

WHY LUTHER IS NOT QUITE PROTESTANT

The Logic of Faith in a Sacramental Promise

Phillip Cary

John Calvin honored Martin Luther as a pioneer of the Reformation, whose work was completed by those following after him who were not so entangled in the old ways of the medieval church.¹ Ever afterwards many Protestants have regarded Luther as not fully Protestant, certainly not as consistently Protestant as Calvin. This is a reasonable judgment. There are a number of points, most prominently in his sacramental theology, where Luther is closer to Catholicism than the Reformed tradition ever gets.² This of course makes Luther ecumenically very interesting, a possible bridge between sundered territories of the Christian church. For one who is not fully Protestant may by the same token be less one-sidedly Protestant.

Against a background of extensive agreement Calvin diverges from Luther in ways that can be described as narrow but deep, like a small crack that goes a long way down. The crack widens in later versions of the Reformed tradition as well as its offshoots, such as the Baptist and revivalist traditions. A useful mark by which to locate this widening crack is the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. If an American revivalist could ask Luther whether he was a born again (i.e., regenerate)

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1. See Brian Gerrish, "The Pathfinder: Calvin's Image of Martin Luther" in his *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

2. See David Yeago, "The Catholic Luther" in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). The precise extent to which Luther can and cannot be called "Catholic" is clearest in comparison with medieval Catholicism, but this of course decisively affects any comparison with contemporary Roman Catholicism.

Whereas all agree that one is born again only once in a lifetime (either in baptism or in conversion) for Luther justification is a different matter: it is not tied to any single event but occurs as often as a Christian repents and returns to the power of baptism. For as we shall see, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone takes shape in the context of the Catholic sacrament of penance, where justification occurs whenever true penance does.

Christian, his answer would surely be: "Of course I'm a born again Christian. I am baptized."³ Someone who gives such an answer does not think a decision for Christ or a conversion experience is necessary in order to be a Christian. It is enough to be baptized as an infant and then believe what you are taught, for instance, in a catechism. Hence it is not surprising that there is no revivalist tradition native to Lutheranism, much less to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, all of which teach baptismal regeneration and practice infant baptism. There are particular complexities in the story of the Reformed tradition, which typically practices infant baptism but does not teach baptismal regeneration. But beginning with the Reformed tradition Protestantism has been characterized by a soteriology in which the decisive moment of passing from death in sin to life in Christ is not baptism but a conversion to faith that happens once in a lifetime. This is a departure from Luther, based on a fundamental but seldom-noticed divergence on the doctrine of justification. Whereas all agree that one is born again only once in a lifetime (either in baptism or in conversion) for Luther *justification* is a different matter: it is not tied to any single event but occurs as often as a Christian repents and returns to the power of baptism.⁴ For as we shall see, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone takes shape in the context of the Catholic sacrament of penance, where justification occurs whenever true penance does.⁵ In this regard Luther is not quite Protestant enough to believe that justification happens only once in life.

Except when theologians fail to pay attention, there is always a tight fit between theology, church practice and the shape of Christian experience. Practice and experience fit together, for example, in that the practice of teaching children what to believe results in a very different form of Christian experience from the practice of teaching them that they are not believers until they choose to be. Of course the latter also involves teaching children what to believe (e.g., they are taught what it means to choose to believe) and the former does not eliminate the possibility of choice (for one can refuse to believe what one is taught). Nonetheless the two forms of Christian experience are quite different,

3. It is a regular part of Luther's pastoral advice to urge people who doubt whether they are Christians to remember their baptism and appeal to it. See Luther's *Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 442 (henceforth Tappert); *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1976) 12:371, 35:36 and 36:60 (henceforth LW); and Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), p. 122 and 133f (henceforth *Spiritual Counsel*).

4. The alien righteousness by which we are justified before God "is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant," according to the 1519 sermon "On Two Kinds of Righteousness," LW 31:297.

5. See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III 85.6 ad 3 (henceforth ST). For Thomas the justification of the ungodly is brought about by the remission of sins, which occurs in penance (ST I-II 113.1).

both for the children and for the adults they become. The difference in experience and practice cannot be understood, however, without clarifying the difference in theology—and in particular, the underlying difference in what I shall call the logic of faith. Hence in what follows I will begin by correlating Christian experience and church practice with syllogisms representing the logic of faith—as I am convinced that logic, emotion and life are intimately bound up with one another, especially in Christian faith. My aim in connecting experience and practice to logic is not to reduce one to the other but to show as precisely as possible why Luther is not fully Protestant—and in two senses: first, to clarify the logical difference between Luther and more consistent Protestants such as Calvin, and then to indicate what pastoral motives led to this difference.

My argument is that Luther's understanding of the power of the gospel depends on a Catholic notion of sacramental efficacy, which places salvific power in external things. Without such a notion Protestantism cannot sustain Luther's insistence on putting faith in the external word alone, but must rely also on faith itself (i.e., on the fact that I believe) as a ground of assurance, especially in the face of anxieties about predestination. There is a conceptual trade-off between putting faith in the word alone and having faith that you are eternally saved. Logically you can't do both, and Luther never consistently takes the second, Protestant option.

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TWO SYLLOGISMS

The Protestant teaching on which Calvin and Luther fundamentally agree is the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which is based on the conviction that believers receive Christ through faith in the promises of God. Faith in Christ is thus always faith in a divine promise. Luther insists on this correlation between faith and promise in treatises that were foundational for the Reformation⁶ and Calvin builds it into his definition of Christian faith.⁷ For both Luther and Calvin faith alone justifies, because what God promises in the gospel is nothing less than Jesus Christ (in whom is justification, salvation, etc.) and the only way to receive what is promised is to believe the promise. Thus Luther can say, in numerous variations, "Believe it and you have it"⁸—not because

6. See the crucial treatises of 1520: *Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:348f) and *Babylonian Captivity* (LW 36:38-43 and 58-62).

7. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 3:2.6-7 and 29 (henceforth *Inst.*).

8. This motto (derived from Matt. 8:13 and 9:29: "be it unto you according to your faith") recurs frequently and in many variations; e.g., "you have as much as you believe" (LW 35:16), "You have it because you believe that you receive it" (LW 31:104), "You receive as much as you believe" (LW 31:193), "as you believe, so it will happen to you" (LW 12:322), and "if you believe, you shall have all things" (LW 31:348).

faith earns or achieves anything, but because God keeps his promises. Similarly, faith is certain (Luther and Calvin agree) because the promise of God is certain. This is not the modern Cartesian notion of certainty based on the perception of clear and distinct ideas within the mind, but rather the certainty that God speaks the truth—a certainty that is logically independent of what we perceive, know or believe. God is sure to be true to his word, whether we believe it or not. Hence the certainty of faith is rigorously objective rather than subjective, in the sense that what makes faith certain is not the activity of the subject of faith (the perception, reasoning, intuition or experience of the believer) but the faithfulness of the object of faith (the fact that God keeps his word). The certainty of Christians is not based on their faith but on God's faithfulness.

For Luther the logic of faith works differently. He originally worked out the correlation between faith and promise in the context of sacramental theology, where he sees a double structure of God's word: first a scriptural promise of Christ that institutes the sacrament, then an oral word that is part of the sacramental action itself.

The difference between Luther and most other Protestants emerges because Scripture contains more than one divine promise, and it makes a difference which kind of promise is taken as fundamental. Protestant theology typically bases Christian faith on a universal promise such as "Whoever believes in Christ shall be saved." On this basis the logic of faith leads to the certainty of salvation.⁹

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.
 Minor Premise: I believe in Christ.
 Conclusion: I am saved.

In this syllogism the major premise¹⁰ is taken from the Scriptural promise, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). The minor premise is a confession of faith in Christ. The logical conclusion is the assurance of salvation. Hence to know that I am saved I must not only believe in the promise of Christ but also know that I believe it. In this sense faith is reflective: faith is based on God's word, but the assurance of faith must include believers' awareness that they have faith.

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9. This is a version of what the Reformed tradition has called "the practical syllogism," though something like it is clearly assumed in most forms of Protestant theology. Hence I will call it "the Protestant syllogism." For some of the many formulations of the practical syllogism using the minor premise "I believe..." see Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 293 and R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 71.

10. "Major premise" is a logicians' term of art referring typically to the universal principle in a syllogism, whereas the "minor premise" is an application of the principle to a specific case. Traditionally the major premise is stated first.

11. This double structure is spelled out in 1519 in the little treatise on *The Sacrament of Penance* (LW 35:12f) and applied to the Lord's supper in 1520 in *A Treatise on the New*

16:16) Luther teaches that the baptismal formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," is the word of Christ. Luther is emphatic on this point: the words spoken in the act of baptizing are Christ's own, so it is Christ who really performs the baptism.¹² Most importantly for the logic of faith, the first-person pronoun in the baptismal formula refers to Christ, so that it is Christ himself who says to me, "I baptize you...." Ministers are merely the mouthpiece for this word of Christ, just as when they say, "This is my body, given for you."

This is why for Luther Christian faith is quite literally faith in one's baptism. To have faith in Christ is to believe him when he says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Since baptism signifies new life in Christ, faith justifies us by receiving this new life. Faith in effect speaks thus:¹³ Christ says he baptizes me, and therefore (since baptism means new life in Christ) I have new life in Christ. Hence for Luther justification does not require us to have a conversion experience or make a decision for Christ. These are acts of will that would detract from Luther's point about faith alone: that we are justified merely by believing what Christ says is true. The logical connection is made by Luther's motto, "believe it and you have it": to believe in your baptism is to have the new life Christ signifies when he baptizes you.¹⁴ Hence the logic of faith in Luther can be represented as follows:

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).

Here the major premise is a sacramental word of grace, and the minor premise is based on the truthfulness of God—a favorite theme of Luther's, who frequently uses Paul's saying, "Let God be true and every man a liar," (Romans 3:4) as an admonition to put faith in no word but God's. (Of course the logic of Luther's faith falls apart if Christ is not God).

The part about "every man a liar" includes me. I am to put no faith in my own words, not even in my confession of faith. Hence in his defense of infant baptism, Luther argues that the church is not to baptize

Testament, that is, the Holy Mass (LW 35:82-84), then generalized to cover all three sacraments (baptism, penance and supper) in the *Babylonian Captivity* (LW 36:82f; cf. also LW 32:16f). In sum, Mark 16:16 authorizes the baptismal formula as Christ's word; Matt 16:19 authorizes the word of absolution as Christ's word in the sacrament of penance; and the word of institution ("This is my body" etc.) is both the authorizing scriptural promise and the external word in the Supper.

12. A repeated claim: see, e.g., LW 36:62 and 40:242, as well as the *Large Catechism*, Tappert, p. 437.

13. For ease of exposition I will often adopt characteristic features of Luther's discourse when expounding Luther's theology. One such feature is a fondness for synecdoche, the figure of speech in which part stands for whole. Here for example, as often in Luther, "faith" means the whole believer, precisely insofar as he or she believes.

14. *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, LW 35:38.

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So for Luther the doctrine of justification by faith alone means that Christians do not rely on faith. Faith does not rely on itself but only on the promise of Christ.

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on the basis of a believer's confession of faith, because believers are never certain whether they really believe.¹⁵ In this sense Luther makes Christian faith profoundly unreflective: faith does not include knowing one has faith. It does not even require *believing* one has faith: for "he who doesn't think he believes, but is in despair, has the greatest faith."¹⁶ Christian faith puts no faith in faith, precisely because it is faith in God's word alone. For faith, Luther teaches, must be certain, which means it cannot put faith in our inadequate ability to believe. So for Luther the doctrine of justification by faith alone means that Christians do *not* rely on faith.¹⁷ Faith does not rely on itself but only on the promise of Christ.

What makes this unreflective faith possible is the logical character of Luther's major premise. Being a sacramental word, it is wholly external—dependent for both its meaning and its truth on external circumstances, the particular time and place in which it is spoken. Hence Luther will also insist that the gospel is essentially an oral rather than a written word.¹⁸ This dependence on external circumstances of utterance makes it possible for the word of Christ to use the pronoun "you" to address me in particular. (This understanding of the gospel as a sacramental word of address leads to Luther's habit of expounding the logic of faith in the first person singular, which I adopt here. Trying to speak in the third person when explaining Luther's theology—persistently saying "one is baptized," for instance, rather than "I am baptized"—makes for unbearably awkward prose. This is no accident, of course. Luther wants to make it difficult to overlook the first-person character of faith, which includes the realization that Christ's life and death, preaching and promise are indeed *for me*. This is the famous Lutheran *pro me*. It is important to notice that the emphasis here is not on personal experience but on the content of the word of God. When the gospel is preached—most clearly of all in the sacraments—Christ himself says "you" and means me.¹⁹ To believe this word is to learn

15. Luther argues that because "*all men are liars* and God alone knows the heart ... whoever bases baptism on the faith of the one to be baptized can never baptize anyone." For no one knows who has true faith, not even he who has it: "the baptized one who receives or grounds his baptism on his faith ... *is not sure of his own faith*," *Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:240. (All emphases in quotations are mine, serving simply to highlight the point to be illustrated.)

