

The monstrous uncertainty

✧ *In the name of Jesus.* ✧

The Reformation rediscovery of a righteousness from God through faith in Christ – faith *alone* in Christ – opened the gates of paradise for Luther. As he reminisced in 1545, this changed everything for him. “A totally other face of Scripture showed itself to me” (*Luther’s Works [LW] 34:336-337*). Knowing now that there is a righteousness from God in Christ, he saw the work of God as “what God does in us,” the power of God as that “with which he makes us strong,” and the wisdom of God as that “with which he makes us wise,” and so on and so forth. He did not only understand Romans 1 and those long-hated psalms, but also passages like 1 Corinthians 1:30, “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” Finally he knew. Finally he was certain.

Raging against this joyful certainty is what Luther called in his 1535 Galatians lectures, “this monster of uncertainty” (*LW 26:386*). Luther aimed these words at the pope who directed Christians to look to their own “good deeds or perfection,” “at our own works and merits,” instead of “at God Himself as He promises, and at Christ Himself, the Mediator” (*LW 26:387*). For centuries this horrible monster raged and rampaged its way through the Christian Church. Christians bought indulgences and prayed to saints. The faithful performed satisfactions to gain absolution. Christians saw purgatory looming and wondered just how much purging they would go through before they found their way through the pearly gates. The Mass was

offered as a sacrifice for the living and the dead to lessen that time of purging. Monks discussed earnable merit both condign (full merit) and congruous (half-merit). At the pinnacle we find the axiom *facere quod in se est* (“to do what is in you”), the comforting assurance that when one does what is in them (that is, their best!) God will certainly not deny them grace. And still, even with that softening of the severity of God’s “Be holy,” no one ever knew, nor could ever know, where they stood with God. Against this monster, Luther held up God’s promises: “When this happens, a man can never be certain about the will of God but is continually forced to waver and finally even to despair. It is impossible ever to decide what God wills and what is pleasing to Him, except in His Word. This Word makes us certain that God cast away all His wrath and hatred toward us when He gave His only Son for our sins. The sacraments, the power of the keys, etc., also make us certain; for if God did not love us, He would never have given us these. Thus we are overwhelmed with endless evidence of the favor of God toward us” (*LW 26:388*).

We have the evidence of God’s favor which overcomes the sin that plants doubt and the devil and flesh that create uncertainty. It is in the Word, the promises of God, promises about forgiveness, life, and salvation in that one name above all names: Jesus Christ, named that “because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). It is in the Word made visible: the Baptism Peter says saves us and the Sacrament Jesus says is for our forgiveness. Here we look when all else appears different, when all else says otherwise. Here we look when that monster,

that uncertainty, comes and says otherwise about God, that God is different than the Scriptures say, that God hates you and that the only place for you is in hell because of your great wretchedness (which is, of course, true apart from Christ and faith in Him). Jesus directed us to the Word of God when He talked about the wise man hearing “these words of mine and putting them into practice” by building on the rock, because the gates of hell cannot overcome that rock, that Word of God, for “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 7:24, 16:18, 24:35).

Standing at the center of that certainty is the righteousness of God, that righteousness “from God...that is by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:17), the righteousness that Paul calls “justification” in Romans 3. The uncertainty that destroyed Luther, that led him to hate God, disappeared only when the Holy Spirit gave him Paul’s understanding that this righteousness is from God alone, by God’s grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, revealed by the Holy Scriptures alone (“to which the Law and the Prophets testify,” Romans 3:21). The uncertainty disappeared when Luther saw Christ as God intended him to be seen: “the sacrifice of atonement,” so that God could “be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25-26). The Word showed Luther the Jesus of the blessed exchange: “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18). The Word showed him the God of reconciliation: “That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21). The Word showed him the righteousness that makes all other kinds of righteousness look like garbage, a

righteousness not my own “but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:9). Luther tied all this confidence, comfort, and uncertainty up in the pronoun “our” in Galatians 1:4 (“who gave himself for our sins”): “Especially practice this pronoun ‘our’ in such a way that this syllable, once believed, may swallow up and absorb all your sins, that is, that you may be certain that Christ has taken away not only the sins of some men but your sins and those of the whole world. The offering was for the sins of the whole world, even though the whole world does not believe” (LW 26:38).

This righteousness, this justification, this declaration of God for the sake of Christ Luther set at the center of theology. In the Large Catechism he said this is why the church exists, exchanging the word “justification” for “forgiveness” just as the Formula of Concord does: “Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the <grace of the> Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but <continuous, uninterrupted> forgiveness of sin” (LC, II:55). In the Smalcald Articles he called it “the first and chief article” and said “Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls.... Upon this article everything that we teach and practice depends, in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the whole world. Therefore, we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine” (SA, II:1, 5). Notice the use of the word “doubt.” We must not doubt justification. If we doubt this, then we have nothing else to hold

on to. Worse, we will begin to create other objects of faith.

Melanchthon made similar statements in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. He called justification the “chief topic” that “opens the door to the entire Bible” (Apology, IV:2). Notice that description. Justification is not just the most important doctrine of Scripture, but justification is the starting point of theology, the doctrine that evaluates the others (Mattes, 10). We do not isolate justification from the other doctrines. Justification informs all other doctrines, as Franz Pieper said, either as an antecedent flowing into justification or a consequence flowing out of it (Pieper, II:404). Further, all doctrines “serve” justification (Pieper, II:513-514).

Then Melanchthon talked about the confidence and assurance justification gives: “But let us remember that the Gospel gives a sure promise of the forgiveness of sins. To deny that there must be a sure promise of the forgiveness of sins would completely abolish the Gospel” (Apology, V:143). The Scriptures, in fact, extol confidence, rightly placed confidence, most famously in Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” The Apology: “Christ, however, condemns confidence in our works; He does not condemn confidence in His promise. He does not wish us to lose hope of God’s grace and mercy. He attacks our works as unworthy, but does not attack the promise that freely offers mercy” (V:218). The Lutheran Church emphasized just this point in her final confession. “This article about justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the chief article in all Christian doctrine. Without this teaching no poor conscience can have any firm consolation or truly know the riches of Christ’s grace” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration [FC SD], 3:6).

