so troubled that [he] cannot speak” (vv. 3–4).

Even after Martin Luther’s recovery of the gospel of grace and the assurance of salvation that he enjoyed through faith in Jesus Christ, there were times when he struggled with various doubts and fears. There were times, in fact, when he struggled mightily

18 No. 210:5, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995).