16. *Ibid.*, 241.

17. "There is quite a difference between *having* faith, on the one hand, and *depending on* one's faith, on the other. Whoever allows himself to be baptized on the strength of his faith is not only uncertain but also an idolater who denies Christ. For he trusts in and builds on something of his own, namely a gift which he has from God [i.e., faith] and not on God's Word alone," *ibid.*, 252.

18. See especially *Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, LW 35:123.

19. "It is this 'you' that makes it our concern, just as in baptism.... So here it is: 'for you.' Therefore, note well and learn well these words! The benefit is: 'given for you, shed for you....' Remember to include yourself in this 'for you' ... There stands your God; he offers you his body and blood, broken and shed for you..." *Sermons on the Catechism*, LW 51:190f.

about myself from another, rather than to trust my own personal experience or feeling. Thus the Lutheran *pro me* does not make Luther's faith reflective, but precisely explains why it is unreflective: to believe Christ's word is to be uninterested in the fact that I believe but captivated by what Christ has to say to me. Even apart from its character as word of address, the gospel is good news *for me* because it is Christ's story, not mine. To say it is not my story means, not that it has nothing to do with me, but that it is about what Christ does for me rather than what I do for Christ. The Law tells me what to do; the gospel tells me what Christ does. So "Christ died for you" is a way of stating the gospel, whereas "I believe in Christ" is not. I appear in Christ's story as object, not subject—not the doer but the one on the receiving end of the good things Christ has done. Hence when the gospel is properly preached the pronoun that refers to me is the object rather than the subject of active verbs.²⁰ If the gospel alone is the proper object of faith, then the *pro me*—the fact that I am the object of Christ's love and redemption—is part of the content of faith, whereas an awareness that I believe is not. That is why faith in a word that is explicitly *pro me* is free to be unreflective.)

According to Luther's account of baptism Christ speaks to me in particular, which is possible only with an external word, not a universal principle. Thus the major premise of Luther's syllogism, which refers to me in particular, differs subtly but profoundly from the major premise of the standard Protestant syllogism, which is a universal principle applying to me only as a member of a whole class of people, i.e., all who believe in Christ. In the Lutheran syllogism, "you" means me; in the Protestant syllogism, "you" could only mean whoever meets the stated condition of belief in Christ. For the promise in the Protestant syllogism is conditional, logically equivalent to the conditional statement: "If you believe in Christ, you are saved." Here the pronoun "you" is not dependent for its meaning on external circumstances and therefore cannot refer to me in particular. It is a logical placeholder, like a variable in algebra. In modern logic, in fact, the sentence would read: for all *x*, if *x* believes in Christ then *x* is saved. In order for this "*x*" to refer to me, I must meet the condition stated in the if-clause. What is more, according to the logic of this syllogism I must *know* I meet the condition in order to know I am saved. Here Luther gets off the boat.

Thus the Lutheran pro me does not make Luther's faith reflective, but precisely explains why it is unreflective: to believe Christ's word is to be uninterested in the fact that I believe but captivated by what Christ has to say to me. Even apart from its character as word of address, the gospel is good news for me because it is Christ's story, not mine.

20. Note this grammatical pattern (the subject of the active verb is Christ, not I) in two key passages about the nature of the gospel: "The gospel does not preach *what we are to do* or to avoid. It ... reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite and says, 'This is *what God has done for you*'" (*How Christians Should Regard Moses*, LW 35:162); and "Faith in its proper function has no other object than Jesus Christ. ... It does not look at its love and say: 'What have I done? Where have I sinned? What have I deserved?' But it says, 'What has Christ done? What has He deserved?' And here the truth of the gospel gives you the answer: 'He has redeemed you from sin, from the devil and from eternal death'" (1535 *Commentary on Galatians*, LW 26:88).

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All the Reformers agree, of course, that faith in Christ is a condition of salvation, but Luther does not think we need to know we meet this condition. This gives us a kind of freedom to be unconscious of our faith—unconcerned about how strong or weak it is, how sincere or insincere—which is reflected in the minor premise of Luther's syllogism. To say that Christ tells the truth is to make a statement of faith in Christ which does not explicitly mention faith (quite in contrast to the minor premise of the Protestant syllogism, "I believe in Christ"). This makes it logically possible for believers not to believe that they believe. For faith need not speak of faith but only of the truth of God's word.

The logic of faith in the two syllogisms differs because the truth of the two major premises works differently. "Whoever believes in Christ is saved" is the kind of sentence that is always true,²¹ whereas "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," is true only when spoken in the right circumstances. I can utter the baptismal formula at a whim or while writing a theology article, and then it is not true. No one is baptizing anyone as I write this article! The baptismal formula is only true in its proper sacramental context: its truth depends on being uttered under the right circumstances, at the right time and place. Hence the word of Christ quoted in the major premise of Luther's syllogism is an external word in a way that a universal principle cannot be: its truth is quite literally dependent on external circumstances. That does not mean its truth is uncertain or changing. It means that different utterances of the same sentence differ in truth. To put it more precisely: different *tokens* of the same *type* of sentence have different truth values (i.e., some tokens are true while others are false). This technical terminology from modern logic clarifies the sense in which two utterances of a sentence are the same and yet different: they are the same *type* of sentence but different *tokens*. (Analogously, two copies of the same book are the

21. In modern logical terms, "whoever believes is saved" is an eternal sentence, meaning its truth value never varies. (Both *false* and *true* are "truth values" in the technical sense of this term). Thus for example both "two plus two equals four" and "two plus two equals ten" are eternal sentences. So are "grass is green" and "whoever believes in Christ is saved." If it turns out that grass is not always green—or that some people believe in Christ but are not saved—this means that the sentence is simply false, not that its truth value has changed. An eternal sentence thus has the logic of a universal principle: it is true always and everywhere or it is false always and everywhere. However, the class of eternal sentences includes not only universal principles but also many particular statements, such as "Lincoln died in 1865." The point is that if any utterance of an eternal sentence is true, all of them are. In terms of the type/token distinction (introduced below), this means that all tokens of an eternal sentence are true or else all are false. This is what is meant by saying its truth is independent of circumstances of utterance. As a result of this, one can safely ignore the difference between type and token when evaluating the truth of an eternal sentence—and one normally does. The logic of Luther's theology, on the other hand, is often hard to follow because we are much more accustomed to thinking of the logic of eternal sentences (as in mathematics or history) than the logic of personal address, where both truth and meaning (e.g., the referent of the pronouns "I" and "you") depend on circumstances of utterance.

same type but different tokens). Like many other sentences in which one person addresses another, the sentence-type, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," has no fixed truth value. But *tokens* of this type do have a fixed truth value.²² When I mumble the baptismal formula while writing this article, the token I utter has a truth value that will not change: it is false and will remain so forever. But when uttered in the proper sacramental context, a token of the same type is not only true, but has (Luther insists) the unchanging truth of God's word.²³ The oral word of the gospel, sounding in the air at one moment and gone the next, is the unchanging truth of God — not because it is universal and timeless but because God keeps his promises.

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THE SACRAMENTAL EFFICACY OF THE WORD

The difference in the logic of faith represented by these two syllogisms is subtle, and I am not claiming that Luther, Calvin or their followers were always aware of it. Quite the contrary: because the difference is so easy to miss, two theologians can think of justification by faith alone in profoundly different ways without noticing the difference. It is especially easy to overlook the distinction between a faith that is required to be reflective (believing that one has faith) and a faith that is not. This distinction makes a subtle but profound difference in the experience of faith, because it makes a difference in faith's object. A reflective faith has itself for object in addition to God's word. As a result, in most forms of Protestantism there is a tendency for the experience of faith to become part of the content of faith. There are reasons why most Protestants have a reflective faith, which are closely connected with the reasons why Luther is not quite Protestant. Luther's unreflective faith depends on an external word of grace, which requires a Catholic notion of sacramental efficacy. For as a Catholic sacrament is an external sign that confers what it signifies, so the Lutheran gospel is a promise that gives what it promises.²⁴ Thus Luther can say that "the words of

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22. This is not a matter of course. There are some types of sentences whose tokens frequently change in truth value, because the reality to which they refer changes; e.g. "it is raining" and "the cat is on the mat." The point is that the sentence-type, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" does not fall into this category.

23. Precisely in its externality—as an oral word which was heard at a particular time and place—the sacramental word is for Luther the unchanging, utterly reliable word of God: "The unchanging Word of God, once spoken in the first baptism, ever remains standing" (*Concerning Rebaptism*, LW 40:249) and "the promise which God made [in baptism], which cannot possibly lie, is still unbroken and unchanged, and indeed, cannot be changed by sins" (*Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:60).

24. In a particularly lapidary formulation, Luther says, "the promises of God give what the commands of God demand," i.e. righteousness, holiness, love, etc., *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:349. The contrast with a similar formulation of Augustine is instructive. Augustine prays, "Give what you command, and command what you will" (*Confessions* 10:29.40). This is the standard example of an Augustinian prayer for grace (see

Christ are sacraments by which he works our salvation," because "the Gospel words and stories are a kind of sacrament, that is a sacred sign, by which God effects what they signify in those who believe."²⁵

For a key example of this sacramental efficacy of God's word, we can turn to one of Luther's earliest treatments of the correlation between faith and promise, a brief treatise on the sacrament of penance in 1519, in which he treats the sacramental word of absolution ("I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit") as the external sign in the sacrament of penance. This is striking, because Luther normally makes a sharp distinction between word and sign in a sacrament—e.g., the baptismal formula is the sacramental word in baptism and immersion in water is the sacramental sign.²⁶ But in the sacrament of penance there is no sign other than the word of absolution. A year later this lack of a distinct sign was one of the reasons Luther ceased to count penance as a separate sacrament.²⁷ But in 1519 he got around this problem by identifying the word of absolution as the sacramental sign in penance. This identification of word and sign is conceptually possible because medieval theologians classified both words and sacraments as signs, following Augustine's semiotics or theory of signs, which embraced both his philosophy of language and his sacramental theology.²⁸ Luther speaks in this Augustinian way when he says that penance "is called a sacrament, a holy sign, because *one hears the words externally that signify spiritual gifts within.*"²⁹ Here the words *are* the sacrament, the sacred external sign of inward spiritual gifts. So when he assigns salvific power to these external words, this is not simply analogous to the medieval concept of sacramental efficacy but rather is one instance of it. That is to say, Luther's doctrine of justification by

When he assigns salvific power to these external words, this is not simply analogous to the medieval concept of sacramental efficacy but rather is one instance of it. That is to say, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone is at its origin a Catholic sacramental doctrine.

also Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter* 22 and *On the Gift of Perseverance* 53) but whereas Augustine seeks grace in prayer (a human word), Luther directs us to find grace in the Gospel promise (a divine word). This insistent focus on the promise of God is the crucial Reformation addition to the Augustinian legacy.

25. My translation from a 1519 sermon in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993; henceforth WA, for *Weimarer Ausgabe*) 9:440.

26. Most importantly in *Babylonian Captivity* LW 36:43, picking up on the distinction he made a few months earlier in the *Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass*, LW 35:91. 27. *Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:124.

28. For the semiotic basis of language (i.e., words as a species of sign) see Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2:3.4. On sacraments as signs, see the reference to a sacrament as "sacred sign" in Augustine, *City of God* 10:5, which medieval theologians took as the starting point for their definitions of the term "sacrament." Augustine himself draws attention to the parallel between words and sacred signs, *ibid.*, 10:19.

29. *The Sacrament of Penance*, LW 35:11. The identification of the word of absolution as a sacramental sign is also clear from Luther's division of the sacrament into three parts, corresponding to sign, thing signified, and faith. In the trilogy of short treatises on the sacraments written in 1519 (*The Sacrament of Penance*, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, and *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ*, all found in LW 35) each contains this tripartite analysis of the concept of sacrament. In *The Sacrament of Penance* the place of the sign in this analysis is occupied by the word of absolution.

faith alone is at its origin a Catholic sacramental doctrine.³⁰ This early focus on the sacramental efficacy of the word of absolution remains in Luther's later work, where he insists that to entertain any doubt about the truth of the absolution is unbelief, tantamount to calling God a liar.³¹ In the same period, the confessional documents of the Lutheran tradition call the word of absolution "the true voice of the Gospel."³² For although after 1520 Luther no longer counts penance as a separate sacrament, it remains a Lutheran sacramental practice, because it is counted as part of the sacrament of baptism. What happens in penance is, according to Luther's teaching, simply a return to baptism.³³

The bulk of the Protestant tradition, on the other hand, has treated sacramental absolution as fraudulent, a merely human word that is far from being the basis of saving faith. Calvin's position on this point is particularly interesting because it is particularly nuanced. He sees great value in private absolution—not as a sacrament but as a pastoral practice—so long as it is made explicitly conditional upon faith in Christ. The word of faith which is unconditional in Luther therefore becomes conditional in Calvin, very much along the lines of the Protestant syllogism described above. Contrasting Catholic and Protestant practice, Calvin insists that "to know for certain whether the sinner is absolved does not pertain to the priest ... [so] the minister of the word, when he duly performs his functions, can absolve only conditionally."³⁴ Plainly, Calvin's concern is that the minister's word is false if he pronounces absolution upon someone who puts no faith in Christ. Hence the absolution must be explicitly conditional:

The bulk of the Protestant tradition, on the other hand, has treated sacramental absolution as fraudulent, a merely human word that is far from being the basis of saving faith.