This is what God desires for us: confidence, hope, assurance, certainty. It stands at the center of the promise, that you can know this about God, and thus, through faith in Christ, about yourself. Consider Romans 5:1, “Therefore since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Consider the use of the word “world” (*kosmos*) in key justification passages like John 1:29 (“takes away the sins of the world”), John 3:16 (“God so loved the world”), 2 Corinthians 5:19 (“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ”), 1 John 2:1-2 (“but also for the sins of the whole world”), and even in the negative sense in Romans 3:19 (“the whole world held accountable to God”). Then there is the use of “all” in Romans 5:12-19 (“justification that brings life for all men”) and 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (“one died for all, and therefore all died”). Pile on the pronouns both personal (“for our sins,” “his love for us”, “who reconciled us to himself”) and indefinite (“whoever believes,” “anyone who trusts in him,” “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”). Consider the words of the psalms, “In his Word I have put my hope,” “But with you there is forgiveness.” Think of Jesus saying simply to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” Or turn to the words of Paul and Silas to that jailor, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” We could go on and on. The point remains quite elementary: God does not desire us to live in doubt. He makes plain both the consequences of sin (“The wages of sin is death.”) and the consequences of his grace (“But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”). God makes sure to leave neither the law nor the gospel side of the equation in doubt or uncertain. Here justification informs our Lutheran law/gospel hermeneutic, driving our interpretation of all the Scriptures.

Yet as simple as this might seem to be, it has not been a simple thing to hold on to throughout Church history. Alister McGrath lays some blame on the Latin language. In his history of the doctrine of justification, he blames the Latin word *iustificare* for the problems we have had and still do have with justification. That word, which etymologically means “to make righteous” (*justum facere*), became the default translation for the Greek *dikaioo*. And, as McGrath says, “this resulted in a shift of emphasis from *iustitia coram Deo* to *iustitia in hominibus*” (McGrath, 15). One word choice caused faith to drift from seeking the righteousness before God (*coram Deo*) that comes from God to being obsessed with the righteousness in men (*in hominibus*) that tended to come more and more from man. In other words, the great debate between forensic righteousness (“God declares me not guilty for the sake of Christ”) and inherent righteousness (“God actually makes me holy”) turned on a translation choice (interesting that this could happen even then, eh?).

This error in justification eventually led, as we have already briefly traced out, to the Reformation itself, for it opened the door for and perhaps even created the monstrous uncertainty. If it is about holiness in me (*in hominibus*), a condition, not a status, then how do I get holy (Faith alone? Indulgences? Penance? Satisfaction? Meritorious works both condign and congruous?)? And when am I ever holy enough? It led the Reformers, after their study of Scripture, to state simply before emperor, pope, and world in 1530: “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight

(Romans 3 and 4)” (Augsburg Confession, 3:1-4).”

Seven years later things remained the same among the Lutherans. “I do not know how to change in the least what I have previously and constantly taught about justification. Namely, that through faith, as St. Peter says, we have a new and clean heart, and God will and does account us entirely righteous and holy for the sake of Christ, our Mediator. Although sin in the flesh has not yet been completely removed or become dead, yet He will not punish or remember it” (SA, III:13:1).

Forty years later, the Lutheran Church remained convinced. “Therefore, the righteousness of faith is the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and our adoption as God’s children only on account of Christ’s obedience. Christ’s obedience alone—out of pure grace—is credited for righteousness through faith alone to all true believers. They are absolved from all their unrighteousness by this obedience” (FC SD, 3:4).

If, as Bente reports, one of the Roman bishops at Augsburg in 1530 said, “What has been read to us is the truth, the pure truth, and we cannot deny it” (*Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*, 3:24), then this should be the end of things. *Scriptura locuta, causa finita est!* But we are not so naïve. Just because the truth has been proclaimed does not mean that it stands unopposed, or even wins the day. I referred to the work of Alister McGrath above. His history of the doctrine of justification makes it clear that in justification things have bounced back and forth between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (mostly heterodoxy) for centuries and, amazingly, for being the doctrine upon which the Church stands and falls, this has been one of the most unsettled theological *loci*. This is

because, as Luther put it, “the devil wastes no time on vacation or sleep” (LW 14:38-39). From day one he has worked to undermine this doctrine because he knows that here is the foundation of Christian faith, hope, and certainty. “Hence it is supremely necessary that we ask God to pour or sprinkle upon us this hearing of joy so that we are not covered again with the sadness that the feeling of sin brings on” (LW 12:375). This “hearing of joy” is nothing else but the preaching of justification, the forgiveness of our sins for Christ’s sake, which if we make sure not to “neglect,” then all other falseness will “fall over on [its] own” (LW 26:224).

So the devil has worked to erect new falseness and new barriers, new unclarity and uncertainties and doubts, where there were not any and do not need to be any, though, as Solomon reminds us, they are not really all that new, for there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). He began that work within Luther’s church. Famously, Melancthon wobbled on justification by faith alone and turned into a subtle synergist by adding the will of man as a cause in justification. But it was not just among Lutherans that the devil worked, nor have you asked me to discuss such Lutheran intramural activities. You asked me to treat the doctrine of justification from the perspective of the Reformed and Evangelicals.