The word of faith which is unconditional in Luther becomes conditional in Calvin, very much along the lines of the Protestant syllogism described above.

30. This is shown most clearly in the developmental study by Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971); see especially chapter 4, "Die reformatorische Wende als Neugestaltung des Bussakraments." Luther was in the process of reconceiving sacramental absolution as an efficacious word of promise in his 1518 defense of the 95 theses, especially in his explanations of theses 7 and 38 (cf. LW 31:98-107 and 191-96). But for the first complete text in which Luther's new understanding of absolution is worked out in its own terms, Bayer points to a set of theses composed in 1518, *Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientis consolandis* in WA 1:630-33. The 1519 treatise on *The Sacrament of Penance*, which I use extensively here, is based on this set of theses and incorporates many of them *verbatim*. It appears Luther used the theses as his outline for the treatise.

31. See especially *The Keys*, LW 40:347f, 367f and 375.

32. *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 12:39 in Tappert, p. 187. The logic of Luther's 1519 treatise on *The Sacrament of Penance* comes through strongly in the *Augsburg Confession* itself, article 25, which insists that in the evangelical churches "the people are carefully instructed concerning the consolation of the word of absolution.... It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the voice of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command.... We also teach that God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if we heard God's voice from heaven, that we should joyfully comfort ourselves with absolution and that we should know that through such faith we obtain forgiveness of sins," Tappert, p. 61f.

33. *Babylonian Captivity*, LW 36:124; a point taught also in the *Large Catechism*, Tappert, p. 445f.

34. *Inst.* 3:4.18.

For absolution is conditional upon the sinner's trust that God is merciful to him, provided he sincerely seek expiation in Christ's sacrifice.... The sinner can, indeed, embrace clear and true absolution when that simple condition is applied of embracing the grace of Christ according to the general rule of the Master himself.... According to your faith be it done unto you.³⁵

Calvin's "general rule" here stems from the same biblical passage as Luther's motto, "believe and you have it," but functions differently, because the logic of faith here is different. Instead of an assurance that you have what is promised, it functions as a warning that you don't have what is promised until you meet the condition. So we have here a variant of the Protestant syllogism:

Major premise: Christ promises absolution of sins to those who believe in him.

Minor premise: I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: I am absolved of my sins.

For Luther, on the contrary, to put faith in sacramental absolution simply is to put faith in Christ. For the absolution is Christ's word, not the pastor's, and to believe Christ's word is to believe Christ. Here again the logic of Luther's faith is sacramental.

Here we have exactly the same minor premise as in the earlier Protestant syllogism, with a different promise as the major premise. As a result, we must (once again) believe that we believe in Christ before we have any assurance of the truth of the conclusion. Thus we can put no faith in the absolution without first being convinced we have put faith in Christ.

For Luther, on the contrary, to put faith in sacramental absolution simply is to put faith in Christ. For the absolution is Christ's word, not the pastor's, and to believe Christ's word is to believe Christ. Here again the logic of Luther's faith is sacramental, based on a double structure of God's word. The scriptural promise of the keys, the power of binding and loosing given to Christians,³⁶ means that the external word of absolution is Christ's own word, even though it is spoken by the mouth of the minister. For "this word is God's word, even as God has promised."³⁷ Hence the logic of absolution closely parallels the logic of baptism in the Lutheran syllogism described above:

Major premise: Christ says, "I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth

Conclusion: I am absolved of my sins.

We have the same minor premise as before, focusing not on whether I have faith but on whether God's word is true. Hence when Luther

35. *Inst.* 3:4.22.

36. "I give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven," Matt. 16:19. These are Christ's words to Peter, but Luther understands them as addressed to the whole church: "the keys have not been given to St. Peter but to you and me" (*The Sacrament of Penance*, LW 35:15). Hence while (in 1519) Luther assumes one normally goes to a priest for absolution, he insists that absolution may be given at need by any Christian, "even a woman or a child" (*ibid.*, p. 12). The priesthood of all believers is already implicit here.

37. *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), LW 35:17.

insists on the necessity of faith (which of course he does frequently and emphatically) his rhetoric works differently from Calvin's account of absolution. Luther's way of exhorting people to believe is to draw attention to the truth of God and warn them that their unbelief makes Christ out to be a liar:

You had better not go to the priest if you will not believe his absolution; you will be doing yourself great harm by your disbelief. By such disbelief you make your God to be a liar when, through his priest, he says to you, "You are loosed from your sins," and you retort, "I don't believe it" or "I doubt it." As if you were more certain in your opinion than God is in his words, whereas you should be letting personal opinion go, and with an unshakeable faith giving place to the word of God spoken through the priest. For if you doubt whether your absolution is approved of God and whether you are rid of your sins, that is the same as saying, "Christ has not spoken the truth."³⁸

Luther's way of exhorting people to believe is to draw attention to the truth of God and warn them that their unbelief makes Christ out to be a liar.

This requirement to believe is not a condition for believing the absolution but an unconditional demand: for if I do not believe Christ's absolution I am calling him a liar and thereby "committing the most grievous sin of all."³⁹ This is clearly meant to be a "must" in service of a "may," giving me the freedom to believe I am forgiven and loved by a gracious God rather than condemned for my sins. I am allowed to believe this good news because I am required to. For God "not only promises us forgiveness of sins, but also commands us ... to believe that they are forgiven. *With this same command he constrains us to have a joyful conscience.*"⁴⁰ This of course addresses Luther's own besetting pastoral problem: an anxious conscience so terrified by the depth of his own sin that it seems intolerably presumptuous to believe that God would have mercy on so horrible a sinner. Luther's demand that we must believe is meant to reverse this situation: now, unless I am presumptuous enough to call God a liar, I have no choice but to believe that God is gracious to me and forgives all my sins.

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But one could press Calvin's concern here. Although on Luther's understanding of the sacrament of penance there is no danger of believing the absolution without believing in Christ (this being logically impossible if the absolution is Christ's word) there still seems to be the danger of the absolution being falsified by the unbelief of those to whom it is addressed. Luther himself warns us that in our unbelief we "make Christ a liar"⁴¹ —not of course by causing him to lie (which is impossible) but in the sense that to doubt his word is "to ascribe ... lying and vanity to

38. *Ibid.*, 35:13f.

39. *Ibid.*, 35:14.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 35:15. The German is *Christum Lügen strafen* (WA 2:718). Surely it would have been less misleading and more idiomatic to translate, "make Christ out to be a liar." All three of the 1519 treatises on the sacraments warn us not to make God out to be a liar; cf. also LW 35:37 and 61.

So on behalf of Protestants everywhere we could raise the question: How can the sacramental word of absolution be true when it is spoken to one who does not believe? For of course Luther agrees with Calvin that there is no forgiveness of sins for those who do not believe in Christ.

God."⁴² So on behalf of Protestants everywhere we could raise the question: How can the sacramental word of absolution be true when it is spoken to one who does not believe? For of course Luther agrees with Calvin that there is no forgiveness of sins for those who do not believe in Christ. Yet he also has no doubt that because the absolution is Christ's word, "the forgiveness is truthful, as true as if God had spoken it, whether it is grasped by faith or not."⁴³ So the question is: how can a word of forgiveness be truthful if the person to whom it is spoken is not forgiven?

Luther answers this question when he defends the power of the keys against the pope a decade later, arguing that the word of absolution, which is based on the key that looses,⁴⁴ is true and certain despite the minister's ignorance of what lies in the heart of him who receives the absolution and even the possibility that he is impenitent and unbelieving:

He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key's fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but thus does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king's fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.⁴⁵

One might think that a gift cannot actually be given unless it is actually received. Calvin speaks for such a view of the logic of gift-giving when he lays down the principle, "It is one thing to offer, another to receive."⁴⁶ But Luther talks as if one can not only offer but even give a gift that is refused. Here again the difference between Calvin and Luther evidently follows from the difference between a conditional and an unconditional promise. You could imagine a last will and testament which bequeathed a castle conditionally: "if my elder son wants the castle, he can have it. Otherwise give it to my younger son." But Luther is apparently thinking of a more standard bequest, such as "the castle goes to my elder son." In that case the son owns the castle willy-nilly, even if he doesn't believe it has been given to him, refuses to accept it, never lives in it, and gets no benefit from it. It is like a bank account established in his name which he does not believe in and therefore never uses; it makes him none the richer. Or as Luther puts it in the context of another sacrament: "The treasure is opened and placed at everyone's door, yes, upon everyone's table, but it is also your re-

Luther talks as if one can not only offer but even give a gift that is refused.

42 "For what is this but to make God a liar or to doubt that he is truthful?—that is, to ascribe truthfulness to one's self but lying and vanity to God?" *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31 350 Thus unbelief in effect tries to say the opposite of "Let God be true and every man a liar"

43 LW 35 22 I have altered the translation to highlight the connection between "truthful" and "true" (*wahrhaftig* and *wahr* in the German, WA 2 722)

44 The connection is clearer in Latin the minister absolves (*absolvit*) on the basis of the key that looses (*solvit*) in Matt 16 18

45 *The Keys*, LW 40 367

46 *Inst* 4 14 16, cf 4 17 33

sponsibility to take it and confidently believe that it is just as the words tell you."⁴⁷

This can also be compared with the action of the Lord's Supper, where a minister does not just offer Christ to the congregation but puts him in the hand or mouths of communicants. For Luther the Gospel is not, as the old Protestant saw has it, like one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread. That would mean the minister's job is to instruct people in how to meet the conditions necessary for salvation—how to get from here to where the true bread is. Instead, for Luther the gospel is one beggar simply giving another beggar the bread of life, which of course is exactly what happens whenever Christ's body is distributed in the sacrament.

Every Augustinian theologian agrees that a sacrament is an external sign that signifies a gracious inner gift of God, but that the gift is not received by those who have no faith in Christ. In short, unbelief separates sign from signified.

CLINGING TO EXTERNALS

The difference between Luther and Calvin on the nature and power of the gospel can be clarified by setting it against the backdrop of an Augustinian view of the sacraments. Every Augustinian theologian agrees that a sacrament is an external sign that signifies a gracious inner gift of God, but that the gift is not received by those who have no faith in Christ.⁴⁸ In short, unbelief separates sign from signified: to receive the sacrament without faith is to receive an empty sign—a sign of grace without grace. So a sacrament received by an unbeliever is valid but not efficacious: it is a true, holy, and (in the case of baptism) unrepeatable sign, but it does the unbeliever no good, because the inward grace it signifies can only be received in faith. So far this is common ground on which Calvin and Luther agree. The difference comes when medieval theologians add to Augustine the doctrine that the sacramental sign not only signifies but also confers or causes grace in the soul.⁴⁹ This is the specifically medieval notion of sacramental efficacy, to which Calvin counterposes the doctrine that God alone gives what the sacrament signifies.⁵⁰ If Calvin's teaching can be called a doctrine of sacramental efficacy, it is certainly not a doctrine of

47. *Large Catechism* on baptism, Tappert, p. 450.

48. The principle is well established in medieval theology beginning with Peter Lombard, "Whoever comes without faith or in pretense, receives the sacrament but not the thing [signified]," *Sentences* 4:4.2.

49. This crucial step seems to have been taken in a 12th-century text ascribed to Hugh of St. Victor, *Summa Sententiarum* 4:1 (*Patrologia Latina* 176:117) which quotes Augustine's teaching and then adds that a sacrament "is not only a sign of a sacred thing but is efficacious [*efficacia*].... A sacrament not only signifies but also confers that of which it is the sign." This formulation is picked up and restated at the very outset of Lombard's *Sentences*, speaking of the "Gospel sacraments" which "not only signify but confer that which inwardly helps." This view had gained such widespread acceptance by the 13th century that Aquinas could say that "we have it on the authority of many saints that the sacraments of the New Law not only signify but also cause grace," ST III, 62.1.

50. See Calvin's formulation, "our Lord gives us in the supper what he signifies by it," *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* in *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 163 (henceforth *Treatises*).

Luther sides with the externalistic sacramental piety of Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard, for whom external signs can give what they signify, while Calvin sides with Augustine, for whom external signs are always pointing away from themselves to something found elsewhere.

external sacramental efficacy. The underlying principle for Calvin is that "we place no power in creatures,"⁵¹ a principle which leads him to deny that "a hidden power is joined and fastened to the sacraments by which they of themselves confer the graces of the Holy Spirit upon us, as wine is given in a cup."⁵² The sign is not where the action is, but testifies to a divine action elsewhere. So for instance Calvin will say, "the Sacrament sends us to the cross of Christ,"⁵³ whereas for Luther if we want to receive what Christ won on the cross we go to the sacrament, not the cross, for it is in the sacrament that it is actually given to us through the word.⁵⁴ The difference is that Luther sides with the externalistic sacramental piety of Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard, for whom external signs can give what they signify, while Calvin sides with Augustine, for whom external signs are always pointing away from themselves to something found elsewhere.⁵⁵

The parting of the ways here concerns how to direct the attention of faith. Calvin gets it exactly right when he characterizes the intention of the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper: "To what purpose is the presence [of Christ's body] hidden under the bread, if not that those who desire to have Christ joined to them may halt at this symbol? Yet the Lord himself willed us to withdraw not only our eyes but all our senses from the earth...."⁵⁶ Luther's sacramental piety halts at the external sign and finds Christ nowhere else. So whereas Calvin warns us that "we are not to cling to the visible signs and there seek our salvation, or imagine the virtue [i.e., power] of conferring grace to be fixed and enclosed in them,"⁵⁷ for Luther such clinging is all that faith does: "faith clings to the water and believes it to be Baptism in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through the water ... but through its incorporation with God's word."⁵⁸ Not to cling to such external signs, Luther teaches, is precisely unbelief, for the problem with unbelievers is that they "do not cling to the outward signs by which God has revealed himself in Christ. But this is to lose Christ altogether."⁵⁹

51. *Inst.* 4:14.12.

52. *Inst.* 4:14.17.

53. *Inst.* 4:17.4.

54. "Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed it or given it on the cross.... [I]n the supper or sacrament ... he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously," *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:213f; cf. *Large Catechism*, Tappert, p. 450.

55. For Augustine signs never give us what they signify but at best admonish us where to look to find it; see Augustine, *On the Teacher* 10.33-11.36.

56. *Inst.* 4:17.29. By "symbol" (*symbolum*) Calvin always means the external sign of the sacrament.

57. From the Geneva Catechism, *Treatises*, p. 132.

58. *Large Catechism* on baptism, Tappert, p. 440.

59. Commentary on Psalm 51, LW 12:352.

Of course Calvin does not deny we should cling to God's promises, but he tends not to think of them as external—and when he does, he thinks of them as inherently powerless. Calvin's sacramental theology typically treats the gospel promise not as an external sign but as a thing signified, that which is sealed and confirmed by the sacrament.⁶⁰ But he does also speak of an external word, associating it with the sacrament as something that has no effect on our hearts without the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶¹ The gospel, like the sacrament, is an instrument which has no intrinsic power.⁶² Word and sacrament are not instrumental causes of grace in the medieval sense but instruments of signification, exhibiting and attesting what God alone has the power to accomplish. To convince us of this, Calvin gives an example from the art of rhetoric, asking us to put ourselves in the place of a speaker trying to persuade an obstinate hearer of the truth: the words beat on the ears in vain and have no effect on the heart.⁶³ Calvin surely speaks from experience here—an experience every preacher of the Gospel has had, beginning with Christ himself. But the power of the word looks different if we put ourselves in the position of the hearer, not the speaker. It is from this standpoint that Luther, who agrees with Calvin that the word has no effect without the Spirit,⁶⁴ will nonetheless speak of the external word as having great power. For when we are hearers—especially if we are anxious and needy hearers—the only place to find the power of God is in the word. From the hearer's standpoint, it is not so surprising that “the human mind is unable to refrain from either enclosing the power of God in signs, or substituting signs in the place of God,” as Calvin complains.⁶⁵ The question is whether the human mind is ever right to find the power of God in external signs—especially if the word of the gospel is, as Luther conceives it, an external sign. In order to give a Yes answer to this question, one needs something like the medieval view of sacramental efficacy that Calvin rejects.

Calvin's sacramental theology typically treats the gospel promise not as an external sign but as a thing signified, that which is sealed and confirmed by the sacrament. But he does also speak of an external word, associating it with the sacrament as something that has no effect on our hearts without the power of the Holy Spirit.

60. *Inst.* 4:14.3 and 5f.

61. “If we ascribe to creatures either the increase or the confirmation of faith, injustice is done to the Spirit of God, who should be recognized as its sole author.... For that the word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us.... The Spirit transmits those outward words and sacraments from our ears to our soul...” *Inst.* 4:14.10.

62. “God breathes faith into us only by the instrument of his gospel... Likewise, the power to save rests with God but ... he displays and unfolds it in the preaching of the gospel,” *Inst.* 4:1.5.

63. *Inst.* 4:14.10.

64. See the 3rd article of the Creed in both Small and Large Catechisms; also the 1535 Galatians Commentary: “For the Word proceeds from the mouth of the apostle and reaches the heart of the hearer; there the Holy Spirit is present and impresses that Word on the heart, so that it is heard,” LW 26:430.

65. Calvin, *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 2:229 (henceforth *Tracts and Letters*).

Calvin's manifold and heartfelt effort to reach consensus with Luther's successors was stymied by the resolute externalism of Lutheran piety.

That Luther is on the medieval side of this divide is clearest of course in his theology of the Eucharist. Whereas his insistence on the power of the word may seem to differ from Calvin only rhetorically (since they agree on the key logical point that the Gospel is to be trusted because God keeps his promises) his disagreement with Reformed theologians about the sacrament of Christ's body only became clearer with the years. On this point Calvin's manifold and heartfelt effort to reach consensus with Luther's successors was stymied by the resolute externalism of Lutheran piety. Calvin insisted that the sacramental signs attest a real gift of Christ's body as our spiritual food, but that this body is located literally in heaven and not in the bread. Therefore the sacrament directs our attention away from earth to heaven, where by the power of the Holy Spirit all who believe may not merely remember and contemplate, but—Calvin emphasizes—really partake of Christ's true flesh and blood.⁶⁶ Calvin sees the sacrament in terms of an analogy between spiritual and corporeal, where the corporeal sign exhibits, seals and confirms the spiritual reality,⁶⁷ a point that Calvinist liturgies reinforce in formulations that follow the pattern: *just as* bread nourishes our bodies, *so truly* Christ's body nourishes our souls. Calvin safeguards the Reformed concern by insisting that the corporeal things mentioned in the "just as" clause have no power to confer spiritual gifts.⁶⁸ But in the "so truly" clause he also affirms the Lutheran emphasis that, because of the truth of God's promises, believers do truly receive and partake of Christ's body. The difference Calvin could not overcome, however, was the Lutheran insistence on finding spiritual power in external things. For on the "just as" side of the formula is mere bread, whereas Christ's body is always on the "so truly" side. In Augustinian terms: the bread is sign, the body signified.⁶⁹

The difference Calvin could not overcome, however, was the Lutheran insistence on finding spiritual power in external things.

Luther thinks quite differently, consistently identifying the body and blood of Christ as belonging to the external sign of the sacrament rather than the thing signified.⁷⁰ This identification, which is easily overlooked,

66. *Inst.* 4:17.18. Cf. also Calvin's remark, "it is not necessary for the essence of the flesh to descend from heaven in order that we be fed upon it, the virtue of the Spirit being sufficient to break through all impediments and surmount any distance of place" in "Best Method of Obtaining Concord," *Treatises*, p. 328.

67. For this analogy see *Inst.* 4:15.14, 4:17.1 and 4:17.3.

68. See his reassurances to Bullinger on this point: "We expressly declare that it is God alone who acts by means of the Sacraments; and we maintain that their whole efficacy is due to the Holy Spirit" in *Tracts and Letters* 5:169. This emphasis is later incorporated into the *Consensus Tigurinus*, the Zurich agreement that established a common Reformed teaching on the Lord's Supper: "if any good is conferred upon us by the sacraments, it is not owing to any proper virtue in them... For it is God alone who acts by his Spirit," *Tracts and Letters* 2:216.

69. As Calvin says, "the bread and wine are visible signs, which represent to us the body and the blood" in *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* in *Treatises*, p. 147.

70. See *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ* (LW 35:59), *A Treatise on the New Testament, that is the Holy Mass* (LW 35:86) and *Babylonian Captivity* (LW 36:44).

makes all the difference. It puts the salvific power of Christ's life-giving flesh in an external sign. It also means that even though unbelievers who take the sacrament receive nothing but an empty sign, they do receive Christ's body — although to their harm and condemnation rather than blessing and benefit, because the sign, which is Christ's body, is separated from the grace it signifies. (Nor is such a separation between Christ's body and his grace impossible or even surprising, for it is clear in the gospel narratives themselves that the external presence of Christ's body can be the occasion not only of faith and grace but also of offense and unbelief). This partaking of Christ's body by unbelievers, or *manducatio indignorum* ("eating by the unworthy") as the Lutheran doctrine came to be labeled, remains the crucial marker of the division between Reformed and Lutheran theology on the sacrament.⁷¹

The subtle conceptual point, which is often missed, is that Calvin and Luther agree on the fact that unbelief divides sign from signified. What they disagree about is on which side of this conceptual divide Christ's body is to be found. Since for Luther the body of Christ is an external sign, it must be present wherever the sacrament itself is found, just like bread in the Lord's Supper or water in baptism. For the external sign is a necessary element in any valid sacrament, and unbelief does not render the sacrament invalid but only inefficacious (in the sense that it does not confer the gracious effect it signifies). Take away the thing signified and you still have a sacrament; take away the sign and you've taken away the sacrament itself. So as a baptismal ceremony without water is not only ineffective but is not even a baptism, and as an attempt to celebrate the Lord's Supper without bread is not really a sacrament at all, just so the Lord's Supper without Christ's body is not a sacrament, which means it is not really the Lord's Supper at all. So classifying Christ's body as an external sign, as Luther does, means that nothing can separate Christ and his body from the sacrament so long as there is a sacrament at all.

Moreover, as sign rather than signified, Christ's body has the same external kind of presence as bread: it is there in our hands or mouths whether we believe it or not. Hence our faith does not bring us to Christ or make Christ present, any more than it causes the bread to be present. The word alone brings Christ to us and makes him present: his body is there because he promised, and faith believes it is so because he said so. This means that the presence of Christ for faith is not a presence felt in the heart but an external presence like bread, which is

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71. For Luther's teaching that even unbelievers eat the Lord's body in the sacrament see *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:179f, and *Large Catechism*, Tappert p. 448f. For the recognition that this doctrine marks the key disagreement between Lutheran and Reformed see the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*, Tappert, p. 481f. and Calvin's "Best Method of Obtaining Concord" in *Treatises*, p. 326. For Calvin's criticism of the doctrine see *Inst.* 4:17.33.

So the stunning claim of Lutheran sacramental theology is that something with the power to save our souls is present in such external fashion that we can literally swallow it, even though we do not experience it. But of course this will surprise Catholics far less than Protestants. The result of this externalistic medieval doctrine of sacramental efficacy, shared by Luther but not by Augustine, Calvin, and Protestantism, is a profoundly different way of directing one's attention—a project of seeking God in external things.

there prior to and apart from our belief, feeling and experience. So the stunning claim of Lutheran sacramental theology is that something with the power to save our souls is present in such external fashion that we can literally swallow it, even though we do not experience it.⁷² But of course this will surprise Catholics far less than Protestants.

The result of this externalistic medieval doctrine of sacramental efficacy, shared by Luther but not by Augustine, Calvin, and Protestantism, is a profoundly different way of directing one's attention—a project of seeking God in external things. We are to look for him on earth rather than in heaven because that is where the word of God tells us to find him. Contrasting the omnipresence of God with his local presence in the sacrament, Luther says, "It is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present *for you*. He is there for you when he adds His Word and binds himself, saying, 'Here you are to find me.'"⁷³ Apart from his word Christ is present everywhere like sunlight, and is equally ungraspable:

He is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way.... He has put himself into the Word, and through the Word he puts himself into the bread also.⁷⁴

This externalistic sacramental piety—groping for God in bread—is indispensable if faith is to be unreflective. A faith that looks away from itself needs somewhere external to look—somewhere quite independent of the experience of faith. If, on the contrary, we must not "cling too tightly to the outward sign" as Calvin says,⁷⁵ then the sacraments must direct our attention away from themselves to something more spiritual and heavenly—and that means faith will inevitably become to some degree an adventure of conscious experience, transcending the mere perception of outward things.

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION AS SACRAMENTAL PIETY

The crucial conceptual difference between Luther and more consistent Protestants therefore concerns the direction of attention. Whereas Calvin, who is as sacramental in his thinking as a consistent Protestant gets, has the external sign directing our attention away from itself to a spiritual gift, Luther wants us to find the inner, spiritual gift precisely by directing our attention toward a specific external sign or word. To find an inner gift in external things is precisely the structure of sacra-

72. See Calvin's explicit denial of this point in "Best Method of Obtaining Concord," *Treatises*, p. 326.

73. *That These Words of Christ, "This is My Body," Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics*, LW 37:68.