When we use the terms “Reformed” and “Evangelical” we mean fellow Christians who also have theological origins in the Reformation; in other words, Protestants who are not Lutheran.¹ We refer to the theologies

¹ Though, by some accounts, Lutherans, especially us non-mainline types (non-ELCA), are lumped into the “Evangelical” category. Historically, Lutherans first went by the name “Evangelical,” in order to stress the gospel-centered nature of the

spawned by Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer, Theodore Beza, Heinrich Bullinger, John Knox, John Wesley, Menno Simons, Jonathan Edwards and many more, too many to be named. Within these movements labeled “Reformed” and “Evangelical” there is also the division between “Calvinist” (supremely monergistic) and “Arminian” (synergistic, decision theology). It is a big tent, and in our post-modern, ecumenical age not every label satisfies all the time. Some of the teachings discussed here will be claimed by some and denounced by others and no one group (or theologian) will necessarily match all these descriptions (One major confessional document, the Leuenberg Agreement, signed by over 90 Reformed and Evangelical churches around the world, rejects one of the key doctrines of the Reformed system: double predestination.). Part of the reason for this is that even though the Reformed have confessions, some of which have stood the test of time (Belgic, Westminster, Heidelberg) and are included in hymnals as “official,” still, these churches are not as ruggedly confessional as the Lutheran Church has been.

Since their origins are reformational, we expect to find much in common with the Reformed and Evangelicals. And we do; especially in justification. It is the exception, rather than the rule, to find a definition of the doctrine of justification that sounds radically different than the Lutheran confessions. Many Reformed and Evangelical churches and theologians stand on the side of a forensic

Reformation gospel (It is still a part of our church body’s name, “Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.”). That name went by the way side as the main denominational title and now we are Lutherans and in America “Evangelical” means something different.

declaration of righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, from God, imputed to the believer through faith. Many uphold the vicarious atonement: Christ for me. Calvin violently opposes the Osiandrian error that the third article of the Formula of Concord also rejects. Charles Hodge, a nineteenth century Reformed theologian, bends over backwards to say that Lutherans and the Reformed agree on justification. A volume laying out a variety of views on justification (aptly titled, *Justification: Five Views*), defends not including a Lutheran "view" because the traditional Reformed and Lutheran views are "functionally identical in all significant aspects" (Beilby/Eddy, 10).

This is true, so far as it goes. If we limit ourselves to talking about a strict definition of justification, then we find many fine statements to which we can say, "Yea and Amen!" In other words, if we read only chapter fifteen of the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), or article six of the Genevan Confession (1536), or articles three and four of the *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549), and articles twenty-two and twenty-three of the Belgic Confession (1561), then we might find ourselves rejoicing! If in Calvin's *Institutes* we limit ourselves to his fine gospel proclamations on justification, appeasement, reconciliation, and how Christ's righteousness is made ours (e.g., 2:17:3-5, 3:2:24), we might find ourselves rejoicing! If we study the works of a modern-day proponent of this theology, Michael Horton (labeled by some as a bridge between the Reformed and Lutheran wing of the Reformation churches), and see how he defends the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us poor sinners through faith alone (M. Horton, 195, 207, 268, 280), we might find ourselves rejoicing! In many ways, the Reformed and Evangelicals are fellow travelers with Lutherans in justification, and we would find them on our side in debates

with those who attack justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ.

The problem is on the edges; though that is not a satisfactory way to put it. That makes it sound like we are about to quibble over details. By no means! For the problems that the Reformed and Evangelicals bring into the area of justification are just those that resurrect that monstrous uncertainty Luther railed against. And even if we can rejoice where the Gospel is given free reign, as Paul did in Philippians 1:15-18, and even if we can "hope" with Ewald Plass "that they were better than the creed they professed" (*Abiding Word*, III:302), still, we know that Paul also reminds us that a little leaven leavens the whole lump (Galatians 5:9). "If everything else were sound there, still this monster of uncertainty is worse than all the other monsters" (*LW* 26:386). And make no mistake about it, what happens among the Reformed and Evangelicals creates a monster of uncertainty to almost the same degree as that of the Roman Church. It is, in some ways, a rose by another name. It is a giving and a taking away. The story is told of a man walking down the aisle of an outdoor market. He admires the wares to his left and right. Suddenly something on the ground catches his eye. He sees green and the face of a president. "Money!" the man thinks as he bends down to pick it up. Before he can, it slips away from his hand. Perhaps a gust of wind caught it. He reaches for the bill. Just before he can grasp it, it shoots further away. This time the man notices that there is no wind, but he hears the sound of giggling. He then notices that the money is attached to a string being held by a boy sitting under one of the tables. The boy laughs while he watches people lumber to and fro trying to get the money he dangles before them. I heard this story first about the Roman doctrine of forgiveness, but in reading the confessions and theology of a number of

Reformed and Evangelicals, it seems like the story can fit here as well. Fine statements of justification – God’s gracious declaration of forgiveness to sinners for the sake of Christ, through faith alone in Christ – get yanked away and create the monstrous uncertainty.

Part 1: Giving too much to God

The Reformation rejected semi-Pelagianism. The Roman Church had made works stand at the center of a man’s salvation. Even though they still talked about grace and faith, the real meat of the Christian life was works. God gets you started, He infuses grace into you, and then you have to use that grace to lead a holy, blameless life. Various schools of thought gave more or less credit to works, but all agreed that works played some role in salvation. So corrupt had things become, in fact, that Lutherans conceded that at least mentioning faith along with works as a result of the Reformation gospel was an improvement. “They do not teach that we are justified only by works. They join faith and works together, and say that we are justified by faith and works. This teaching is more tolerable than the former one. It can offer more consolation than their old teaching” (AC, 20:6-7).

Naturally, then, most of the reactions from reformers, whatever their stripe, would be against works, that is, arguing for the *sola gratia*. For the Reformed who follow in John Calvin’s footsteps, it is really a two-front war. On the one hand, there are the Roman perversions of grace that introduce works and merits and earning salvation aided by the hated sacramental system of the pope, the popish sacrifice of the mass especially. On the other hand, there are the abominations introduced by Jacob Arminius and his Remonstrants in the early seventeenth century, abominations that eventually became

what we know today as decision theology. It is, in fact, fair to say, that much of the argumentation of the Reformed is not so much directed at Lutherans (except perhaps when it comes to the sacraments) as it is in a fear and dread of Roman and Arminian theologies, theologies that add man’s work and cooperation (synergism) to God’s *sola gratia* (monergism).

So fiercely monergistic is John Calvin and those following him, so much do they want to defend God’s grace, power, and sovereignty, that three chilling teachings became the heart of Reformed theology: double (or unconditional) predestination, that is, from all eternity God chose those who were going to heaven (the elect) and those who were going to hell (the reprobate); the limited atonement (Jesus only died for the elect); and the effectual calling (the Spirit accompanies the Word to call only the elect; also known as irresistible grace).

You might wonder, what has this to do with justification? It is the doubt created. Fine statements about the work of Christ and justification get vitiated when we go out further from the center and discuss how what Jesus did becomes our very own. That problem begins at the beginning, with the premises and the foundations. For the Reformed, the starting point for so much of their hermeneutic is God’s sovereignty instead of the law/gospel distinction that Lutherans make. If God is sovereign and all-powerful, then what He wants to have happen happens, right? Gabriel Fackre, a Reformed theologian, asks, “What happens when Reformed “sovereignty” takes charge of the doctrine of justification, rather than being a perspective on it? The answer is in the history of Reformed thought on predestination. From Calvin forward, the sound impulse to ground justification in the eternal purposes of God

has been accompanied by a speculative leap into the workings of the divine mind as to who is elect and who is reprobate. Thus sovereignty *cum* justification eventuates in theories of double predestination, controversies as to whether such is supralapsarian, infralapsarian, or sublapsarian and the like: (Rusch, ed., 78).

Fackre goes on to compare the Lutheran and Reformed Christ. One is haveable and the other is unhaveable. Lutherans can find Christ "in, with, and under" and among us while the Reformed find him only up there, sovereign, making these eternal and secret decrees (*ibid*, 62).

From this premise come some conclusions. If God picked some to be saved, as Ephesians 1 says, then He must have rejected others, or at least passed them by. "No man who would be thought pious ventures simply to deny" this, Calvin says (*Inst.*, 3:21:5). Further, "There could be no election without its opposite reprobation" (*Inst.*, 3:23:1). It just has to be this way.

From that conclusion comes two others. Firstly, "the covenant of life is not preached equally to all" (*Inst.* 3:21:1). God's call and His Spirit only comes to and effectually calls the elect, otherwise "one hears merely the external word" (M. Horton, 260). Secondly, if God accomplishes all He decrees; further, since He does not just permit, but decrees everything, then not a drop of Jesus' blood can be wasted or spilled in vain (Palmer, 43), and so we must say that Jesus only died for the elect; His atonement, while it may be theoretically sufficient for all, in reality is only efficient for the elect (cf. Canons of Dordt, 2:3, 8; Westminster Confession, 11:1; Philadelphia Confession of Faith, 11:3; cf. also Berkhof, Palmer, M. Horton).

As said above, the goal is to defend God, to defend grace, to defend man's total depravity and worthlessness, the total loss and wreck we were in sin. But in doing so, it gives too much to God. It makes God even more inexplicable than He already is. We agree with Paul that God is beyond us, "Who has been his counselor?" We agree with Isaiah when he quotes the Lord, "Your ways are not my ways." We nod, even if only grudgingly, when the Lord tells Moses, "The secret things belong to me." But in all this, we rely on the clarity of God's promises; we see God, as Luther did in his commentary on Psalm 51 "dressed in his promises" (*LW* 12:310), a God "we can grasp with joy and trust" (*LW* 12:312), a God who shows himself to us in His Son and says, "When you have seen me you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). This you cannot do when faced with such a sovereign God as Calvin and his followers posit. All the good words on justification fall into doubt and darkness when you introduce an eternal decree to hell, a limited atonement, and an effectual calling. Though Calvin and others would rage against such a characterization and fight to their deaths to say it is not so, these teachings take away hope and introduce the monstrous uncertainty. Especially when combined with the traditional Reformed teaching that there is no temporary faith. Think hard on this.

The decree of reprobation or passing over or eternal damnation means that no matter what you think, do, say, or feel, if you are God's elect you will go to heaven. If not, you will not. And you never could. There never was any hope for you, simply because it pleased God to do so. Significantly, it is the same for those chosen. The first reason given and the main reason given for election is not necessarily "in Christ," but rather, "God's pleasure." He is sovereign. This is the default answer. "God's sovereign, He can do what He wants." Granted, Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God

is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him," yet still, the bare, unloving way in which this God is often shown to us does not match the picture of Scripture. And when Christ is left out of the picture, as in so many places He is, then it is a terrifying thing. Calvin himself said so. "The decree, I admit, is dreadful" (*Inst.*, 3:23:7). It gets more dreadful, because, again, denying it to the hilt, Calvin and those who follow him even include sin in this sovereignty. God does not just foresee the fall, "but also at his own pleasure arranged it" (*Inst.*, 3:23:7). "God decides and causes all things to happen that do happen...even sin" (Palmer, 25). Arguments made to the contrary fall into the "if only wishing made it so" category; or maybe sophistry.

This gives birth to the most dreadful and hateful thing of all: the inability to preach the gospel. From Michael Horton and Edwin Palmer comes the warning that we cannot say, "Jesus died for you" to anyone (M. Horton, 212; Palmer, 54), because He might not have, because you might just be among those damned from eternity. It is the exact opposite of the Lutheran approach. We assume (hope, pray) that everyone before us is actually among the elect, even if they are not at this moment believers, and that perhaps today or tomorrow we will see God do His eternal work in time. The Calvinist can only say, "I know that Jesus died for some people, and He might have died for you, possibly. I hope you get the Spirit's assurance at some point so that you'll know for sure!"