74. *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics*, LW 36:342f.

mental efficacy as medieval Catholicism understood it. It also brings into play the logic of perception, for the sacrament is external precisely in that it is not a spiritual reality or universal principle but a thing perceived by the senses. According to the theory of perception Luther learned from medieval Aristotelianism, our minds become one with the form of the external object we perceive. So the form of Christ is in us precisely to the extent that we believe what we hear him say in his external word.⁷⁶ Faith takes hold of nothing but Christ in his word, which means Christ is himself the “form of faith” or even “my form” insofar as Christ and believers become one, so that the latter have “the form of Christ” and “they think of God altogether as He feels in His heart, and they have the same form in their mind that God or Christ has.”⁷⁷ Hence in contrast to most modern theories of consciousness (especially those of 19th century Germany, which have been exceedingly influential in theology) Luther does not assume that if something is in our minds we must be conscious of its presence within us or have experience of it. On the contrary, Christ is united to us in the depths of our hearts precisely as we look away from ourselves and take hold of Christ in his word.⁷⁸ The Aristotelian theory of perception, though running contrary to modern assumptions, makes good sense once you get used to it: it articulates the way we get the color green into our minds by looking outside the mind at green things and get music in our hearts by paying attention to physical sounds. The outward turn of our attention is how the ex-

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75. *Inst.* 4:14.16.

76. Luther explicitly acknowledges his use of this Aristotelian theory of perception in the early Romans lectures (LW 25:364) where it supports his account of how we take on the form of the word in justification (LW 25:211). The same Aristotelian style of thinking undergirds his mature doctrine of Christ as the form of faith in our hearts in the Galatians lectures two decades later, where he speaks of Christ as “the form of faith” (LW 26:129f) or Christ as “my form” (LW 26:167 and 430f). What is unAristotelian is Luther’s insistence that the form of Christ in us is not an essence or concept but that the whole Christ including his body is in our hearts—a point strongly hinted at in LW 26:357 and explicit elsewhere, as for example in *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics*: “in believing hearts he is completely present with his body and blood” (LW 36:346).

77. The 1535 Galatians commentary, LW 26:129f, 167 and 430f. The recent Finnish re-interpretation of Luther’s doctrine of justification, based on union with Christ rather than forensic imputation, builds on these and similar passages. See Tuomo Mannermaa, *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1989) and Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

78. See for instance the turn to externals in the 1535 Galatians commentary: “By paying attention to myself ... I lose sight of Christ, who alone is my Righteousness ... This is an extremely common evil...therefore, we must form the habit of leaving ourselves behind...” (LW 26:166); “And this is why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person or works, but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive” (LW 26:387).

In effect an Aristotelian theory of perception (receiving the form of Christ in our hearts by hearing his word) replaces the Aristotelian theory of habituation (developing the form of righteousness in our souls by doing good works) in explaining how we come to have a share in the righteousness of God.

ternal form (color, music, Christ) becomes none other than the shape of our hearts. In the same way, Luther is thinking, faith brings Christ into our hearts by taking hold of him in his external word. Hence what faith learns by experience is to pay no attention to the experience of faith but only to the gospel of Christ.⁷⁹ If your attention is focused on how you're experiencing the music, then you're not paying enough attention to the music.

Because Christ is formed in the heart by faith, Luther is even willing on occasion to use the scholastic term "formal righteousness," whose role in medieval doctrines of justification he often criticized. The point about the word "form" is that it does not mean mere outward shell (as in modern form/content distinctions) but the essence or substance of a thing (as in Aristotle).⁸⁰ The form of righteousness is substantial righteousness, not something merely imputed to us. Of course for Luther our formal righteousness cannot be a quality or habit of the soul, such as an Aristotelian virtue or skill acquired by repeated practice. That would mean we become righteous by doing good works, which Luther thinks is as absurd as trying to make a tree good by making it bear good fruit. That gets things backwards: the fruit does not bear the tree, but the other way around! The "substance or person himself" must first be good before he can do good works, just as a tree must be good before it can bear good fruit.⁸¹ This is precisely to say: the form of Christ must be in our hearts by faith, and then it is possible for us to do all the good things we ought. So in effect an Aristotelian theory of perception (receiving the form of Christ in our hearts by hearing his word) replaces the Aristotelian theory of habituation (developing the form of righteousness in our souls by doing good works) in explaining how we come to have a share in the righteousness of God. Luther is willing to call this a "formal righteousness," not in the medieval sense of the concept of created grace but as the uncreated grace, as it were, of Christ's presence in us by faith: "Christ and faith must be completely joined....

79. This rejection of a reflective experience of faith is a frequent theme of Luther's attacks on the "fanatics" or *Schwärmer* who "imagine that faith is a quality that clings to the heart apart from Christ. This is a dangerous error. Christ should be set forth in such a way that apart from him you see nothing at all" (LW 26:356). Faith does not see faith in the heart but only Christ outside me.

80. To illustrate: to be a bowl is to have the form of a bowl—otherwise there is only a shapeless mass of metal or wood or other material ("matter" in the Aristotelian sense). To be a horse is to have the form of a horse, its structure and organization and powers—otherwise there is only a corpse or a heap of rotting horseflesh (the matter of the horse without its form). The form of a thing is its essence or substance, that which causes it to be that kind of thing.

81. *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:361. This tree/fruit analogy is explicitly directed against Aristotelian virtue theory in the lectures on Romans: "For the tree does not come from the fruit, but the fruit from the tree. And virtue does not come from acts and works, as Aristotle teaches, but acts come from virtues, as Christ teaches," LW 25:354.

He lives and works in us, not speculatively but really, with presence and with power."⁸²

Precisely this formal righteousness is therefore, in Luther's favored terminology, an alien righteousness. It is called alien not because it remains outside us, but because it is the righteousness of another (*justitia alieni*) which is "infused from outside."⁸³ It is Christ's righteousness, not our own, and we find it only outside ourselves. But by the logic of external sacramental efficacy, what we find outside ourselves is formed in us as we perceive it in faith. So this alien righteousness is emphatically our possession, because faith unites us with Christ as our bridegroom so that "Mine are Christ's living, doing and speaking, his suffering and dying."⁸⁴ So once again, if we believe it we have it: "everything which Christ has is ours" because "he is entirely ours with all his benefits if we believe in him."⁸⁵ Thus the justified soul "has Christ itself as its righteousness."⁸⁶ It is not enough, therefore, to say that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us—though that is one of the things Luther does say. What must also be said is that faith receives nothing less than Christ himself, and therefore his righteousness as well. It is alien righteousness only in the sense that it is the righteousness of the bridegroom, not the bride—and precisely as such is the bride's possession, for all he has is hers. This means that faith possesses an inward righteousness in the heart. The righteousness of faith is "outside of us and foreign to us" only in the sense that it "cannot be laid hold of by our works," for it is faith alone that takes hold of Christ.⁸⁷ But faith does not leave Christ outside, as if he were merely someone to think about or believe in, but embraces him, saying "He is my beloved and I am his."⁸⁸

It is not enough, therefore, to say that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us—though that is one of the things Luther does say. What must also be said is that faith receives nothing less than Christ himself, and therefore his righteousness as well. It is alien righteousness only in the sense that it is the righteousness of the bridegroom, not the bride—and precisely as such is the bride's possession, for all he has is hers.

82. The 1535 Galatians commentary, LW 26:357. The famous grace/gift distinction in Luther is a denial of the doctrine of created grace (i.e., grace as a quality of the soul) but an affirmation of uncreated grace, i.e., the presence of God in the soul: "Grace means the favor by which God accepts us, forgiving sins and justifying freely through Christ. It belongs to the category of relationship ... So you should not think it is a quality, as the scholastics dreamed.... [But] the true Spirit dwells in believers not merely according to his gifts, but according to his own substance. He does not give his gifts in such a way that he is somewhere else or asleep, but *he is present with His gifts*" (LW 12:377).

83. The 1519 sermon "On Two Kinds of Righteousness," LW 31:297. I have altered the translation to reflect the scholastic terminology Luther actually uses: *ab extra infusa* (WA 2:145).

84. LW 31:297.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 298. This follows the fundamental pattern of Luther's thinking about faith and promise set forth in *Freedom of a Christian* (LW 31:351): by faith in God's promise we receive not just forgiveness and righteousness but Christ himself as our bridegroom (as if the promise were a wedding vow). To believe in the Gospel promise is thus to be united with Christ our bridegroom and thereby to receive, like a bride, all that he is and has, including righteousness, grace, salvation, etc.

86. LW 31:300. The Biblical basis of this claim is 1 Cor. 1:30, quoted at the beginning of the sermon: Christ is "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (LW 31:297).

87. From the 1536 *Disputation concerning Justification*, theses 27 and 28; LW 34:153.

88. The 1535 *Theses on Faith and Law*, thesis 22 (LW 34:110).

So faith does not just believe in Christ but takes him to heart. In the language of the great Galatians commentary of 1535, faith apprehends or takes hold of Christ himself in his word, in such a way that he is not merely the object of faith but “the One who is present in the faith itself.”⁸⁹ This is precisely why for Luther faith is rightly called a “formal righteousness.”⁹⁰

We must get used to such apparent reversals in Luther: my own proper righteousness is merely external to me, a thing of the body, while an alien righteousness, found outside me, is what is deepest in my soul. The only way such reversals make sense is if Luther is thinking sacramentally.

So the outward turn of attention in Luther’s doctrine of justification, based on a kind of sacramental externalism and summed up in the phrase “alien righteousness,” must not be confused with the very different externalism of the purely forensic doctrines of justification that predominate in Protestantism, according to which the righteousness of faith makes no inward change in us but only gets Christ’s merits imputed to us. On the contrary, for Luther the alien righteousness of faith is the deepest thing in me: it is Christ dwelling in my heart and conscience as a bridegroom in the bridal chamber, so that “Christ and my conscience . . . become one body”⁹¹ with the result that I am an entirely different person. I am reborn as that good tree which can bear good fruit, a person who can by faith actually do good works, which make up what Luther calls my own “proper” righteousness. This latter is not the inward and alien righteousness in the depth of my heart, by which I am justified before God, but the external works of righteousness I do for the sake of my body or my neighbor.⁹²

We must get used to such apparent reversals in Luther: my own proper righteousness is merely external to me, a thing of the body, while an alien righteousness, found outside me, is what is deepest in my soul. The only way such reversals make sense is if Luther is thinking sacramentally, in terms of an inward gift that I apprehend outside myself. Looking at myself, therefore, I do not find or experience Christ but only my own “proper” righteousness which is purely outward, in the sense that it has no place in my conscience and should not affect what I believe about my standing before God. For all my good works (the good fruits in which my proper righteousness consists) are in and of themselves mortal sins. This is the claim that was most deeply offensive to 16th century Catholic theologians,⁹³ and it produces as its logical consequence the great ecumenical stumbling block: Luther’s dictum

89. LW 26:129.

90. *Ibid.*, 130.

91. 1535 Galatians commentary, LW 26:166. See also *ibid.*, p. 120.

92. On the meaning of good works, see especially *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:358f and 364-68. For the contrast between “proper” and “alien” righteousness, see “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (LW 31:299f). For the parallel between faith/deeds and *tr ee/fr uit*, see especially the 1535 Galatians commentary, LW 26:255f.

93. See the scandal it causes in Luther’s response to articles 31, 32 and 35 of the papal bull condemning him (LW 32:83-87 and 91) as well as in the treatise *Against Latomus* (in LW 32) which is an extended defense of this claim.

that a Christian is *simul justus et peccator*, "at the same time righteous and a sinner."⁹⁴ For I am righteous by my alien righteousness, which is Christ present in the depths of my heart by faith alone, while I am a sinner by my own proper righteousness, those external good works which apart from Christ are nothing but mortal sin. So Luther argues at length for the scandalous thesis that "even a righteous man sins in doing good."⁹⁵

At this point a forensic element does play an indispensable though subordinate role in Luther's doctrine of justification. My proper righteousness, though it would be damnable sin in itself, is not counted as sin but pleases God for the sake of Christ.

Everyone who believes in Christ is righteous, not yet fully in point of fact [*in re*] but in hope [*in spe*] ... the sin that is left in his flesh is *not imputed* to him. This is because Christ, who is entirely without sin, has now become one with him....⁹⁶

This non-imputation of the sin that remains in us is an Augustinian theme that Luther makes much of in the treatises where he argues that all sins, even those of the righteous, are inherently mortal (i.e., would cause our damnation apart from faith).⁹⁷ However, this non-imputation is not fundamental but secondary, based on the prior, real righteousness present in me by faith. This real righteousness is Christ himself, for the sake of whom God does not count my sin against me.⁹⁸ Purely forensic doctrines of justification, which are the norm in Protestantism, ignore this teaching that Christ is the real form of the righteousness of faith in us.

The sense in which "alien" righteousness is external to us must therefore be understood not in terms of a Protestant doctrine of forensic justification but in terms of Catholic sacramental piety—reinforced by an Aristotelian theory of perception rather than a modern theory of consciousness. Likewise, the underlying conceptual structure of the formula *simul justus et peccator* is that of the sacramental efficacy of an external word of grace, which can give us what it signifies. This is why the *simul* is a specifically Lutheran rather than generally Protestant for-

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94. 1535 Galatians Commentary, LW 26:232.

95. *Against Latomus*, LW 32:183.