In other words, the Reformed (and really the Evangelicals right along with them), end up with something that Philip Cary calls "reflective faith" (Cary, "Why Luther Is Not Quite Protestant"). In other words, the key thing is to be able to say, "I know that I believe." But there are two problems here: what about when I am dealing with *Anfechtung*

and just do not know for sure? And what about when I fall into grave sin? That is bad enough, but it gets worse, because the Reformed also make it clear that it is possible to have a faith that looks like faith, sounds like faith, and acts like faith, but is not actually faith. There is a rejection of any sort of temporary faith. This comes from two parts of that famous Calvinist TULIP²: the unconditional election that is also called double predestination and the "P" of the TULIP, which is the perseverance of the saints. As Horton puts it: it is "impossible" to "reverse the court's verdict" (M. Horton, 321), because God does not call "those whom he has not chosen" (M. Horton, 321), and those who appeared to believe "were never living members through faith" (M. Horton, 322: cf. Calvin's *Institutes*, 3:2:10, 3:2:11, 3:24:7).

But, since some can have all the signs of faith, where can any confidence lie? It is not just a matter of wondering if Jesus died for me or not, or wondering if God was preaching to you or not when the Word came to you. You cannot even be sure of your faith. Ever. Right here, right now, your faith may or may not be genuine. It does not matter what you think or feel, because this false faith can have the appearance of real faith...but it is not real. What monstrous uncertainty. If God picked from all eternity the haves (heaven) and the have-nots (hell), and if Jesus only died for the haves, and if God only really and truly (effectually) calls those whom He has elected, then what good is it to hear the gospel? For it is entirely possible that I could hear the gospel and "believe" in Jesus, only to find out that Christ has consulted His list and said,

² TULIP is an acronym representing the five chief points of Calvinist theology: **T**otal depravity, **U**nconditional election, **L**imited atonement, **I**rresistible grace, and the **P**erseverance of the saints.

“Um, no, sorry, but you can’t accept me. You’re reprobate.” A have-not.

Part 2: Giving too much to man

As much fun as it is to ponder that dark abyss, we have to give some attention to the other side, where too much credit is given to man. Here we find Jacob Arminius rebelling against the terrible decrees of Calvin and those who came after him. Arminius did not invent these doctrines. He just raised the specter of Pelagius, that British monk responsible for so much of Augustine’s theological output. It is Pelagius who “introduced” into the church the idea of making your choice for good or evil. While Arminius was not so crass, he did certainly bring synergism into the Reformed churches, just as Melancthon brought it ever so subtly into the Lutheran Church. Of course, the Smalcald Articles suggest that the devil introduced this doctrine into the Church when he whispered to Eve, “Did God really say?” and that Eve introduced it into humanity when she saw that the fruit of the tree was “good for food...and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6; SA III:8:5).

The key to this is doing everything opposite of John Calvin. Calvin says man is totally depraved; Arminius, and those who follow after him (and expand upon him), says that man is, if not a moral free agent, in possession of at least some spark, some ability to make that radical and amazing decision for God. We must be able to accept or reject God’s offers (S. Horton, 348, 361). Erasmus said such things. “God would not command something we could not accomplish.” There must be a voluntary response from us (Grudem, 200). “I must decide” (Grudem 702, 709, 710, 712, 717). In fact, Wayne Grudem calls justification, a “response” from God to our faith (Grudem, 722). Whatever depravity the decision

theologian posits, it becomes a chimera when giving credit and ability to the human will and begging him to pray the sinner’s prayer and so save himself today.

Move on in the contradictions of Calvin. If the Reformed say election is unconditional (based on nothing within man), then it must be conditional. The Arminians move in the realm of the *intuitu fidei*, the idea that man is chosen by God on the basis of a foreseen faith (cf. Article 1 from The Five Articles of the Remonstrants).

Not only that, but far from being a limited atonement, it is clearly unlimited, that is, available to all, if only you choose. Which means grace is clearly resistable because some believe and some do not. Though, at the end, at least some of the Evangelicals end up agreeing with the Reformed on the perseverance of the saints (Baptist Faith and Message, Article V). So not all Calvin is anathema all the time.

Lutherans find themselves sympathetic to the Arminian cause just as we embrace at least the “T” of the Calvinist TULIP (total depravity). We want to free up Christ’s blood for all people. We agree that election is based on nothing in man, but we allow God to actually want all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. But we have also seen that we can work just as little with Arminians as with Calvinists.

Again, some fine words might be said about justification, but what happens when there is a choosing of salvation that eliminates grace *alone*? What happens when faith is my personal decision? The monster of doubt stalks onto the stage. How did you decide? When did you? Did you mean it? Look at your life since then. That “reflective faith” Cary describes becomes a key component of the

Evangelical *Sitz am Leben*. Cary produced a syllogism that helps clarify this: “Major premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved. Minor premise: I believe in Christ. Conclusion: I am saved” (Rogers).

But do you see the monster of doubt? This syllogism forces you to “worry whether the faith [you] have is ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ faith” (Rogers). In other words, the typically Reformed and Evangelical way of looking at faith (which, let us be honest, we have probably taught in catechism more than we would care to admit, even if only accidentally) contains within it the seeds of the monster of uncertainty. It causes us to do a type of theology Gerhard Forde loathed: adverbial theology. “Do I really believe? Sincerely believe? Truly believe? Have I made sure to deeply and despairingly enough repent of my sins” (Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 10)? Instead, Cary suggests we use this syllogism: “Major premise: Christ told me, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’ Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth. Conclusion: I am baptized (i.e., I have new life in Christ)” (Rogers).

But in exactly this area both the Reformed and the Evangelicals generally end up on the same side, because both sides have problems acknowledging that God “can do godlike things through simple means” (*Abiding Word*, II:333). Michael Horton, writing in a seemingly autobiographical vein, hinting at his own past, talks about the view of “many Christians”: “For many Christians, especially evangelicals, the public means of grace (preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper) are ‘churchy,’ different from – if not antithetical to – one’s private, personal, and unmediated relationship with Christ” (M. Horton, 343-344). This he further summarizes as growing up with an “emphasis...on getting us to do something: to learn and follow (in preaching), to commit (in

baptism) and to recommit (in the Lord’s Supper)” (*ibid*, 345).

Again, you say, “You’re talking about the sacraments, you’ve drifted from justification.” But have we? Joel Fredrich, in a study of the Marburg Colloquy and the announcement by the Lutherans that Zwingli and his friends were of a “different spirit,” that is, outside of the Church, unbelievers, says that when you lose the means of grace, you stand to lose justification, because you lose the God who gives (Fredrich, “A Different Spirit”). Burnell Eckardt suggests something similar in a study of Luther’s “Bondage of the Will.” He notes that on the Reformed side, especially with Calvin, “the purpose of salvation...was primarily to provide God with people who would praise him. For Luther, however, the primary purpose of salvation was ‘in order that I may be his.’... This comparison demonstrates that Christian theology either must begin with a merciful God, or it will inevitably result in a God whose chief aim is to take rather than to give” (Eckardt, 28-29).

In other words, if the means of grace are minimized, then what becomes of the *sola fide* and the *sola gratia*? Among Arminianism the answer is rather obvious. We have it within us to make this decision for ourselves. All things happen on a direct, two-way line between me and God. This is perverted even further by the Pentecostal movement which adds the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, followed by tongues speaking and miracles of healing, all of which are seen as necessary, an “integral part of the gospel” (Statement of Fundamental Truths, 7, 8, 10). Further, the Church is “subnormal” without this immediate pouring out of the Holy Spirit apart from the Word of God (S. Horton, 448).

But what about the Reformed theologians who work so hard to maintain the *sola gratia*

and the *sola fide*? While there are exceptions here and there, of course, in the main they reject the means by which God brings this *gratia* to mankind and creates this *fides* in our hearts. Pore over the confessions and theological writings of the Reformed and Evangelicals and you will find these words describing the sacraments: signs, symbols, tokens, commemorations, ordinances, seals, remembrances, bond and pledge, memorials, figurative, represents, confirms, exercise of faith, appendices to the gospel, marks and badges of Christian profession, living pictures, gifts received not by the mouth but by the Spirit through faith, helps us understand the gospel, testimonies of grace. What you will almost never hear connected to the means of grace is forgiveness of sins.

Where is the connection? It comes in when the Reformed suddenly become enthusiasts (*schwaermerei*). Though they almost to a man affirm the creative power of the Word when *accompanied* by the Holy Spirit (a powerful *caveat*), they consistently also teach that the Spirit is not bound to these means, though he regularly uses them (Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 1; Philadelphia Confession of Faith, 10:3). Further, they posit a specific example where He goes outside His means: babies born to believers. Calvin says this in book four of his *Institutes* (4:15:20, 4:15:22). Michael Horton agrees in his most recent work, *Pilgrim Theology* (450-451). Berkhof summarizes it well in his *Systematic Theology*: “The special grace of God operates only in the sphere in which the means of grace function.... This, of course, does not mean that He has Himself become subservient to the appointed means and could not possibly work without them in the communication of His grace, but only that it has pleased Him to bind Himself, except in the case of infants, to the use of these means” (608).

This is not the only whiff of enthusiasm we can smell among the Reformed. We find it also in the “P” of the TULIP, the perseverance of the saints, the blessed assurance. Calvin promises that believers will feel and know this assurance and so be convinced that they are not among the reprobate (3:2:15). It comes not primarily from the promises of God, but from things in addition to God’s promises, like “steadfast prayer” (Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter 16) and a “serious and holy pursuit of conscience and good works” (Canons of Dordt, Part 5, 10). In other words, when the means of grace are minimized, downplayed, or rejected, we have really no place to turn for confidence, to remove the monster of uncertainty, but ourselves. We must see progress. We must see gifts of the Spirit. Again, what if we are filled with *Anfechtung*? What if I am unable to find assurance or security? As Daniel Deutschlander points out, this seems to be one of the hallmarks of Reformed theology and one of the great threats. For the Lutheran, looking at God’s Word, looking at Christ, hearing the promises of God, we can rejoice, even when things are terrible (“Reformed Theology and Its Threat”). Because it is not about Cary’s reflective faith (“I know that I believe”), it is rather that “unreflective faith” that says, “Christ promises and God does not lie.” Cary goes on: “Talking about faith does me no good in *Anfechtung*, when only the Word of God can help me” (Cary, “Why Luther Isn’t Quite Protestant”). Provocatively, Cary asks in another article, “What do I care if I’ve been predestined or not? Today’s sacramental faith is sufficient for the day. Today you can believe that God is not lying to you. Tomorrow’s faith will have to wait for tomorrow. The sacramental promise of your baptism will still be there, and the struggle to believe it (against worries about predestination, the weakness of your own faith, and so on) will still be there to be

fought" (Cary, "Sola Fide: Luther and Calvin"). While much lip service is paid to the Word of God, when the assurance comes from God electing babies simply because their parents believe, the Spirit working or possibly not in the Word, my "steadfast prayer" or a good ol' Protestant work ethic, then it is hard not to see the monster of uncertainty waiting to pounce, as sin waited to pounce upon Cain. "The decree, I admit, is dreadful."

And it gets worse. C.F.W. Walther cites John Gerhard on why there is no comfort in the Calvinist system when one really sticks to it in both of its aspects (that is, giving too much to God and giving too much to man). Gerhard goes to the places in which we seek comfort and certainty and explains how they are emptied of such:

"But God has boundless mercy for you (His atonement is sufficient!)"