96. The 1519 Galatians commentary, LW 27:227.

97. *Defense and Explanation of all the Articles* (against the papal bull), LW 32:28, quoting Augustine *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1:25.28. Cf. *Against Latomus*, LW 32:209.

98. See again the two kinds of righteousness according to the *Disputation concerning Justification* (LW 34:153). In thesis 27f we learn of "Christ or the righteousness of Christ" which is (as seen earlier) comprehended by faith, and in thesis 33 we learn that "to be justified includes...that we are considered righteous on account of Christ." The first righteousness is the basis of the second. Luther's account of Christian righteousness in the 1535 Galatians commentary has the same two-part structure: faith "is indeed a formal righteousness" but imputation is added as "a second part of righteousness" to make up for the imperfection of our faith (LW 26:229-33).

The simul is a specifically Lutheran rather than generally Protestant formulation. Its conceptual underpinnings are too Catholic to play a widespread role in Protestantism, for it makes no sense unless the Christian heart has Christ within by finding him outside.

This refusal to rely on experience is at the heart of Christian experience, as Luther understands it.

mulation. Its conceptual underpinnings are too Catholic to play a widespread role in Protestantism, for it makes no sense unless the Christian heart has Christ within by finding him outside. The deepest and most elegant formulations of the *simul* in Luther's writings thus teach us to look outside ourselves to see who we really are in Christ: "I am a sinner in and by myself apart from Christ. Apart from myself and in Christ I am not a sinner."⁹⁹ Or even more simply: "though I am a sinner in myself, I am not a sinner in Christ."¹⁰⁰ If I try to find myself in myself, turning my attention inward and believing my own inner experience, I find only anxiety, mortal sin, damnation and unbelief (this last is crucial, because it is the source of all the others). I do not find faith or any other good thing in myself, so I must look at Christ instead—and precisely this is faith. So if there is to be any comfort or consolation for me I must find myself outside myself—by faith alone, which means, simply by believing what Christ has to say about me in the promise of the Gospel. Who I really am is one for whom Christ died and rose, one whom Christ baptized and absolves, one to whom he gives his body and blood.

This refusal to rely on experience is at the heart of Christian experience, as Luther understands it. When he speaks of experience he thinks immediately of *Anfechtung*, temptation or (more literally) assault: the recurrent experience of being attacked by an awareness of how offensive I am to God, a consciousness of sin and death and the devil which also shows me the weakness of my faith. In this regard Luther stresses that there is no substitute for experience:

This cannot be adequately expressed in words, but our own experience is necessary in addition. This teaches what hard work it is to climb over the mountain of our own unworthiness and sins standing between God and us as we are about to pray ... *it is here that we feel the weakness of faith most.*¹⁰¹

Christian experience is the experience of the inadequacy of our own faith. The only comfort we feel at these times of *Anfechtung* is the inexpressible sigh of the spirit that Paul describes, which in fact we barely feel at all:

It is time to turn your eyes away from the Law, from works *and from your own feelings* and conscience, to lay hold of the Gospel and to depend solely on the promise of God. Then there is emitted a little sigh ... and nothing remains in your heart but the sigh that says "Abba! Father!" And so the promise produces the sigh that cries: "Father!"¹⁰²

At the heart of Christian experience for Luther is therefore this "sighing, of which we are hardly aware" because "we do not hear this cry.

99. *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests*, LW 38:158.

100. Commentary on Psalm 51, LW 12:311.

101. *Ibid.*, 12:319.

102. 1535 Galatians Commentary, LW 26:389.

We have only the Word."¹⁰³ The sigh of the Christian spirit is the anxious prayer of one who has no reassuring experience or feeling, and certainly not the experience of a strong faith, but only the word of promise to cling to. But the word alone is enough. That is precisely what we are to learn by experience—not by mere words, as Luther often puts it.¹⁰⁴ This contrast between experience and words is not meant, of course, to devalue the word of Christ but rather to criticize the discourse of reflective faith. Talking about faith does me no good in times of *Anfechtung*, when only the word of God can help me. How many preachers have failed to learn this lesson? You cannot help me to have faith by telling me about faith or the experience of faith but only by preaching the Gospel, which tells me about Christ. Thus good preaching conforms to the essential shape of Christian experience, which is uninterested in faith, feeling or experience but only in the external word of Christ.

The experience of faith, in other words, is the practice of refusing to put faith in experience. This, I take it, is the key lesson of Luther's *simul* for modern Christianity. And lest this be thought to be some grim doctrine, let me be explicit: an experiential faith is, in my own experience, nothing but anxiety—and probably self-deception and hypocrisy as well—and it is no small comfort to believe with Luther that my experience is not what matters. It is Christ that matters, and to realize this is comfort and joy that creates a much more cheerful sort of Christian experience than a reflective faith is capable of.

Talking about faith does me no good in times of Anfechtung, when only the word of God can help me. How many preachers have failed to learn this lesson? You cannot help me to have faith by telling me about faith or the experience of faith but only by preaching the Gospel, which tells me about Christ.

The logic of Luther's doctrine of justification supports a faith that is unreflective, not in the sense that believers cannot have any idea at all of whether they believe (for of course they do) but in the sense that believers cannot have any idea at all of whether they believe (for of course they do) but in the sense that they do not have to. Knowing you believe is possible for Luther but not obligatory, because nothing important depends on it.

THE REFLECTIVE FAITH OF PROTESTANTISM

The logic of Luther's doctrine of justification supports a faith that is unreflective, not in the sense that believers cannot have any idea at all of whether they believe (for of course they do) but in the sense that they do not have to. Knowing you believe is possible for Luther but not obligatory, because nothing important depends on it. This is the import of Luther's saying that "I cannot build on the fact that I believe."¹⁰⁵ Christians must not rely on their faith but on God's word and sacraments, and therefore are free not to worry about whether their faith is real or sincere enough. Pastorally speaking, it does not matter whether I am strong or weak in faith, because in either case the word of promise refers to me and is true. So strong or weak, confident or doubtful—even sincere or insincere—what is required of me is the same: I am to hear the gospel promises, believe them and take them to my comfort. Things are quite different in most varieties of Protestantism,

103. *Ibid.*, 26:381.

104. In addition to LW 12:319, quoted above, see also LW 13:110-18 (Commentary on Psalm 90) and LW 21:299-311 (Commentary on the Magnificat).

105. From the discussion of infant baptism in the *Large Catechism*, Tappert, p. 443.

“So baptism is only the beginning of the Christian life, and salvation belongs only to those who persevere in faith to the end of their lives.” This clarification raises the issue that divides Luther not just from most Protestants but specifically from Calvin. At this point indeed Calvin’s doctrine marks a radical innovation in the Augustinian tradition which is fundamental to the origin of the Protestant tradition as we now know it. It is an innovation Luther does not follow.

for which the promise of the gospel does not take the form of an external, sacramental word. For this creates the problem of knowing whether the promise really refers to me. When the Gospel takes the form, “whoever believes in Christ is saved,” then I cannot tell whether the promise of God is about me until I am confident that I really believe in Christ. Reflective faith therefore becomes essential in Protestantism.

But it turns out there are reasons why those who believe they are justified by faith alone might want to have a reflective faith, reasons that are operative even in Luther. To discern them we can return to our imaginary American revivalist asking Luther whether he is a born again Christian. “Of course—I have been baptized,” comes the answer. We can imagine the revivalist responding, in puzzlement or indignation: “What do you mean? You think you’re saved just because you’re baptized? But surely, Dr. Luther, you can see that there are plenty of people who get baptized when they’re babies but don’t get saved in the end!” Here Luther is usually inclined to give the standard Augustinian answer that Catholics would also give: “Well of course none of us are saved yet; for while we are in this mortal life we are not saved in reality (*in re*) but only in hope (*in spe*).”¹⁰⁶ This answer divides Catholics from Protestants. We can imagine the revivalist at first trying to interpret it in Protestant terms: “You mean to say you can lose your salvation?” This is a distinctively Protestant question, which no Augustinian Catholic would think to ask. We can imagine Luther clarifying, “No, I said I am not saved yet. I cannot lose what I do not yet have. You see, to be born again is not yet to be saved. Through mortal sin—by which I mean unbelief—we lose the new life that is given us in Christ. That is why it is called mortal. So baptism is only the beginning of the Christian life, and salvation belongs only to those who persevere in faith to the end of their lives.” This clarification raises the issue that divides Luther not just from most Protestants but specifically from Calvin. At this point indeed Calvin’s doctrine marks a radical innovation in the Augustinian tradition which is fundamental to the origin of the Protestant tradition as we now know it. It is an innovation Luther does not follow—except on the occasions when, not quite consistent with himself, he anticipates Calvin’s key insight and becomes more Protestant than he usually is. But let us begin by looking at the consistent, Calvinist version of the innovation.

The problem of perseverance in the faith has a very specific weight in any Augustinian theology because it is inseparable from the pastoral problems occasioned by the doctrine of predestination, which is in turn inseparable from Augustine’s strong doctrine of prevenient grace, according to which even my first turning toward God in faith is the result

106. “We are saved in hope ... we do not yet possess a present salvation, but await salvation in the future.” Augustine, *City of God* 19:4.

of God's grace.¹⁰⁷ According to Augustine Christians do indeed freely choose to believe, but we do this precisely because God first chose from eternity to give us the gift of faith. And Augustine quite explicitly rejects the possibility, later espoused by both Catholic Molinists and Protestant Arminians, that God chooses for salvation those whom he foresees will choose faith in Christ.¹⁰⁸ Quite the contrary: we choose to believe precisely because God first chose to give us the gift of faith. For Luther and Calvin this is good news, for it takes even the choice to believe out of our inadequate and untrustworthy hands.¹⁰⁹ What is often overlooked is that predestination, to be effective in saving us, must concern not just the beginning of faith but also its end. As Augustine points out in his late treatises on predestination, faith does not gain salvation if it does not persevere to the end. From this he draws the conclusion that since nothing I do or choose or believe today can guarantee that I will still have faith in Christ tomorrow or next year or the hour of my death, I cannot know in advance whether God has chosen to give me the gift of perseverance.¹¹⁰ I can know whether I have the beginning of faith, but I cannot know whether I will persevere in faith—hence I cannot know whether I am ultimately saved. In a crucial and recurring Augustinian metaphor, I have a long journey ahead of me before I reach home. So long as I am on the road I am still a pilgrim who has many dangers and temptations to face before I reach my destination. I journey in hope and confidence, but not without occasional moments of salutary fear. It would not do to be complacent—to have what Augustine calls “security” (*securitas*).¹¹¹ Thus Augustine rejects the teaching Calvinists later call “eternal security”—a teaching that is logically required if we are to know we are already saved.

Calvin's theology is foundational for the Protestant tradition in that it is the first theology in the wake of Augustine to inculcate and systematically support the belief that Christians on earth are already saved for eternity. This requires a crucial departure from Augustine, in that Calvin must teach that individual believers can and should know they

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107. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, chapters 1.1-2.6. The point about predestination here is based on the doctrine that grace is prevenient, in the sense that it comes before faith not just as an offer to be accepted but as the sufficient cause of our freely choosing to believe; cf. Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, 14.27-16.32.

108. Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, chapters 35-39.

109. Cf. Calvin on the “very sweet fruit” of the doctrine of predestination in *Inst.* 3:21.1. Luther puts the point with characteristic boldness: “For my own part, I will frankly confess that even if it were possible, I wouldn't wish to have free choice given to me, or to have anything left in my own power by which I might strive for salvation” (*The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:288).

110. Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance* 1.1 and (for a fuller argument) *On Rebuke and Grace* 6.10-9.20.

111. “Security may engender pride” (*Rebuke and Grace* 13.40) and “No one can be secure about life eternal” (*On the Gift of Perseverance* 22.62).

are predestined for salvation (since all who are saved are predestined to be saved, I cannot know I am saved without knowing I am predestined to be saved). We can call this, Calvin's epistemic thesis about predestination. This epistemic thesis, not double predestination,¹¹² is Calvin's radical innovation in the doctrine of predestination. To support it, both logically and pastorally, the rest of his thinking must take a shape that is quite different from any previous Christian theology. Above all, Calvin's epistemic thesis implies that true faith in Christ be permanent, persevering to the end.¹¹³ This implies (contrary to Augustine's view) that all who truly believe in Christ receive the gift of perseverance, which implies in turn that if you know you truly believe, you can know you will persevere and be saved.¹¹⁴

This emphasis on a once-in-a-lifetime effectual call or conversion to faith is a crucial innovation in the doctrine of justification, though its novelty often goes unnoticed. It is a necessary feature of Calvinist theology, for only such a calling or conversion, combined with Calvin's new doctrine of perseverance, allows me to make the inference from my present faith to my eternal salvation.