"Yes, but what about the decree of reprobation and passing by?"

"Ah, look to the merits of Christ!"

"Yes, but He died only for the elect."

"You were called through the Word!"

"But only the elect get effectually called by the Spirit!"

"Return to your Baptism."

"But rebirth only happens later."

"Run to the Table of our Lord!"

"It's just a sign and symbol, a reminder of something you should already have."

"What about the goodness of Christ our mediator?"

"The human nature of Christ, my mediator, is far away, locked up in heaven!"

"Ah, search your heart, feel the assurance of your faith."

"Yes, but that often vanishes."

"Look at your life, your good deeds."

"Yes, but my unbelieving neighbor does the same things."

"What about the office of the preaching of the Word?"

"What, and turn my pastor into an idol" (Walther, 53)?

The monstrous uncertainty.

Part 3: Coming full circle

We began with Luther and his agony over the righteousness of God. This is what our next theology, one burning its way through the Reformed and Evangelical world today, identifies as our first mistake. "The Church began before Luther," they cry out. "The Church's problem hasn't always been Luther's problem," they protest. One of these, a Swede named Krister Stendhal, named it "the introspective conscience of the west" and called it a "plague" (Stendhal, 17) because it has perverted our view of Paul and justification for centuries.

Others in this school of thought, called "the New Perspective on Paul," including such still living scholars as E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright, get right down to it and say we have completely misunderstood Paul on

justification. It is not some “overarching” or “organizing” principle of Paul’s theology (Stendahl), it is, rather, a very specific response to a very specific problem: the problem of Jew/Gentile relations in the early church. Paul was not contrasting FAITH and WORKS in general. He was simply talking about certain Jewish works that set the boundaries between them and others and had become causes of overweening pride and nationalism: circumcision, kosher eating, and the Sabbath. In all other ways, Paul and the Jews agreed. They were on the same wavelength when it comes to salvation: God “gets you in” by grace (election); you “stay in” by works. This group of scholars, this perspective, then announces that since they have found some grace in Judaism, all references to Jewish legalism must be abandoned and thrown out and we must admit that that is not what Paul was talking about when he discussed justification by works in Romans and Galatians or a righteousness from God in Philippians and Corinthians. Or, if he was, it is just a small component of a much bigger theological picture.

We will grant them half credit. The Church did begin before Luther. We will not grant that Luther’s problem has not always troubled the Church. Go back to the beginning. What troubled Adam and Eve? A guilty conscience. What troubled Cain? A guilty conscience. What troubled Judas and Peter in their betrayal and denial? What problems did Paul point to? The guilt of sin and the inability to get out from the hole you dig in sin. The monstrous uncertainty! “It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (Romans 2:13). “Yes,” Paul says. “You are correct. God will judge. He is a righteous God demanding righteousness and holiness. By your deeds he will know you.”

And yet in Galatians Paul says, “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:15-16). In other words, Paul tells Peter, the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament) should lead us to justification by faith. And so, here we find our half-agreement with the New Perspective. “You are correct, gentlemen, Jews knew grace. It did not begin with Luther.”

But this is not enough for the New Perspective. Many of them wish to redefine the word “justification.” For N.T. Wright justification is a status, but it is not the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is God’s faithfulness to His covenant and our membership in that covenant (Wright, *Justification*, 133ff) which will, inevitably, lead to my faithfulness to the covenant. It is in interacting with Romans 2:13 that Wright and others fall into a trap. They cannot make the Lutheran connection of a faith that precedes and a love that follows; they can only see an initial justification, God bringing us out of exile (Wright’s favored picture), and then a final justification, which, as Dunn argues “is in some degree conditional on faithfulness” (Beilby/Eddy, 200). The New Perspective calls it a “justification by/according to works” (Dunn, 85) because in the end, since they cannot see the righteousness of Christ imputed to us (Paul “would have raged against it,” [Sanders, *Paul*, 81]), but demand rather that we are only “in Christ,” that is, transformed. They lean on something happening to me and in me, that I am actually, personally, performatively righteous (Dunn: “the final judgment will be the measure of that transformation,” 93-94).

Sanders calls this “covenantal nomism” in his landmark work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

Covenant refers to God’s initiative, His grace, bringing someone into His covenant. Nomism comes from the Greek word for “law,” *nomos*. E.P. Sanders asserted that grace “gets you in” and good works “keep you in” or help you “stay in.” Others have polished or revised his language, but many of the New Perspective defenders end up saying one of two things: either we have to do some good works to finish the job of salvation (“final justification”, cf. Dunn, 93-94), or justification is not just a declaration of righteousness, the giving of a status, it is making righteous, giving us some inherent holiness that allows us to perform and do; it is a medicinal act, healing us. Thus we must produce good works to be saved. Our good works count in some way towards salvation. New Perspective proponents hedge and hem and haw and say, “No, you aren’t earning salvation; you aren’t meriting anything,” but their language belies this, especially in a fun little piece of sophistry where Dunn says it is not “earned” but “attained” or “maintained,” and you are not “meriting” but “securing” (Dunn, 221, 290, 222, 463).

The ecumenical benefit? This “final justification” of the New Perspective is a return to the semi-Pelagianism of the medieval church, which the pope teaches yet today. Hence the title of this section: “coming full circle.” The Roman Church teaches that we are not simply declared righteous, we become righteous, and so do good deeds, which earn and merit salvation. N.T. Wright says explicitly that this New Perspective should help us come closer to Rome (cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*). James Dunn goes in another direction and says if Paul is not talking about all works, but only boundary markers, than anything that marks boundaries (like denominational

badges, the doctrine of inerrancy, the inspiration of Scripture, close communion, the roles of men and women, etc.) can be ignored and we should all just get along and work together (Dunn, 70).