Supporting this new knowledge is a new concept of justification, linked to a decisive event of conversion to faith in Christ which Calvin describes as an "inner call," based on Paul's identification of those who are predestined to salvation with those who are "called according to God's purpose" in Romans 8:28-30. This divine call is not simply the gospel's general offer of salvation to all but a special and effectual calling of particular individuals in which "the illumination of the Spirit" is added to "the preaching of the Word" so that the individual actually receives the gift of faith in Christ, which means that the event of calling itself—that is, the inner call—serves as "a pledge of salvation that cannot deceive us."¹¹⁵ Therefore our election is revealed not by the external word alone (which does not say who belongs to the elect) but by the inner call. Thus "God by his call manifests the election which he otherwise holds hidden within himself."¹¹⁶ This emphasis on a once-in-a-lifetime effectual call or conversion to faith is a crucial innovation in the doctrine of justification, though its novelty often goes unnoticed. It is a necessary feature of Calvinist theology, for only such a calling or conversion, combined with Calvin's new doctrine of perseverance, allows me to make the inference from my present faith to my eternal salvation. Only if there is a single moment in my life after which I am

112. Calvin is often cited as the originator of the doctrine of double predestination, the teaching that God not only chooses some for salvation but actively chooses the rest for damnation (the doctrine of reprobation)—in contrast to the more usual Augustinian formulation that God simply passes them over and does not choose to save them (with no doctrine of reprobation). Calvin himself does not think his teaching of double predestination diverges from Augustine's in any substantive way (as is evident in *Inst* 4:23.1), but even if one disagrees with him about this historical judgment, it is clear that the difference between the two doctrines of predestination makes no difference pastorally: both raise the same anxieties about whether or not I belong among those predestined to be saved.

113. *Inst.* 3:2.12 and 3:24.6-7.

114. For the certainty of perseverance, see *Inst.* 3:2.40.

115. *Inst.* 3:24.2.

116. *Inst.* 3:24.1

permanently a true believer, can my knowledge that I presently believe allow me to conclude that I am saved for eternity.

Calvin's epistemic thesis therefore makes Christian faith essentially reflective. Since the gospel does not tell me directly whether I am predestined for salvation, I must work by inference, and the crucial premise of my inference must be that I believe in Christ. From the fact that I presently believe I can infer that I will persevere in faith to the end — from which it follows that I am predestined for salvation. So if Augustine is wrong to deny that I am already saved, then he must also be wrong also about my inability to know whether I will persevere in faith. But what about Augustine's rather obvious point that some Christians in fact do fall away from the faith? Calvin's answer is equally obvious, because it is logically necessary if the Calvinist doctrine of perseverance is true: those who do not persevere in the faith never had true Christian faith to begin with. Calvin calls theirs a temporary faith, to distinguish it from the saving faith of the elect.¹¹⁷ So the distinctive anxiety of Calvinism immediately arises: do I have true saving faith or only the temporary kind — and how can I tell the difference?¹¹⁸ Similar anxieties about the authenticity of faith persist in Protestant traditions that part from Calvinism over predestination but retain the conviction that we are, even in this life, saved by faith alone. For in any case the only possible guarantee that I am already saved is that my faith is real. So the reality of my faith is the primary thing to worry about — the distinctively Protestant worry.

Logically, it is an odd worry. For normally if I want to find out whether I really believe something, I just ask whether it is true. This procedure stems from the essential logic of belief: to believe something said to me is simply to believe it is true. Once I have found it to be true, there are no further questions to ask about whether I believe it. Luther's syllogism, whose minor premise focuses on the truth of Christ's word, relies on this logic of first-person belief. It is designed to strengthen my faith by giving me a true word to believe in. Things are different, however, if the question is about someone else's beliefs. I cannot tell whether *you* believe something simply by deciding whether it is true. I may ask you what you believe, but then I must still decide whether I think you are telling me the truth. This is the logic of second-person belief, which plays a crucial role in Luther's thinking about how we know God's will toward us, based on his being true to his word. But there is also a third-person way of thinking about belief, where I do not ask *you* but observe *him* or *her*, and then ask myself questions such as: does she behave like someone who really believes what she's saying? Does she

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117. *Inst.* 3:2.11; cf. 3:24.7-8.

118. Calvin himself is exquisitely sensitive to the anxieties raised by his doctrine about true faith, *Inst.* 3:2.17-22.

Because of this logic of third-person belief, the assurance of faith acquires a double focus: it must concern not only the certainty of God's promise but also the assurance that I actually believe it.

live like a true believer? What is odd about the Protestant anxiety concerning true faith is that it means applying this third-person reasoning to my own beliefs. Instead of looking for the truth, as in the logic of first-person belief, I must look at the belief itself. Even when what I look at is the inner experience of faith, I still use the same form of reasoning as I do about third-person beliefs, but apply it reflectively to myself. I ask myself whether I am living like one who truly believes or even whether my belief feels inwardly like true faith. As in all reflection (as when I literally look at my reflection in a mirror) I am seeing myself as others see me. But in this case I may have to go so far as to try seeing myself as God does, looking upon my inmost heart.

Since outward good works can be done even by the unregenerate, the real evidence of saving faith will have to be inward, and the reflex act must therefore concern itself with the inward changes that sanctification brings about in my heart.

Because of this logic of third-person belief, the assurance of faith acquires a double focus: it must concern not only the certainty of God's promise but also the assurance that I actually believe it. For if faith is to include the certainty that I am saved, it must include the certainty that I am among the elect, which requires me to be certain that I have faith. To be assured I have faith I must perform a "reflex act," as the Puritans called it, in which I look at myself and recognize that I am a believer. But with the rather terrifying distinction between temporary and saving faith in mind,¹¹⁹ the reflex act will have to look not just at whether I believe the gospel is true but at whether that belief has had the effect on my life that true saving faith must have. Since outward good works can be done even by the unregenerate, the real evidence of saving faith will have to be inward, and the reflex act must therefore concern itself with the inward changes that sanctification brings about in my heart.

This is the reasoning made explicit in what the Puritans called "experimental divinity," which is 17th-century English for "experiential theology." But the need for a minor premise that is "read in the heart"¹²⁰ or "rests upon personal experience of the Holy Spirit"¹²¹ is felt not only by English Puritans but throughout the Reformed tradition. One can see why in the canonical statement of the Synod of Dordt, stating the classical form of Calvinist doctrine:

The elect, in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with a spiritual joy and holy pleasure,

119. According to Kendall (*op. cit.* p. 22), the concept of temporary faith "poses the chief pastoral problem in Calvin's theology and in the experimental predestinarian tradition" (the latter being his label for the English Calvinists whom most of us call "Puritans"). While Kendall's work is controversial because of the discontinuity he sees between Calvin and the Calvinists, this point of continuity, which is central to his exposition, seems to me the decisive point that makes an experiential turn to the "reflex act" establishing the minor premise of the "practical syllogism" an inevitable consequence of Calvin's own thought. (For this terminology, see *ibid.*, p. 9).

120. Muller, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

121. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 177.

the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God; such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc.¹²²

From there it is not so far to a minor premise that is no longer directly about faith but about feeling, as in the 17th century continental Calvinist Johannes Wollebius:

Major Premise: Whoever feels in himself the gift of sanctification, by which we die to sin and live unto righteousness, is justified, called or presented with true faith and elect.

Minor Premise: But I feel this, by the grace of God.

Conclusion: I am justified, called and elect.¹²³

What is striking (and it has often struck observers of the tradition) is that after denying that *justification* causes any inner change in us, the Calvinist tradition puts so much stock in the experience of inner changes caused by the grace of *sanctification*. This is the exact opposite of Luther, for whom justification is indeed an inner change, but one which is not experienced: I know of my inward renewal (that I am a good tree capable of bearing good fruit) not by experience but by faith alone, i.e., simply by believing what Christ tells me about myself.

With the experiential theology of the 17th century there is born a distinctively Protestant inwardness, where "faith alone" means a focus not on the external word alone, but also on the experiences that faith brings into our inner life. The possibility that "the testimony of a good conscience" might in a supplemental way confirm our faith, which both Calvin and Luther countenanced with careful qualifications,¹²⁴ is here incorporated into a systematic practice of self-examination whose purpose is not the confession of sin but the experience of holiness. In effect, believers are *required* to feel they are inwardly holy and righteous. The moral dangers of this requirement are obvious. If I am required to feel I am righteous, then I am apt to produce feelings that comply with the requirement. But feeling righteous and being righteous are two very different things. It is the self-righteous, not the righteous, who most reliably have the feeling that they are righteous. This inward feeling of righteousness is probably what has ended up giving the very word "righteousness" such a bad odor, as if it were synonymous with self-righteousness. Indeed in common usage today, to call people "righteous" is to call them self-righteous. I take this to be one of the legacies of Protestant inwardness, that form of Christian experience which, by requiring believers to experience their own sanctification, opens up a broad and easily-traveled road from imputed righteousness to self-righteousness.

What is striking (and it has often struck observers of the tradition) is that after denying that justification causes any inner change in us, the Calvinist tradition puts so much stock in the experience of inner changes caused by the grace of sanctification. This is the exact opposite of Luther, for whom justification is indeed an inner change, but one which is not experienced.

122. Canon 1.12, in Philip Shaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 3:583f.

123. Taken from Heppe, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

124. See Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 80-97, 198-203, and 210-23.

Yet the Protestant turn to experience is not the result of self-righteousness or some unaccountable narcissism, but a logical consequence of how Protestant theology identifies the promise of the gospel. If the gospel is a conditional promise with a logical structure equivalent to "If you believe in Christ, you are saved," then I cannot know I am saved until I know I meet the condition. I must know this about myself—that I believe in Christ—before I can be assured that the promise applies to me. Since I cannot know this fact about myself simply by believing the promise (for I have no assurance the promise refers to me until I know this fact about myself) I need some reflective or experiential method of examining myself to discern the inner reality of my own faith. By the same token, if my self-examination turns up unpromising results, I may find myself in the painful position of believing that the promise of Christ is true without believing it applies to me. This is not simply a logical oddity, but the cause of deep suffering and agonies of soul that were a key concern of Calvinist pastoral care, which had to deal frequently with baptized Christians who sincerely believed the gospel was true but were not confident they had a saving faith in it.

Lacking the notion of an efficacious sacramental word, the distinctively Protestant logic of faith requires some further basis for saving faith in addition to the word of God. This requirement is especially urgent in light of the need to know whether I am one of those who are chosen and predestined for salvation, something I cannot find out simply by believing the truth of the gospel.

The heart of this pastoral problem is how to come to a belief that the gospel promise is meant for me—the problem which Luther addresses by directing us to cling to an external word that says "you" and means me. For if the gospel is a promise that tells me, "this is my body given for you," then it is logically impossible to believe the promise is true without believing it is meant for me. Luther draws our attention to this advantage which the sacrament has over preaching: "In the sermon one does not point out or portray any particular person, but *in the sacrament it is given to you and to me in particular*, so that the sermon comes to be your own."¹²⁵ The sacrament assures me that the gospel word is for me.

Lacking the notion of an efficacious sacramental word, the distinctively Protestant logic of faith requires some further basis for saving faith in addition to the word of God. This requirement is especially urgent in light of the need to know whether I am one of those who are chosen and predestined for salvation, something I cannot find out simply by believing the truth of the gospel. As Calvin puts it, "Even though the preaching of the gospel streams forth from the wellspring of election, because such preaching is shared also with the wicked it cannot of itself be a full proof of election."¹²⁶ What Calvin adds to the preaching of the word, as we have seen, is the inner illumination of the Spirit, which he also calls the inner testimony or teaching of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is "the inner teacher by whose working the promise of salvation penetrates into our mind"¹²⁷ Just as in Calvin's doctrine of the sacra-

125. *The Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood—Against the Fanatics*, LW 36:348f.

126. *Inst.* 3:24.1.

127. *Inst.* 3:1.4.

ment the power of the Spirit causes me to partake of Christ's body in heaven, so in his doctrine of the word the power of the Spirit causes the word to be impressed on my heart. This means not just that the Spirit gives me the gift of faith (as Luther or Augustine or Aquinas would readily agree) but that the Spirit's inner testimony gets me over the hump of wondering whether God's word is really meant for me in particular.¹²⁸ This is a distinctively Protestant hump to get over, and eventually produced a distinctively Protestant doctrine of the Spirit, whose inner testimony is closely allied with the experience of faith: I know I am saved because I know I believe, and I know I believe because I have experienced the witness of the Spirit in my heart. At this point a danger looms that both Luther and Calvin worked hard to avert: that the certainty of faith might be grounded in the experience of the heart rather than the promise of God—in the voice of a Spirit that floats free of the biblical word. So for instance when evangelical Protestants in America today talk of "hearing God speak," they are usually thinking not of an external or scriptural word but of the experience of the Spirit speaking in their hearts.¹²⁹

What leads Protestantism to take this road in the first place is evident not just in Calvin but also in Luther. It can be discerned in Luther's pastoral advice to people who are anxious about predestination. Most of the time he is not very Protestant and tells them they can't know anything about it.

THE ATTRACTION OF REFLECTIVE FAITH

What leads Protestantism to take this road in the first place is evident not just in Calvin but also in Luther. It can be discerned in Luther's pastoral advice to people who are anxious about predestination. Most of the time he is not very Protestant and tells them they can't know anything about it. Predestination is found in the hidden will of the Divine Majesty, and "it is not permissible for me to pry into the will of the Divine Majesty."¹³⁰ The operative distinction here is between God hidden in his majesty and God revealed in his word:

God must therefore be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his word.¹³¹

This is just another way of insisting that Christian faith is based on God's promises alone. We do not deal with "God as he is in himself" but only "God as he is clothed and revealed in his promises and Word."¹³² This seems to imply that we cannot know whether we are

128. On this problem of the *pro me* in Calvin, and the inner testimony of the Spirit as its solution, see also *Inst.* 3:1.1-4 and 3.2.15-16.

129. For an influential book advocating the practice of listening to the Spirit in the heart, see Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

130. *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:147.

131. *Ibid.*, 33:139.

132. Commentary on Psalm 51, LW 12:312.

predestined for salvation—and should not even try to know. Indeed, often Luther says just that. For example, one record of Luther's table talk tells us that

he spoke of predestination and said that when a man begins to dispute about it, it is like a fire that cannot be extinguished, and the more he disputes the more he despairs. Our Lord God is so hostile to such disputation that he instituted Baptism, the Word and the Sacrament as signs to counteract it. We should rely on these and say: 'I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus Christ. I have received the Sacrament. *What do I care if I have been predestined or not?*'¹³³

But Luther does not always stop there. On a few occasions he tries to bridge the gap between the revealed and the hidden God.

But Luther does not always stop there. On a few occasions he tries to bridge the gap between the revealed and the hidden God. In one very long piece of table talk, he is recorded as saying:

Apart from the Word of God I am not supposed to know whether I am predestined to salvation or not.... Here God desires to be inscrutable and to remain incomprehensible. He says in effect "Let me remain hidden.... Here I wish to remain unrevealed.... *I shall reveal your election in another way. From the unrevealed God I shall become the revealed God. I shall incarnate my Son and shall give you one who will enable you to see whether you are elected.*"¹³⁴

The will of the Divine Majesty remains essentially hidden, for no one has access to God's decisions about who is ultimately saved, but there is an exception in the first-person case of my own faith in the word of the revealed God, which gives me access to God's secret intentions towards me. Each individual may bridge the gap between the hidden and the revealed God for herself:

Christ will lead you to the hidden God....If you embrace him with true love of your heart and with true faith, *you will know for sure that you are predestined to salvation.....*

God has revealed himself to you. If you believe this, then you are to be numbered among his elect. Hold firmly to this and with assurance, and *if you accept the God who is revealed, the hidden God will be given to you at the same time.*¹³⁵

Knowing we believe in Christ allows us to infer that we are predestined, based on the knowledge that we are called by God, in the Pauline sense that was so important for Calvin.

Similarly, in a letter to a woman anxious about predestination, Luther urges a line of reasoning that is strikingly Calvinist. First of all, Christ is the mirror in which we see God's will for us:

the highest of all God's commands is this, that we hold up before our eyes the image of his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Every day he should be our excellent mirror wherein we behold how much God loves us.¹³⁶

Then, knowing we believe in Christ allows us to infer that we are predestined, based on the knowledge that we are called by God, in the

133. *Spiritual Counsel*, p. 122 (Table Talk 2631b).

134. *Ibid.*, p. 132 (Table Talk 5658a).

135. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

136. *Ibid.*, p. 116. Letter to Barbara Lisskirchen, April 30, 1531.

Pauline sense that was so important for Calvin:

It will be manifest that you believe in Christ. If you believe, then you are called. And if you are called, then you are most certainly predestinated. Do not let this mirror and throne of grace be torn away from before your eyes.¹³⁷

It is not clear at this point whether the mirror of grace is Christ or our own faith in him. The problem is that Christ makes no promise that any one of us in particular will persevere in faith. So Luther, like the Calvinist tradition, must build instead on Paul's description of the sequence of divine action in the Christian's life, from divine foreknowledge to predestination to calling to justification and finally to glorification (Romans 8:28-30). To know that I belong in this sequence, I must not only know Christ and his promises but know that I in particular have been "called according to God's purpose" (Romans 8:28). And that requires reflective faith—knowing that I believe.

It is not hard to see what drives Luther on these occasions to embrace a reflective faith. He wants the promise of the gospel to give me certainty not only of forgiveness for today but of salvation for eternity, because otherwise faith in the promise does not afford all the knowledge I might want of a gracious God. With a purely unreflective faith, I can be assured that God presently forgives my sins but not that he intends to save me in the end. And in some moods Luther finds that intolerable.

It is not for you to inquire into the secret will of God without a word of revelation nor should you imagine that God will fail to keep his promises to you. God is truthful, and he has given us assurances in the Scriptures in order that we may be certain ... he is not a God who deceives us and is to be doubted ... consequently *one should say of a man, "I do not know if he is friend or foe." But not so of God....* If you wish to know what God's secret intention is, his dear Son will show it to you.¹³⁸

So rather than urging us to stay away from the hidden God and cling only to Christ the revealed God, Luther here insists that "Christ will lead you to the hidden God."¹³⁹ The problem, again, is that this requires an access to God's "secret intention" which Christ's word does not give us and which indeed no external word *can* give us. The word of the gospel gives nothing less than Christ to all who believe it; but it does not promise that tomorrow or at the hour of my death I will still have the faith that takes hold of Christ in his word. Christ will never forsake those who have faith in him, but he does not promise that each one will always have faith in him. That opens up the deep problem posed by the Augustinian doctrine of predestination for both Luther and Calvin. We are to take Christ as the mirror of election (Calvin)¹⁴⁰ who reveals the

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137. *Ibid.*

138. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

139. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

140. *Inst.* 3:24.5.

Luther is least like the Calvinist tradition when he clings to the word alone and says, "What do I care if I am predestined or not?" Of course to persist in this attitude is to persevere in faith, which is exactly what those predestined for salvation do. But even as they persevere, they do not know they will persevere and therefore do not know they are elect. This is the price of the freedom to believe the word alone.

Father's will toward us (Luther).¹⁴¹ But this does not help us if there can be any gap between the promise of Christ and the predestinating will of the hidden God, for then God could keep his promise of forgiveness and mercy today but not intend to save us in the end. A faith that trusts nothing but God's word cannot overcome this gap. It must live by the promise day by day, with no security for tomorrow other than the fact that the promise will still be there to be believed.

Luther is least like the Calvinist tradition when he clings to the word alone and says, "What do I care if I am predestined or not?" Of course to persist in this attitude is to persevere in faith, which is exactly what those predestined for salvation do. But even as they persevere, they do not know they will persevere and therefore do not know they are elect. This is the price of the freedom to believe the word alone. I am free from the reflective requirement of believing in the authenticity of my own faith or experiencing my own holiness, but I am uncertain of God's ultimate intentions towards me. To find this particular uncertainty intolerable is to be propelled toward Protestantism. To live with it is to be prone to a different set of anxieties from Protestantism—not anxiety about whether I truly believe but anxiety about whether the truth of God's gracious word shows me what God really intends for me. This of course is one of the key anxieties described in Luther's accounts of *Anfechtung* or temptation, the assault of the devil which can be triggered any time I notice what a damnable sinner I am, and especially when I notice the unbelief which lies behind all my sin. How can I trust that an unbeliever such as myself, one whose unbelief is all the more inexcusable because I have so often tasted the goodness of Christ's word, will persevere in the faith and be saved?

This distinctive anxiety is a natural consequence of Luther's *simul*: every time I look away from Christ and at myself, I see a sinner, which means I see an unbeliever. Indeed, by Luther's reckoning *at the same time righteous and sinner* really amounts to *at the same time believer and unbeliever*, because just as all righteousness comes by faith so all sin comes from unbelief.¹⁴² I need an unreflective faith precisely because when I reflect and look at myself what I see is a sinner, i.e., an unbeliever. Above all, I need to be free to confess my sin of unbelief, an act of penance which of course strengthens my weak and half-hearted faith. But to practice such penance I must be free from the requirement of experiencing myself as a true believer. As a result, in order to believe in the word alone I need a freedom that Calvinism and other forms of Protestantism cannot give me. The other side of

141. LW 24:60-66 (Sermons on the Gospel of John), LW 26:396-400 (1535 Galatians Commentary).

142. E.g., "as ... faith alone makes a person righteous ... so unbelief alone commits sin," in Preface to Romans, LW 35:369.

the problem is that I can acquire this freedom only at the price of giving up the kind of assurance that Protestant theology is especially designed to give: the certainty that I shall be saved in the end. While it is an immense relief to be free to confess my sin of unbelief rather than profess myself a true believer, it also leaves me deeply vulnerable to the worry that the promise of the gospel may in the end do no good for such an unbeliever as me—a worry that can easily plunge me into terror and *Anfechtung*.

When he is not speaking like a Protestant, this is in fact what Luther expects will be the normal pattern of Christian life, alternating between what he calls the time of law and the time of grace—sometimes terrified by my own sins, other times comforted by the promise of the gospel.¹⁴³ This is the *simul* spread out in time: for though I am righteous and sinner at the same time, I do not feel my sins at the same time I feel myself justified by Christ. Christian experience, as we have already seen, means for Luther the recurrent experience of being terrified when I turn to myself and comforted when I turn to Christ in his word. Precisely this is how I grow in faith and obedience, learning from hard experience that there is nothing I can hang onto in the face of sin, death and the devil but Christ's promise.

This is of course an extraordinarily volatile picture of the Christian life. It was perhaps inevitable that it would give way to a more settled Protestant theology even among Lutherans, who by the time of the *Formula of Concord* had assimilated the Calvinist emphasis on conversion.¹⁴⁴ For the notion that there is such a thing as an irrevocable conversion to faith—after which I am in some deep and permanent sense no longer an unbeliever—is the abolition of the *simul justus et peccator* in the original, more Catholic form found in Luther. From that point on Lutherans too are Protestants, believing that we are *justus*, justified, solely through a righteousness that is imputed to us, whereby the merits of Christ are reckoned as ours.¹⁴⁵ The sacramental piety and the belief in union with Christ remain—as they do in most branches of the Reformed tradition—but they no longer form the backbone of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The theological gap widens between the shores of Catholicism and Protestantism as we move downstream from Luther, leaving that particular bridge behind.

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143. See especially the 1535 Galatians Commentary, LW 26:340-51.

144. See especially the discussion of the role of free will in conversion in Tappert, pp. 519-39. The concern about free will is raised by Luther, the focus on conversion is not.

145. How Lutheranism came to adopt a wholly forensic account of justification is a very complex story, but at the heart of it is not the conflict with Catholicism but the rejection of Andreas Osiander's version of Lutheranism (see *Formula of Concord*, article 3, Tappert pp. 472-75 and 548-550). Reaction against Osiander was also an important factor in firming up Calvin's resolutely forensic doctrine of justification (*Inst.* 3:11.5-12).

AN ECUMENICAL EPILOGUE

It is not as if we could go back. Far too much water has flowed under that bridge. But as we proceed further downstream, epochal changes that affect both sides do seem to be bringing them closer to each other. For one thing, Christian experience is different in an era when anxiety about individual salvation does not have so deep a grip on the Christian conscience. There are even some good reasons for this. The deepest theological development on this score is surely Karl Barth's insistence that Christ is the focus of divine predestination, which has convinced many theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, that the biblical doctrine of election does not have the structure of some people being chosen for salvation *instead of* others, but rather some being chosen *for the sake of* the salvation of others, as Israel is chosen for the blessing of all nations and Christ is chosen for the salvation of the world. This more biblical doctrine of election does not answer the question of whether I in particular am saved, but it does free me to rejoice over divine predestination rather than worry over it. It does not help me cross the gap between the revealed God and the hidden God but rather abolishes the gap altogether, because it teaches that divine election is not a hidden decree at all but the eternal choice that Jesus Christ would in due time be exactly what the gospel says he is.¹⁴⁶

Protestantism cannot carry through its own deepest intention—to put faith in the word of Christ alone—without a Catholic doctrine of sacramental efficacy. This sort of irony is only to be expected if the division of the church means that each fragment of Christ's divided body has lost something essential to its own being.

However, Barth has been less successful in his campaign against the Protestant proclivity, accentuated in classic liberal Protestantism and now in many versions of evangelical and charismatic renewal, to base faith on the experience of faith. I myself am a Protestant who shares Barth's allergy (as he often calls it) to the liberal turn to experience, but I find his conceptual alternative—an actualism or event-ontology which gives us nothing external to cling to—an impressive but ultimately unpersuasive failure. It is a teaching that has no real successors and probably deserves none, and certainly has no authority in the church as Christian doctrine. (It would be absurd to instruct Christians to believe in Barth's actualism the same way Luther's Catechisms instruct Christians to believe in the power of the sacraments. The doctrine of actualism is not something to put our faith in, and the sacraments are.) I take this failure as evidence that Protestantism cannot carry through its own deepest intention—to put faith in the word of Christ alone—without a Catholic doctrine of sacramental efficacy. This sort of irony is only to be expected if the division of the church means that each fragment of Christ's divided body has lost something essential to its own being. □

146. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) II/ii, esp. pp. 3-76 and 94-194.



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