This is the great weakness of the New Perspective. While we can praise Dunn and Wright at least for a marginally higher respect for Scripture than many higher critics, in that they make honest efforts to wrestle with the text (though they do use the historical-critical method, and with Paul only function with the “undisputed epistles”), it remains that they desire to absolve Judaism of all charges and to talk about community over the individual, about unity trumping all things. They downplay sin and God’s undeserved love and overplay the hand of works. The New Perspective suggests that Paul’s main problem with Judaism might simply be that it was not Christianity. Meanwhile, if all this is true about Judaism and the Jewish faith, if they knew grace and God’s covenant, why did Jews reject Christ, especially in the light of Paul’s words in Galatians 2:16?

Worse than all that, N.T. Wright, in his book on justification, meant to “once and for all” settle some of the suspicions about his teaching on the issue and that of the New Perspective, shows his disdain for the “for me” aspect of the doctrine, the one thing Luther said should be written in golden, capital letters (to be fair, Wright finds Luther’s Galatians commentaries disjointed and unconvincing, so...). In the preface to his volume on justification he compares focusing on the “for me” to denying helio-centricity. He calls it “self-centered” and “truncated” and “only tangentially related to Paul” (Wright, *Justification*, 23, 25). Finally, with the New Perspective, you now have to wonder if it is not about how I am saved and get to heaven, you know, the big cosmic questions, well, then, what is it about, and, by the way,

how am I saved and get to heaven? Wright does not even really want us to ask this question. It is too selfish and individualistic. On top of it all, you have to worry: what do I have to do to stay in God's covenant (since that is now the definition of justification: "membership in God's family")? In other words, the monstrous uncertainty returns to camp out in my heart, almost worse than before. Our Lord spoke of this in Matthew 12:43-45: "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

In other words, where can my conscience run when the devil assaults me with my sins? Even after my Baptism I still sin. While I grant that God brings me into the covenant by grace, I see how poorly I maintain my status in that covenant. How can I possibly "stay in" when my righteous acts are filthy rags? The monster of uncertainty!

This is not just a New Perspective problem. It is an old Adam problem. We have a term for this: *opinio legis*, that is, "the opinion of the law." We all have in our hearts this tendency and desire to want to get in and stay in based on our own efforts. The Jews did it. Roman Catholicism teaches it. Our sinful hearts do it. We talk big about grace, but then measure our salvation by our church attendance, contributions, and how we dress for church versus how that guy over there does it so poorly. We want credit for the "good works" we do, especially when compared to that no-good, do-badder over there. We must be the ones who are not just "in" but "staying in"; by

works, our works. And then it is no longer grace.

I can stay in only when I see that this righteousness I need comes from God – beginning, middle, and end – through Christ who was righteous for me (interestingly, the whole debate about *dia pisteos Christou*, "through faith in Christ" vs. "the faithfulness of Christ," might be worth exploring here). He began the good work in me; He completes it. He authors and perfects my faith. It is by faith from first to last, as Paul writes in Romans 1. And that faith is in Christ, as Paul so eloquently teaches in Ephesians 1. God blesses us...in Christ. God chose us...in Christ. God predestined us to be adopted...through Christ. We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins...in Christ. God makes known to us His good and gracious will...in Christ. God chooses us...in Christ. God includes us...in Christ. God marks us with a seal, the Holy Spirit...in Christ. For all the talk about "justification by faith," this good news is not always front and center in the New Perspective on Paul, or among the Reformed and Evangelicals. If it is the Reformed, I must doubt that Jesus died for me or that God is talking to me. I might be reprobate. If it is Arminianism, I have to doubt the sincerity of my decision and the conviction of my new life, my grasping and inviting and keeping Jesus in my heart. If it is the New Perspective, I have to doubt the point of it all, because it was only about a few things here and there that are completely irrelevant today and not the big one: forgiveness, getting right with God, heaven and hell. On top of all that, I have, in all of these theologies lost a connection to the one thing that is true, pure, objective, and certain: God's word of promise, the place where faith looks: "Faith is to believe God's promise" (Apology, IV:48). "We must always run back to the promise" (V:44). And in the Lutheran church we have a place to find that

promise: "We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sins, which is wrought through the holy Sacraments and absolution and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire Gospel" (LC, II:54). In other words, as noted above, when we lose touch with the means, the instruments by which God promises to give us Jesus and what He has done for us, we tend to lose what Christ has done for us. When we do this we allow that monster of uncertainty to rise up who preaches to me outside of the Word, but no less powerfully than the Word itself it seems. Yet in that Word God so very personally and powerfully reaches out and grabs us, preaching to us from the pulpit, and when that goes over our heads, puts Himself into our hands and mouths saying, "For you! Take it and be certain!"

These errors and distortions are not new. Augustine talked about (and in some cases, introduced or suggested) similar ideas in the 400s. Luther addressed them in the 1500s. And now we get to address them today. And we have to when we talk about justification, because when we talk about justification, we talk about being saved and getting to heaven. And it is all God: all His grace; all His Word; the law that sets up sin, the sin that sets up remission, and the remission that sets up salvation (cf. *LW 27:269*). And that is for you. In Christ. Of that you can be certain, and you must, or else "genuine unbelief is sure to

follow" (*LW 40:348*). You can be sure because God's apostle, Paul, says it: "Therefore the argument that Paul presents here is the most powerful and the highest of all against all the righteousness of the flesh; for it contains this invincible and irrefutable antithesis: If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on Him, then they are still on the world. Again, if Christ Himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through Him. But if He is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them. 'But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ Amen'" (1 Cor. 15:57) (*LW 26:280*).

And you can be certain because Jesus Himself says so: "Behold, how I bear your sins! ...You are all condemned, but I will take your sins upon Myself. I have become the whole world. I have incorporated all people since Adam into my person.' Thus He wants to give us righteousness in exchange for the sins we have received from Adam" (*LW 22:168*).

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